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The 2017 Independence Referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Overreliance of De Facto States on Their Patrons

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MA Middle Eastern Studies Thesis

**The 2017 Independence Referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and the
Overreliance of De Facto States on Their Patrons**

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1. Introduction

The struggle between forces that try to break up or maintain multi-ethnic states has been a growing phenomenon since the end of the Cold War in 1989.¹ Moreover, according to Matt Qvortrup, the number of independence referendums worldwide has increased throughout the last couple of decades, especially during times of political instability and popular revolt.² In many cases, the ‘parent states’ being seceded from oppose these referendums, and attempts at secession may lead to armed conflict. Indeed, according to O’Driscoll & Baser, many armed conflicts nowadays are attributed to struggles for self-determination.³

The Kurds in northern Iraq - Iraqi Kurds - are an example of an ethnic group that have been struggling for self-determination for decades. In September 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) held an independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and surrounding disputed territories, claiming that Iraqi Kurds had a legal and constitutional right to self-determination.⁴ Voters overwhelmingly voted in favour of independence, with a turnout of 72% and 93% voting ‘yes’ for secession from Iraq.⁵ However, the case of the 2017 referendum is also considered as an example of an independence movement backfiring, as it did not achieve the ostensible aims of the Iraqi Kurdish political elite and triggered an armed response from the central government, along with a host of economic sanctions.^{6 7} The central government declared the referendum “unconstitutional”, imposed an international flight ban on the KRI’s airports, and took control of 20 percent of the territory previously controlled by the Kurds – all within the span of a month following the referendum.⁸

In addition to opposition from the central government, the referendum was also opposed by internal and external actors (O’Driscoll & Baser, 2019; Degli Esposti, 2021). There was interfactional disagreement within the KRI regarding the referendum, with political parties

¹ Dylan O’Driscoll and Bahar Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq’, *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 11 (2 November 2019): 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1617631>.

² Matt Qvortrup, ed., *Nationalism, Referendums and Democracy: Voting on Ethnic Issues and Independence*, Second edition (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2020): 6.

³ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2016.

⁴ O’Driscoll and Baser, 2016.

⁵ O’Driscoll and Baser, 2016.

⁶ O’Driscoll and Baser, 2016.

⁷ Bill Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, *Kurdish Studies*, 5, no. 2 (26 October 2017): 213.

⁸ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2017.

such as Gorran (Change), the Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal) and a contingent of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) boycotting the vote due to competing visions of Iraqi Kurdish independence. Moreover, there was virtually unanimous opposition to the referendum by the international community, including by the United States (US) – traditionally the Iraqi Kurds’ most trusted ally – which prioritised the territorial integrity of Iraq over supporting the Iraqi Kurds’ desire for independence. In fact, only Israel explicitly supported the referendum taking place.⁹

Iraqi Kurdistan’s location, surrounded by Turkey, Iran, Syria and the rest of Iraq, makes it vulnerable to economic damage in the event of regional hostilities. It relies heavily on imports from Turkey and Iran to meet its basic needs.¹⁰ Oil and gas exports, a cornerstone of the region’s economy, mainly transit through these countries.¹¹ Therefore, economic and political constraints posed by its neighbours are closely linked and directly impact the feasibility of independence for Iraqi Kurdistan.

Considering how vital internal cohesion and external recognition are for statehood, it appears that the KRG took a risky gamble by planning to hold the referendum with neither international support nor a unified domestic front for pursuing independence.¹² Despite these risks, Masoud Barzani, the President of the KRG at the time, went ahead with the referendum he had promised in June 2017. Consequently, the KRG found itself in its weakest position since its establishment in 1992, Barzani’s power and legitimacy vanished, he subsequently resigned, and the Iraqi Kurds found themselves further away from independence than they had been for decades.

What drove the KRG to hold the referendum in September 2017 despite the high likelihood of considerable political costs? Was it a genuine perceived need for independence, or was it an aggressive nationalist project used as a distraction from the political and economic turmoil of those years? Were elements of both motivations at work? Did Barzani expect to fall short

⁹ Jeffrey Heller, ‘Israel Endorses Independent Kurdish State’, Reuters, 13 September 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-israel/israel-endorses-independentkurdish-state-idUSKCN1BO0QZ/>.

¹⁰ Hawre Hasan Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum: The KDP’s Public and Private Motives’, *Asian Affairs* 51, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2019.1706338>.

¹¹ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2026.

¹² O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2024.

of the expectations of an eager Kurdish population all along? These questions are critical to address against the backdrop of increasingly frequent struggles for self-determination and the additional context of increasingly globalised conflicts – particularly in the Middle East, where international involvement has shaped many state-building trajectories.

1.1 Research Objective and Relevance

The aim of this thesis is to set the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in its geopolitical context, whilst acknowledging the importance of the domestic political context. This research aims to analyse the motivations behind the decision, in addition to the mere timing, of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence referendum.

This thesis argues that although there were motivations besides domestic popularity in calling for the referendum, the Iraqi Kurdish political elite believed that they could rely on external backing, especially from the US, when it came to challenging Baghdad. It will argue that although a rally-around-the-flag distraction – in the form of an independence referendum – was used as a response to the social and political unrest at the time, Barzani and the KDP's desire for more autonomy was genuine, and the opportunity to achieve this was seized in the context of high international support.

This thesis shows how Barzani and the KDP became heavily reliant on the US in their quest for statehood, miscalculating that they could perpetuate their political legitimacy and power with US backing. Instead, the US chose to prioritise a politically stable and unified Iraq over Kurdish self-determination, against the Iraqi Kurdish political elite's expectations, leading to unintended consequences.

The issues of international involvement, power and self-determination will be tied together in this thesis. The overlap between these factors will provide a new perspective on the case of the 2017 referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and its geopolitical context, whilst aiming to create a better understanding of independence referendums more generally.

This thesis is a relevant addition to the literature on the referendum in question for two reasons. First, it links the academic consensus that it was a failed political gamble with the more recent explanation that it was in fact a distraction staged by Barzani to deflect popular

attention away from the economic and political crises following the war on ISIS – elaborated on later – disguised by nationalist rhetoric. It suggests that these two ideas are not mutually exclusive, and that it is possible for both short-term and long-term political aims to be addressed by holding an independence referendum, rather than only one or the other. Secondly, the increase in the salience of self-determination in geopolitics and in the number of independence referendums in recent decades suggests that this phenomenon is not unique to Iraqi Kurdistan or the Middle East, and that considering alternative perspectives on the Iraqi Kurdish case could raise questions about the geopolitical contexts of other independence referendums worldwide.

This thesis examines the effects of international involvement on the Kurdish independence referendum, with a focus on the US as the most influential actor in Iraqi Kurdistan. By examining the aftermath and consequences of the 2017 referendum, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of overreliance on ‘patron states’ in national liberation movements. It explores the potential limitations and unwanted consequences that may arise when these movements depend on external support from powerful allies. These considerations are essential for understanding the implications of future international involvement in state-building efforts.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Kurdish Nationalism and State Formation in Iraq

The Kurdish national issue has been a contentious matter in the Middle East since the end of World War I.^{13 14 15} Kurdish aspirations for statehood have been persistent, with numerous Kurdish movements seeking independence and rebelling against their ‘parent states’ over the

¹³ Dana El Kurd, ‘The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation: Polarization and Repression in Palestine and Iraqi Kurdistan’, *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, no. 3 (17 December 2020): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-12030002>.

¹⁴ Bill Park, ‘Explaining Turkey’s Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?’, *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (January 2019): 46–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525165>.

¹⁵ Nevzat Soguk, ‘With/Out a State, Kurds Rising: The Un/Stated Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq’, *Globalizations* 12, no. 6 (2 November 2015): 957–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2015.1100857>.

past two centuries. In Iraq, the KRG has engaged in state-building processes since the early 1990s, aiming to achieve independence.¹⁶

In Iraqi Kurdistan, political elites have successfully established control over their territory and secured a monopoly of coercive powers within the autonomous KRI, despite divisions between different *Peshmerga* factions controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK. They have also built institutions that control state mechanisms under the sovereignty of an elected parliament.¹⁷

Whilst the US has not always been committed to the idea of Iraqi Kurdish statehood, it has facilitated the process significantly over the years.¹⁸ The US utilised Kurdish parties as allies in their efforts to control the Ba'athist regime in Iraq prior to and during the 2003 invasion and throughout the years of American occupation. Following the First Gulf War, the establishment of a no-fly zone in 1991 placed the Kurds in a strong position to act as allies of the US. The subsequent measures taken in 1992 – including the holding of elections and the formation of the KRG – are seen by many scholars as pivotal preconditions for the formation of the de facto state that we see today in Iraqi Kurdistan.^{19 20 21 22} The US assured Kurdish parties that they would be protected from Saddam Hussein's regime during this time, providing the externally backed safety and power necessary to focus on state-building efforts.²³

The 2003 American invasion of Iraq elevated the Kurdish parties to “kingmaker” status within Iraqi politics as major allies of the US. Continued American involvement post-2003 established unprecedented autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan and allowed the Iraqi Kurds to play a key role in producing the 2005 Iraqi constitution.²⁴ This allowed them to negotiate the

¹⁶ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 658.

¹⁷ O'Driscoll and Baser, 658.

¹⁸ El Kurd, 'The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation', 294.

¹⁹ Johannes Jüde, 'Contesting Borders? The Formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's de Facto State', *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (July 2017): 847–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix125>.

²⁰ El Kurd, 'The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation', 294.

²¹ Denise Natali, 'The Spoils of Peace in Iraqi Kurdistan', *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 6 (September 2007): 1111–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590701507511>.

²² Yaniv Voller, 'Kurdish Oil Politics in Iraq: Contested Sovereignty and Unilateralism', *Middle East Policy* 20, no. 1 (March 2013): 68–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12004>.

²³ El Kurd, 'The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation', 296.

²⁴ El Kurd, 296.

constitutionally-mandated inclusion of an autonomous Kurdish region within Iraq, and granted them the right to form their own parliament, appoint their own president and prime minister, control their own borders, secure a share of the federal budget, and enjoy representation in Baghdad.²⁵ Equally importantly, it gave them leverage over the issue of the ethnically mixed disputed territories through the inclusion of Article 140, which required the central government to take necessary steps, by democratic means – i.e., census and referendum – to resolve the status of these territories.^{26 27}

The autonomous and empowered KRG would attract significant economic investment as part of their state-building strategy.^{28 29} This led to the development of Iraqi Kurdistan's own independent oil and gas export capabilities.³⁰ The liberalisation and opening of hydrocarbon fields allowed the KRG to negotiate public and private partnerships with production-sharing agreements, leveraging soft power to promote their national brand.³¹

Prior to the war on ISIS, the KRG had cooperated with the central government in Baghdad for over a decade, postponing aspirations for independence due to its infeasibility.³² The KRG had accepted its status as an autonomous region within Iraq after 2003 whilst simultaneously continuing its soft power and nation branding efforts within the political and territorial confines of a united Iraq until the opportunity for independence arose.

1.2.2 The 2017 Independence Referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan

The decision to hold the referendum, in the face of internal, regional and global opposition which made independence for Iraqi Kurdistan seem virtually unachievable, has triggered

²⁵ Fahrettin Sumer and Jay Joseph, 'The Paradox of the Iraqi Kurdish Referendum on Independence: Contradictions and Hopes for Economic Prosperity', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 4 (8 August 2018): 574–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1430533>.

²⁶ Natali, 'The Spoils of Peace in Iraqi Kurdistan', 1111–29.

²⁷ Hawre Hasan Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 10.

²⁸ Azad Berwari and Thomas Ambrosio, 'The Kurdistan Referendum Movement: Political Opportunity Structures and National Identity', *Democratization* 15, no. 5 (December 2008): 891–908, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340802362489>.

²⁹ Jüde, 'Contesting Borders?', 847–63.

³⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 659.

³¹ Umut Kuruuzum, 'In Search of Futures: Uncertain Neoliberal Times, Speculations, and the Economic Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Emel Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 185–200, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53715-3_8.

³² O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 658.

much academic discussion. There are two main camps of scholars who offer opposing readings of the motivating factors behind the decision to hold the referendum.

The first camp, hereafter the ‘political gamble’ camp, whose literature emerged soon after the referendum took place, present it as a gross political miscalculation.^{33 34 35 36 37} According to this camp’s reading of the event, Barzani and his ruling KDP underestimated international opposition to the referendum and believed that their most trusted allies – most notably, the US – would back the independence movement by accepting a positive referendum result and recognising a friendly Kurdish state situated in a geostrategic location. In Kaplan’s words, ‘even if groups [separatists] have perfect information on potential gains in foreign support, miscalculations over potential losses can also lead to risky gambles.’ Moreover, this camp argues that Barzani felt owed by the West, especially the US, following sacrifices made by the Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and that therefore the timing was right to declare independence.

On the other hand, the second camp, hereafter the ‘political battle’ camp, whose literature has emerged more recently, advocates for shifting the focus from external to internal political dynamics. These authors argue that the KRG made a political move for reasons other than independence, causing it to jeopardise its autonomy in the process. They contend that the ‘political gamble’ camp dismisses the importance of domestic political and social dynamics and misunderstands the role of nationalism in explaining the causal factors behind the referendum.^{38 39 40} One of the focal points in the accounts of the ‘political battle’ camp is the

³³ Joost Hiltermann, ‘The Kurds Are Right Back Where They Started’, *The Atlantic*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/history-of-the-kurds/544316/>.

³⁴ Sean Illing, ‘“A Colossal Miscalculation”: Why the Kurds’ Independence Bid Might Lead to Civil War in Iraq’, *Vox*, 20 October 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/10/20/16495748/iraq-kirkuk-kurdistan-isis>.

³⁵ Sumer and Joseph, ‘The Paradox of the Iraqi Kurdish Referendum on Independence’, 574–88.

³⁶ Morgan L. Kaplan, ‘Foreign Support, Miscalculation, and Conflict Escalation: Iraqi Kurdish Self-Determination in Perspective’, *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (January 2019): 29–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525164>.

³⁷ Sara D. Mustafa, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum: Political Parties, Opportunity and Timing’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 5 (20 October 2021): 890–907, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1724077>.

³⁸ Nicola Degli Esposti, ‘The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq’, *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 10 (3 October 2021): 2317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1949978>.

³⁹ Kamaran Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood: Kurdistan’s September 2017 Referendum for Independence’, *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 12 (2 December 2019): 2272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1619452>.

⁴⁰ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2016.

fact that the referendum was highly controversial and not unanimously supported amongst politicians *within* Iraqi Kurdistan.

This camp argues that the referendum was merely a political tool used by Barzani and the KDP to distract the public from their faltering political legitimacy, caused by the economic and political crises that ensued from the war against ISIS, by the divergence of nationalist visions along interfactional lines, and by the party's increasingly authoritarian and repressive practices.^{41 42 43}

These scholars argue that due to a near-complete lack of support for Iraqi Kurdish independence from the international community, independence was never a realistic goal. They characterise the referendum solely as a deflection of public attention away from the turmoil stemming from political stalemate, economic crisis, the proroguing of parliament by the KDP and strained relations between the different political parties in the region.⁴⁴

O'Driscoll & Baser rightly point out that external recognition, which is something the Kurdish leadership did not have, is vital for statehood. However, following Kaplan, this thesis argues that just because the Iraqi Kurds did not enjoy external recognition (except from Israel and a handful of non-sovereign nations), a fact clear in hindsight, this does not mean that the Iraqi Kurdish leadership did not expect external recognition as an acknowledgement by the US and its allies of new realities on the ground, or at least some degree of support and defence from an Iraqi federal response.⁴⁵

One of O'Driscoll & Baser's principal arguments is that nationalism and nationalist rhetoric played a major role in Barzani's referendum campaign. They argue that a rally-around-the-flag effect was created by Barzani and his party to silence civil unrest and maintain their power. This idea is also touched upon by Degli Esposti, who highlights the role played by a

⁴¹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2016.

⁴² Degli Esposti, 'The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq', 2317.

⁴³ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 111.

⁴⁴ Hama, 110–11.

⁴⁵ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 213.

heightened degree of Kurdish nationalism – and a resultant sense of unity – in thwarting the threat posed by civil unrest and upholding the structures of class and power in the region.

These scholars are right to be sceptical about taking the ostensible motivation for holding the independence referendum at face value. Indeed, it is worth noting that the referendum was not called for by the parliament, or even the KDP, but by Barzani himself in his capacity as President of the KRG.⁴⁶ Moreover, the campaign initially had little political support outside the KDP, as other parties saw it as a move by the KDP and Barzani to consolidate their power and maintain legitimacy amidst the political and economic crises of that time.⁴⁷ Indeed, Barzani's presidential term should have officially ended in 2013 after serving two four-year terms, but it was extended by four more years amidst political deadlock, based on a legal interpretation by the Shura (Consultative) Council that the president's seat should not be vacant.⁴⁸

It is also important to note the socioeconomic climate in which the referendum was held. In 2015, the KRG faced a deep economic crisis as a result of the war on ISIS, causing the regional government to delay the payment of public sector salaries. As a result, daily protests ensued in towns and cities across Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly amongst civil servants who were beginning to question the KDP's legitimacy and Barzani's place in government.⁴⁹ This socioeconomic context is vital for understanding the *timing* of the 2017 referendum, but insufficient for understanding the *motivation* to hold it in the first place.

There is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the assumption that Barzani's call for the referendum was motivated by an aspiration to maintain power amidst political turmoil, and, on the other hand, the long-term consequences of holding the referendum against all odds, including the subsequent political failure and discreditation that led to his resignation. It therefore seems unlikely that the consolidation of power was the sole reason for holding the referendum, since power is precisely what Barzani and the KDP lost when the Iraqi Armed

⁴⁶ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 112.

⁴⁷ Hama, 112.

⁴⁸ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2275.

⁴⁹ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 110.

Forces swiftly retaliated and took control of 20% of the territory that had been under the control of the *Peshmerga* until that point.⁵⁰

This thesis argues that the analyses of the ‘political battle’ camp are problematic for four main reasons. First, these accounts seem to assume that the Iraqi Kurdish leadership was inept and unaware of the geopolitical considerations surrounding the referendum, ignoring the international community’s warnings in favour of stirring up nationalist sentiment at home. Second, it can be construed from these accounts that the leadership was entirely reactive and constantly made decisions in response to domestic threats to their political legitimacy and power, to the point where they lost all control over their own population and the ability to make any viable political decisions. Third, it can also be construed that, if the leadership was in fact in control of its political decisions, the case of the referendum should be considered a successful case of a rally-around-the-flag effect promoting the KDP’s brand of Kurdish nationalism – an unconvincing assessment of a failed political gamble. Finally, this account of the events risks underestimating the strength of Iraqi Kurds’ desire for self-determination and statehood.

Although this camp’s literature provides a valuable contribution to understanding the timing of the referendum and the dynamics of the campaign, as well as the importance of the internal political dynamics of independence movements more generally, this thesis argues that its exclusively domestic focus does not adequately explain all of the motivations for holding the referendum. This thesis postulates an intermediary step to explain the mismatch between holding the referendum, which achieved the desired result, and subsequently losing control of the Iraqi Kurdish independence movement: namely, the over-reliance of the Kurdish leadership on the support of the US.

O’Driscoll & Baser also highlight the importance of the role of nationalism as a tool used by political elites to mobilise people and achieve political aims.⁵¹ Regardless of the motivations behind holding the referendum, it is undeniable how well Barzani and the KDP played their hand in campaigning amongst the Iraqi Kurdish population, seen in the high turnout and in the resulting significant majority for independence. According to O’Driscoll & Baser, during

⁵⁰ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 213.

⁵¹ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2021.

the referendum campaign the KDP raised the temperature of Kurdish nationalism by increasing nationalist rhetoric and employing a narrative of Kurdish victimhood, oppression and need for statehood. This made it impossible for the political opposition to oppose holding the referendum, as doing so would have been seen as a betrayal of the Kurdish nationalist cause.⁵² O'Driscoll & Baser argue that this political power game played by Barzani and the KDP is evidence that the referendum was never about the cause of independence. However, this thesis argues that the two causes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that Barzani was still relying on American support for Iraqi Kurdish independence to use this externally sourced 'infrastructural power' to maintain his political power.

1.3 Structure of Thesis

The rest of the thesis is divided into five sections. It will commence by offering some analytical and methodological tools before providing the background and aftermath of the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and the surrounding disputed territories. Chapter 1 will then analyse the historical relationship between the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and the US, to examine how this relationship might have impacted the motivations and timing of the referendum by linking the historical relationship to the narratives of the 2017 referendum. Chapter 2 will analyse the roles and responses of the international community with regards to the referendum, with a focus on the US, and postulate a gap between the expectations of the Iraqi Kurdish political elite and the realities that ensued and disappointed the pro-referendum politicians of Iraqi Kurdistan. Chapter 3 will examine the KRG's sources of internal and external political power and legitimacy to explain the referendum as a tool to gain support from both domestic and international sources. The thesis will end with some concluding remarks and further considerations.

1.4 Research Design

1.4.1 Theoretical Considerations

The 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the motives behind it, require an understanding of the nexus between international involvement, state formation, and

⁵² Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 119.

referendums. US economic and military support for the KRG during the war on ISIS enabled the KRG to increase its military capabilities, territorial control and international engagement, especially with the West.⁵³

However, the lack of a unified and effective response by the *Peshmerga* to the Iraqi Armed Forces' October 2017 offensive to recapture the disputed territories raises questions about to what extent the Kurdish leadership was prepared to take up arms and defend its assertion of independence, or to what extent it was relying on the international community, especially the US, to intervene and defend it, if only as part of a limited operation. The lack of an armed resistance meant there was no war of independence and Iraqi Kurdistan reverted to its 2003 status within Iraq. This also raises important questions regarding the overlap between democracy and self-determination.

1.4.1.1 Theories of De Facto States

Many political entities have managed to achieve some degree of statehood without enjoying international recognition, and these have been defined as 'de facto states', 'contested states', 'unrecognised states', 'quasi-states', 'states-within-states' and 'state-like entities'.⁵⁴ All these classifications suggest a continuum of statehood, between statelessness and internationally recognised statehood. Thus, following Caspersen, 'statehood' is possible in the absence of formal recognition by the United Nations (UN), albeit different forms of statehood result from the positions on the statehood continuum that entities find themselves at.⁵⁵ Moreover, statehood is not linear and development of fully-fledged statehood can fluctuate.⁵⁶ The 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan exemplifies this fluidity by exposing the weakness of de facto state institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan, including the lack of a unified approach to independence and the failure to use its means of coercion – i.e., the *Peshmerga*, to defend its 'statehood'.⁵⁷ This apparent spectrum of statehood challenges the state-centric

⁵³ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2270.

⁵⁴ Palani et al, 2272.

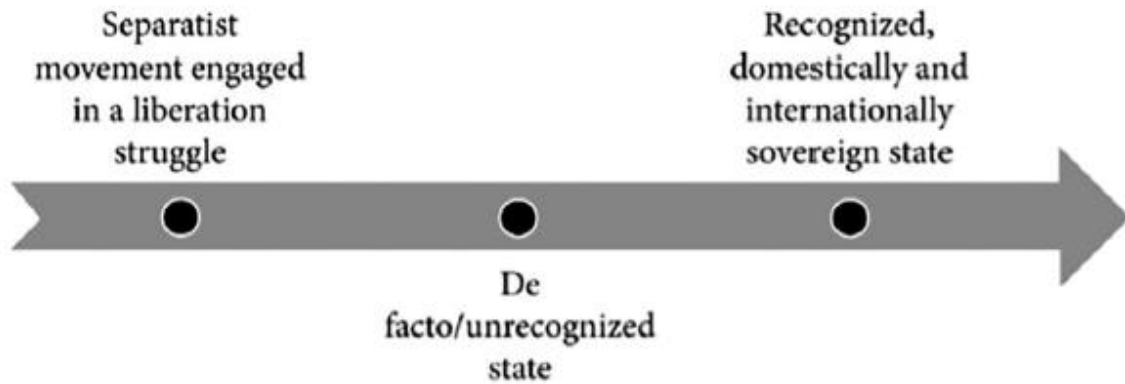
⁵⁵ Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Modern International System*, vol. 41 (Polity Press, 2012): 11, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S009059920002403X/type/journal_article.

⁵⁶ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2272.

⁵⁷ Palani et al, 2272.

ontology of international relations (IR), stressing the need to define these political anomalies and understand their behaviour on the global stage.

Figure I. The statehood continuum.⁵⁸



Caspersen's 2012 book 'Unrecognised States' embodied a major scholarly contribution to the field of alternative forms of statehood.⁵⁹ It identifies five characteristics for a political entity to be considered a de facto state: (1) the entity in question has achieved de facto independence and controls the majority of the territory it claims, (2) building state institutions accompanied by attempts to increase external and internal legitimacy, (3) a declaration of formal independence or at least clearly demonstrated aspirations for independence (for instance, through an independence referendum), (4) the entity has not gained international recognition and (5) the entity has existed for at least two years. The holding of an independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan highlights the equal importance of external support to the KRG in addition to internal legitimacy.

Following Palani et al., de facto states here can be defined as political entities that lack full international recognition, but still, in practice, meet the criteria of the Montevideo Convention on Statehood to exercise control over a territory and over a permanent population, and to demonstrate capacity to enter into relations with other state actors.^{60 61} Pegg's definition of de facto states notes that although international recognition is not

⁵⁸ Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*. (Routledge, 2014): 15, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315886954>.

⁵⁹ Caspersen, *Unrecognized States*, 11.

⁶⁰ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2272.

⁶¹ 'Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States', 26 December 1933, <https://www.jus.uio.no/english/services/library/treaties/01/1-02/rights-duties-states.html>.

required to enjoy a degree of statehood, a de facto state nevertheless “seeks widespread international recognition as a sovereign state”.⁶² Based on the fact that the KRG displays evidence of engendering all of the mentioned criteria, Iraqi Kurdistan is widely considered to be a de facto state by the scholarly community.⁶³

1.4.1.2 Theories of Referendums

The number of referendums globally has risen in recent years, warranting an analysis of their increasingly prominent role in IR.⁶⁴ In the literature, referendums have traditionally been tied to the field of international law and are generally considered to be explicit and direct assertions of democratic processes, as the cases of South Sudan (2011), Scotland (2014), Greece (2015), and the UK (2016) have demonstrated.^{65 66} Referendums on independence have also been perceived as instruments of secession and solutions to ethnic and national issues.^{67 68} In line with these definitions, and the earlier definitions of de facto statehood, this thesis argues that the KRG held the 2017 independence referendum to move along the statehood continuum from its position as a de facto (internationally unrecognised) state to a position of being a de jure (internationally recognised) state.

When it comes to tying independence referendums to statehood, it is important to keep in mind Caspersen’s second characteristic of de facto states – attempts to increase external and internal legitimacy. Thus, the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan cannot be reduced solely to its internal political dynamics. Although this thesis does acknowledge that internal dimensions are important in shaping state-building efforts in de facto states, it argues that the referendum was used as a tool to exert pressure in both directions. Charountaki notes

⁶² Scott Pegg, *International Society and the De Facto State*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019): 26, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429354847>.

⁶³ Palani et al., ‘Strategies to Gain International Recognition’, 2273.

⁶⁴ Marianna Charountaki, ‘Non-State Actors and Change in Foreign Policy: The Case of a Self-Determination Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 3 (3 May 2020): 385–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1663495>.

⁶⁵ Sara Binzer Hobolt, *Europe in Question: Referendums on European Integration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶⁶ Laurence Morel and Mads Qvortrup, *The Routledge Handbook to Referendums and Direct Democracy*, Routledge Handbooks (London: Routledge, 2018): 224.

⁶⁷ Hudson Meadwell, ‘The Political Dynamics of Secession and Institutional Accommodation’, *Regional and Federal Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2009): 221–35.

⁶⁸ Mads Qvortrup, *Referendums and Ethnic Conflict*, Second edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022): 179.

that the 2017 Catalan independence referendum demonstrates how de facto states can pursue and use referendums to formulate foreign policy in the absence of full international recognition by asserting its distinctness to the international community, whilst simultaneously exerting pressure vis-à-vis the central government to increase bargaining power, influence policy, but more importantly, maintain power.⁶⁹

This conceptualisation of independence referendums as multi-purpose tools to influence both domestic and foreign policy is helpful for understanding the KRG's political goals and motivations in the context of the 2017 independence referendum. In this case, the referendum can be linked to the KRG's (quasi-)foreign policy goals – that is, the quest for statehood or, failing this, increased leverage to negotiate with the Central government for a path to eventual independence – in addition to domestic policy goals – that is, the consolidation of power and legitimacy amidst economic and political turmoil. Despite the scholarly debate thus far, this thesis argues that the internal and external political dynamics in Iraqi Kurdistan need not be mutually exclusive when examining the motivations behind the 2017 independence referendum.

1.4.2 Methodology

To explain the linkages between Iraqi Kurdish nationalism, power, state-building and international involvement, this thesis adopts a historical sociological approach that analyses the period between 1991 – when the US, UK and France imposed no-fly zones on Saddam Hussein's regime, providing safe haven for the Iraqi Kurds and permitting their first experience of political and territorial autonomy – and 2017, when Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces (the KRG's military and security forces whose establishment dates back to the first Kurdish revolts against Baghdad) gained control of historically disputed territories, including Kirkuk, during the war against ISIS, and the KRG enjoyed strong Western support.⁷⁰

This thesis will analyse mostly secondary sources including; observers' interviews with senior members of Iraqi Kurdish political parties, such as the incumbent KDP – the largest political party in Iraqi Kurdistan, whose origins date back to the Barzani family-led struggles

⁶⁹ Charountaki, 'Non-State Actors and Change in Foreign Policy', 386.

⁷⁰ El Kurd, 'The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation', 294.

for Kurdish autonomy from Baghdad, the PUK – originally a leftist grassroots movement consisting of ex-KDP members that emerged from the defeat of the KDP by Saddam Hussein during the failed Kurdish revolt in 1975, and the Gorran Movement party – another, more recent grassroots movement challenging the two-party rule of post-2003 Iraqi Kurdistan; officials from the KRG; and members of parliament (MPs), English media coverage, Barzani’s X (formerly Twitter) posts, and speeches – translated into English – acquired from peer-reviewed journals and reports from observers on the ground.^{71 72 73 74}

The building of trust between the KRG and the US coincided with Iraqi Kurdish quasi-state formation during these decades and shaped the political institutions of the region and their foreign policy and state-building trajectory. This trajectory, which was profoundly shaped by reliance on the US for economic and military assistance, led the Kurdish political leadership to believe that they could replace their faltering homegrown power and legitimacy with external support during times of political crisis, such as the popular uprising against the regional government witnessed in 2014–2017, in order to maintain their political hegemony. This outward-facing strategy is the intermediary step that explains the gap between Barzani calling a seemingly unviable referendum and subsequently losing his power and legitimacy.

To examine the historical American–Iraqi Kurdish relationship and understand its role in the 2017 independence referendum, this thesis will utilise case-centric process tracing methods and discourse analysis, using evidence from the case to argue that a link exists between overreliance on the US and the holding of the referendum, with the expectation that it would be successful – at least to a degree.

In the analysis, this thesis focuses on finding evidence of causal mechanisms – namely, overreliance on ‘patron states’ leading to unwanted outcomes for national liberation movements. To do so, this thesis postulates a gap between the expectations of de facto states for their ‘patron states’ to support them, and the geopolitical reality that ‘patron states’ prioritise stability over the norms and ideologies that they champion, including respect for self-determination. Indicators of such a gap include reiterated discourse regarding the right to

⁷¹ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2021.

⁷² Degli Esposti, ‘The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq’, 2319.

⁷³ El Kurd, ‘The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation’, 294.

⁷⁴ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Referendums as a Political Party Gamble’, 660.

self-determination – from both parties – as well as the historical pattern of support by the US for the Iraqi Kurds when faced with the threat of diminished autonomy by Baghdad.

The aim of this thesis is to offer an additional perspective on the literature that argues that the referendum was simply a nationalist distraction project. To do so, it will connect the themes of international involvement, self-determination, independence referendums and power to conclude that these are overlapping concepts that can be explained in a geopolitical context as well as in a domestic political one.

2. Background of the Referendum

On June 7th, 2017, Barzani made this statement on his Twitter (now X) account: “I am pleased to announce that the date for the independence referendum has been set for Monday, September 25, 2017”.⁷⁵ Within days, the referendum campaign and the arrangements for the vote began. The referendum was to be held in the officially recognised Kurdistan Region, the disputed territories held by the *Peshmerga*, and the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora.⁷⁶

On September 25th, 2017, eligible voters from the officially demarcated Kurdistan Region, the disputed territories and the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora voted ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question: ‘Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?’ Although the Iraqi Kurdish political leadership stated that the referendum was legally non-binding, it was later redefined by the KRG as binding in the sense that it would determine its position in their negotiations with Baghdad regarding their future relationship.⁷⁷

2.1 Turnout and Support

According to the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (KHEC), turnout for the referendum was 72.16%, with 92.73% voting yes.⁷⁸ Despite the high turnout and evident popular support for independence, support for the referendum itself was not universal amongst the population of Iraqi Kurdistan or even the political leadership itself. For instance, Gorran, the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG, now the Kurdistan Justice Group (KJG)), the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF), and some factions within the PUK boycotted preparations for the referendum, citing Barzani’s increasingly authoritarian practices, including his extension of his presidency in 2015 and his suspension of parliament in October of the same year, as the

⁷⁵ Masoud Barzani (@masoud_barzani) “I am pleased to announce that the date for the independence referendum has been set for Monday, September 25, 2017 <https://t.co/Woj0JuYZNE>”, X, June 7, 2017, 6:52pm, https://x.com/masoud_barzani/status/872496589868290049.

⁷⁶ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 213.

⁷⁷ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 112.

⁷⁸ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 204.

primary reasons for their scepticism and opposition to the vote.^{79 80 81 82} On September 15th, 2017, the KRG's parliament was convened for the first time since its suspension, specifically to vote on approving the referendum.⁸³ Out of 111 MPs, 68 attended the meeting, of whom 65 voted to approve the holding of the referendum. The boycott of the referendum by Gorran, the KIG, the ITF and certain PUK MPs extended to this parliamentary session. Thus, the referendum was approved mostly by members of the KDP and PUK.

The political dynamics of the referendum also extended to the general population's voting patterns, although to a lesser extent.⁸⁴ The KDP strongholds of Duhok, Erbil and Barzan showed overwhelming enthusiasm for the referendum, with observers noting a clear rally-around-the-flag effect taking place throughout the campaigning and voting periods, along ethnic as well as factional lines.⁸⁵

On the other hand, in non-KDP-controlled regions, the mood on the ground was observed by Park et al. to be less jubilant and nationalist, and this was reflected in the lower turnout.⁸⁶ In PUK-controlled provinces, such as Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, around 80% voted in favour of independence, and turnout was around 50% in both. However, overall, the call to rally around the flag was still effective at transcending factional lines. Indeed, the PUK governor of Kirkuk, Najmaddin Karim, as well as its vice president at the time, Kosrat Rasul, supported the referendum, despite not being aligned with the KDP.⁸⁷

In regions that are less ethnically dominated by Kurds, such as Kirkuk, the turnout was just over 30%. As Park et al. note, due to Kirkuk's ethnic diversity, it is uncommon for any political party to receive a majority of the vote in federal elections, let alone a contentious

⁷⁹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2020.

⁸⁰ Gorran is a grassroots political party that emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan to advocate for democratic development, the end of corruption and nepotism, and the prioritisation of domestic political reform before the question of independence. It is the third biggest political party represented in the KRG after the KDP and PUK.

⁸¹ The KJG, formerly the KIG, is the principal Islamist political party in Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁸² The ITF is a political party that represents the Iraqi Turkmen people across Iraq and is represented in the KRG. It opposes Kurdish independence in Iraq and is often considered to be a representative of Turkey's interests in Iraq.

⁸³ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2019.

⁸⁴ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2023.

⁸⁵ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 204.

⁸⁶ Park et al, 210.

⁸⁷ Park et al, 205–8.

regional poll. However, the low turnout for the referendum in Kirkuk does not necessarily suggest an ethnicised opposition to an independent Iraqi Kurdistan. The presence of numerous roadblocks and heavy security installed by the *Peshmerga* throughout the city on the day of the vote may have constituted major disincentives for non-Kurds to vote in the referendum as they may have felt unsafe to leave their homes that day.⁸⁸ Moreover, polling stations were located in Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods, further hampering access for non-Kurds to participate in the referendum.⁸⁹

2.2 Aftermath

In the wake of the referendum, the KRG faced significant adverse internal and geopolitical consequences. The immediate aftermath saw the Central government impose punitive measures against the regional government, crushing Iraqi Kurds' hopes for imminent independence.

2.2.1 Immediate Backlash from Baghdad

On September 29th, 2017, Baghdad imposed an international flight ban on airports within the Kurdistan Region, signalling a reversal of certain aspects of autonomy the region had enjoyed previously.⁹⁰ This was accompanied by political and economic measures, including arrest warrants issued for the referendum's organisers, restrictions on the sale of US dollars to banks in the Kurdistan Region, and a series of joint military exercises with Turkey. The Iraqi parliament also authorised the use of force by the Iraqi Armed Forces and demanded that the KRG hand over control of border crossings and the disputed city of Kirkuk.

2.2.2 Military Repercussions

The situation escalated on October 16th, 2017, when the Iraqi Armed Forces, alongside federal police and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), seized control of the long-disputed Kirkuk.⁹¹ This operation subsequently extended to the other disputed territories which had

⁸⁸ Park et al, 208–9.

⁸⁹ Park et al, 209.

⁹⁰ Park et al, 213.

⁹¹ Park et al, 213.

been under *Peshmerga* control since the war on ISIS began in 2014. By reclaiming these areas, including the strategically important oil fields, the Central government not only negated the territorial gains made by the Kurds but also severely curtailed the KRG's financial independence, as these oil fields had been a primary source of its revenue since 2014.

2.3 Diminished Negotiating Power

The loss of controlled territory was as profound a setback for the Iraqi Kurdish political leadership as it was traumatic for the Iraqi Kurdish population.⁹² As the KDP and PUK ordered their respective *Peshmerga* forces to retreat, the strained relations between Erbil and Baghdad, and the bitter narratives employed by both sides, took to the social media stage, with labels of “traitor” being exchanged on Twitter (now X).⁹³ The consequences of the referendum significantly weakened the KRG's stance in negotiations with the Central government with regards to autonomy and the KRG's insistence on the democratic resolution of the status of the disputed territories as per Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. These repercussions also discredited Barzani's aspirations for the foundation of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan by democratic means – a process that O'Driscoll & Baser note is vital for external support and recognition – revealing a gap between the Kurdish leadership's expectations of increased autonomy and the events that led to the unintended reality of a diminished autonomy.⁹⁴

The KRG emerged from the aftermath of the referendum far more fractured and compromised in its ability to advocate effectively for a unified vision for Kurdish independence. Despite Barzani's assertion that the referendum was not in vain, and regardless of whether independence was its genuine goal, the initiative clearly failed to achieve its primary objective of advancing Barzani's and the KDP's vision for Iraqi Kurdistan. Rather, it resulted in a significant loss of territorial control and rendered Barzani's and the KDP's position of power more diminished than before, due to the unexpected reaction from Baghdad

⁹² Degli Esposti, 'The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq', 2318.

⁹³ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 213.

⁹⁴ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2026.

and the international community.⁹⁵ These events call into question the argument that the referendum was about maintaining power from within Iraqi Kurdistan and suggest that it was undertaken on the assumption that it would receive external support.

⁹⁵ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 213.

3. The Iraqi Kurdish–American Relationship and the Narratives Surrounding the Referendum

3.1 Introduction

The Iraqi Kurdish trajectory of state-building can be divided into two main periods. The first, from 1923 to 1991, is characterised by rebellion, civil war, and central government policies aimed at suppressing Kurdish identity.^{96 97} The second, from 1991 to 2017, is characterised by international involvement, increased autonomy and elevated negotiating power vis-à-vis Baghdad.⁹⁸ This chapter outlines the historical developments that shaped the trajectory of Iraqi Kurdish state-building during these periods, and analyses how it interacts with the political leadership’s relationship with the US, and how it shaped the narratives surrounding the campaign for the independence referendum.

Central to the referendum’s context were the KRG’s grievances with Baghdad, including the failure to properly recognise the *Peshmerga* and the withholding of its salaries, in addition to the non-fulfilment of Article 140 regarding the status of the disputed territories.⁹⁹ Barzani’s motivations for the referendum were twofold and sometimes contradictory, with ostensible desires for Kurdish independence as well as gaining greater autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad without necessarily desiring fully-fledged independence.¹⁰⁰ Barzani and fellow “failed partnership–right time” politicians heralded the upcoming referendum as binding, with independence being an irreversible political reality. However, in the weeks building up to the referendum, they tempered this assertion by emphasising the need for diplomatic negotiation and dialogue with Baghdad, advocating the referendum instead as a tool to gain increased bargaining power vis-à-vis the central government.¹⁰¹

Although support for Barzani’s referendum was not unanimous across the Kurdish political landscape, the most prominent narrative surrounding the referendum was the “failed partnership–right time” narrative, suggesting disillusionment with the partnership between

⁹⁶ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2018.

⁹⁷ Degli Esposti, ‘The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq’, 2319.

⁹⁸ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2018—19.

⁹⁹ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 111.

¹⁰⁰ Hama, 113.

¹⁰¹ Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2281.

the KRG and the Central government, which was spearheaded by Barzani and the KDP. However, alternative narratives coming from the KDP's rivals included the "No for Now" narrative, which was a movement spearheaded by Gorran and certain factions within the PUK, and the "no right to partition" narrative, emphasising the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity. The former questions the legitimacy of the referendum process and the latter challenged the constitutional right to secede from Iraq. However, in the build-up to the referendum, these narratives, especially the latter, gained far less traction than the "failed partnership—right time" one.¹⁰²

3.2 Kurdish Quest for Statehood

3.2.1 Post-World War I and the Kurds

The post-World War I era was fateful for the Kurds of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, as the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne distributed them between the four new states of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey.¹⁰³ Each state engaged in its own nation-building efforts, often at the expense of non-Arab, non-Persian or non-Turkish ethnic identity and aspirations. The Kurds in Iraq found themselves incorporated into an Arab-majority nation-state which determined their status as an ethnic minority in that country.^{104 105} More importantly, it set the stage for their national liberation movement.¹⁰⁶

Kurdish nationalism began to coalesce after Iraq gained independence from Britain in 1932, but it was not until the 1960s that the Baghdad authorities began to feel threatened by Kurdish revolts, and consistently resorted to oppressive measures to thwart any move towards Kurdish autonomy or independence.^{107 108}

¹⁰² Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 205.

¹⁰³ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2018.

¹⁰⁴ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Degli Esposti, 'The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq', 2319.

¹⁰⁶ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹⁰⁷ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹⁰⁸ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2018.

3.2.2 The Kurdish Revolts and the Iraqi Response

The Kurdish revolts of 1961, predominantly led by the KDP under Mullah Mustafa Barzani, marked a pivotal phase of Iraqi–Kurdish conflict.¹⁰⁹ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this conflict, known as the First Iraqi-Kurdish War, saw the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurds as part of Baghdad’s repressive nation-building tactics.¹¹⁰

Following the Ba’ath Party’s return to power in Iraq in 1968, a new strategy of divide-and-rule was introduced to exploit internal Kurdish divisions.¹¹¹ The defeat of the Kurdish resistance in 1975 by Saddam Hussein’s regime led to a split within the KDP, from which the PUK emerged, led by Jalal Talabani.¹¹²

The Kurdish insurgency resurfaced in the 1980s, coinciding with the Iran-Iraq War of 1980 to 1988.¹¹³ Both Baghdad and Tehran exploited Kurdish factions to serve their military and geopolitical interests. The interfactional conflict deepened, with some Iraq-backed groups derogatively labelled as *jash* (little donkeys) by Kurdish nationalists for collaborating with Baghdad.¹¹⁴ A new alliance – the Kurdistan Front – formed between the KDP and PUK in 1988, encouraged and facilitated by Iran, intensifying Saddam Hussein’s resolve to eliminate the Kurdish resistance.¹¹⁵ The genocidal Anfal campaigns, initiated by the regime that same year, resulted in the deaths of 50,000 to 100,000 Kurds and the destruction of thousands of villages, representing one of the darkest chapters in Iraqi Kurdish history.¹¹⁶

3.2.3 The 1991 Gulf War

The conclusion of the 1991 Gulf War was pivotal for the status of the Kurds in Iraq. Saddam Hussein’s brutal suppression of the Kurds led to the establishment by the US-led coalition of

¹⁰⁹ Degli Esposti, ‘The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq’, 2319.

¹¹⁰ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹¹ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹² Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹³ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹⁴ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹⁵ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹⁶ Degli Esposti, 2319.

a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq.¹¹⁷ As a result, by mid-1991 the Kurdistan Front had successfully pushed the Iraqi Armed Forces out of the Kurdish regions. By the end of the year, Kurdish forces had asserted control over most of the Kurdish-majority areas, laying the groundwork for what would eventually become an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq.¹¹⁸

3.3 Post-1991 Iraq

3.3.1 Establishing Autonomy

The second period of Iraqi Kurdish state-building, commencing in 1991, was pivotal in shaping demands for self-determination. Following decades of oppression and civil war, the Kurdish national liberation movement, spearheaded by the KDP, transformed from one of resistance to one of autonomy, thanks to their new – and first – ally, the US. In May 1992, the KRG was established following regional elections, setting the stage for a level of autonomy that had not been seen by the Kurds in recent history.¹¹⁹

Led by the KDP and PUK, the KRG began to function as a de facto state.¹²⁰ It controlled its own borders, managed foreign relations, and began to develop legislative, executive and judicial institutions. This era can be viewed as the nascent phase of Kurdish state-building, characterised by the institutionalisation of Kurdish governance, by the consolidation of Kurdish nationalism as a response to decades of oppression and Arabisation by the central government, and by close relations with the US.¹²¹

The path to Kurdish autonomy in Iraq was not without its challenges. Throughout the 1990s, interfactional conflicts between the KDP and PUK threatened the stability of the emergent Kurdish quasi-state. These conflicts were once more fuelled by pressures from Baghdad as well as Iranian and Turkish forces.¹²² A significant turning point came with the intervention of the US.¹²³ In 1998, American mediation culminated in the Washington Agreement, in

¹¹⁷ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹⁸ Degli Esposti, 2319.

¹¹⁹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2018.

¹²⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2018–2019.

¹²¹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹²² O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹²³ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

which Barzani and Talabani committed to peace and further cooperation. This US-brokered agreement was crucial in ending the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War and facilitating the political and economic development of the KRG.

3.3.2 Economic Development and Emergent Democracy

The period between 1996 and 2003 was marked by significant economic development for the KRG, initially driven by the UN sponsored Oil-For-Food Programme (OFFP).¹²⁴ The OFFP, which allocated 13% of Iraq's oil revenue to the KRG, was instrumental not only for the region's economic development but also for its aspirations for self-determination. For the first time since its creation, the UN acknowledged the Kurds as a distinct political, administrative and ethnic identity in Iraq.¹²⁵

The economic benefits of the OFFP, coupled with high oil prices and increasing foreign direct investments (FDI), facilitated a boom in the KRG's economy.¹²⁶ This newfound economic stability and increased global bargaining power provided a foundation for the KRG to fashion a cohesive state-building strategy and strengthen their demands for self-determination. The inter-factional peacebuilding formed during this period, facilitated by US support for a unified KRG, was vital for granting the region more autonomy over its affairs and future negotiations concerning Iraqi Kurdistan's political status within Iraq. The salience of Iraqi Kurdish autonomy would only become more prominent after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

3.4 Post-2003 and the Kurds

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 marked another key moment for the Iraqi Kurds, offering unprecedented economic and political opportunities.¹²⁷ ¹²⁸ During the period from 2003–2014, between the invasion of Iraq and the war on ISIS, the KRG consolidated its

¹²⁴ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹²⁵ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹²⁶ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹²⁷ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹²⁸ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 201.

autonomous status, leveraging its natural resources, notably oil and gas, to foster soft power, increase its legitimacy in the global arena and garner support for eventual statehood.¹²⁹

3.4.1 International Involvement, Federalism and Constitution

During the invasion, the KDP and PUK formed strategic alliances with the US and the UK in order to depose Saddam Hussein.¹³⁰ This paved the way for significantly increased, US-backed Kurdish autonomy within a newly federal Iraq, culminating in the approval of the 2005 constitution, which embodied significant opportunities for the Iraqi Kurds to govern themselves.¹³¹ ¹³² The new constitution was based on the 2004 Transitional Administrative Law, which enshrined the KRG's autonomous status and underscored its jurisdiction over most of the territories it had controlled since Saddam's ousting in April 2003.¹³³

The ratification of the subsequent 2005 constitution and Iraq's adoption of a federal system formally recognised the Kurdistan Region as a federal entity with its own parliament and armed forces, and officially demarcated a 'green line' which reinstated the KRG's authority over most of the Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja and Erbil governorates, but excluded most of the currently disputed territories of Diyala, Nineveh and, most notably, Kirkuk, which were also home to sizeable Kurdish populations and whose ultimate fate was to be legally decided by the implementation of Article 140.¹³⁴

3.4.2 Interpretation of the Constitution

The status of the disputed territories has remained a contentious issue since the US-imposed 2005 constitution proposed solutions to the demographic and political concerns regarding the territories.¹³⁵ The governorates of Kirkuk, Diyala, and parts of Erbil and Nineveh had been heavily Arabised during the Ba'ath regime.¹³⁶ The 2005 constitution proposed US-brokered

¹²⁹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2019.

¹³⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹³¹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019.

¹³² Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 201.

¹³³ Park et al, 202.

¹³⁴ Park et al, 203.

¹³⁵ Park et al, 201–7.

¹³⁶ Degli Esposti, 'The 2017 Independence Referendum and the Political Economy of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq', 2319.

negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad, but they were consistently stalled, primarily due to confusion regarding the official boundaries within which each federal entity could assert its authority, leaving the status of these territories unclear.¹³⁷

Article 140 required the Central government to take necessary steps to resolve the status of the disputed territories by 2007.¹³⁸ This aspect of the constitution was seen by the Iraqi Kurds as a US-mandated right to self-determination for the Kurdish residents of the disputed territories in addition to those within the KRI.¹³⁹ In actuality, these constitutional requirements do not specify by which means the status of these regions must be determined. This led to contradictory interpretations of the constitution by Erbil and Baghdad.¹⁴⁰ The ensuing tension allowed the Kurdish leadership to blame Baghdad for failing to deliver on Article 140, and the 2017 referendum was the first instance of the KRG unilaterally making political decisions across the disputed territories.¹⁴¹

The retreat of the Iraqi Armed Forces in mid-2014 during the war on ISIS presented a strategic opportunity for the KRG to expand its territorial control, seizing territories that had been disputed since the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, notably Kirkuk.¹⁴² These territories, which had been under joint control between the KRG and the Central government until 2014, now found themselves effectively administered by *Peshmerga* forces, enabling the KRG to claim authority over them and include them in the catchment zone of the 2017 independence referendum.¹⁴³

Barzani's 2014 executive order to take control of Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, the Nineveh Plains, Makhmoor, Shingal and other areas along the 'green line' reflected a potential shift in the power dynamics between Erbil and Baghdad and an opportunity to pursue an independent Iraqi Kurdistan with clearly demarcated borders.¹⁴⁴ This change in territorial control laid the

¹³⁷ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 203.

¹³⁸ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 110.

¹³⁹ Hama, 110.

¹⁴⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2020.

¹⁴¹ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 112.

¹⁴² Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2273.

¹⁴³ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 115.

¹⁴⁴ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2273.

groundwork for holding the 2017 independence referendum not only within officially recognised KRG territory but also in the disputed territories.¹⁴⁵

In a public announcement in Kirkuk on June 26, 2014, Barzani declared the long-awaited resolution of the status of the disputed territories: “We were trying to implement Article 140, but this article has been implemented automatically”.¹⁴⁶ This assertion determined Barzani’s and his government’s position on the next steps in pursuing independence – the foundations of the eventual independence referendum.

Prior to the 2017 referendum, as discussed earlier, relations between the KRG and the Central government had deteriorated, resulting in political deadlock.¹⁴⁷ The KRG released a report detailing Baghdad’s constitutional violations, alleging a failure to establish democratic institutions and to uphold power-sharing agreements outlined in the 2005 constitution.¹⁴⁸ The report highlighted the continued absence of a second chamber to safeguard regional and ethnic rights and of a Supreme Court to adjudicate constitutional disputes. Without these institutions, it claimed, Iraq had failed to become a functioning democratic and federal state. Additionally, the KRG criticised Baghdad for failing to fulfil its financial obligations, particularly regarding oil and gas revenues owed to the KRG.¹⁴⁹

Drawing on grievances related to Baghdad’s failure to uphold its constitutional commitments and protect Kurdish interests, the KRG articulated a narrative of constitutional violations to bolster the argument for increased autonomy and, ultimately, independence.

3.4.3 Economic Development and Soft Power

Coinciding with the challenges of the disputed territories and the interpretation of the constitution was the region’s ever-advancing state-building process. The period following the 2003 invasion saw significant economic development, largely driven by the KRG’s lucrative

¹⁴⁵ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 205–6.

¹⁴⁶ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 113–14.

¹⁴⁷ Hama, 109.

¹⁴⁸ Hama, 111.

¹⁴⁹ Hama, 111.

oil industry.¹⁵⁰ The opening and privatisation of oil fields attracted numerous public and private ventures through production-sharing agreements, enhancing the KRG's economic stability and its soft power in global fora.¹⁵¹

Dubbed the 'other Iraq', the KRG was portrayed as a beacon of stability and prosperity in a country that was otherwise plagued by conflict.¹⁵² This reputation was bolstered by the international community's increasing acknowledgement of the Iraqi Kurds as a distinct political and ethnic entity, with many countries establishing consulates in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.¹⁵³ New investment opportunities attracted businesspeople to the region, earning Iraqi Kurdistan comparisons with other booming economies such as Dubai.¹⁵⁴ Today, the KRG still maintains 14 representative offices abroad to conduct 'parallel diplomacy' aiming at deepening and institutionalising its international relations, and there are a total of 35 diplomatic missions in Erbil representing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the European Union (EU), and other sovereign states and international organisations.¹⁵⁵

3.4.4 From Resistance to Referendums

This section examines how Kurdish aspirations for statehood evolved from armed resistance to peaceful referendums in the post-2003 period, with a focus on the influential role of the US. Coinciding with Iraqi Kurdistan's newfound economic and political development were the ongoing disputes about the interpretation and implementation of Article 140 of the 2005 constitution, which mandated the normalisation of the status of the disputed territories. A notable solution proposed by the US was a nationwide referendum to determine their status by November 2007.¹⁵⁶

This allowed the Kurdish political leadership to begin pursuing secession from Iraq through narratives of constitutional right rather than armed resistance. The failure of the central

¹⁵⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2019–20.

¹⁵¹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2020.

¹⁵² O'Driscoll and Baser, 2020.

¹⁵³ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2275.

¹⁵⁶ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 110.

government to implement Article 140 was perceived by the Kurdish leadership as a betrayal, perpetuating the strained relations between Baghdad and Erbil during the post-2003 period.¹⁵⁷

Meanwhile, the KRG utilised its autonomy to continue to develop its natural resources, notably through the establishment of its own oil export infrastructure.¹⁵⁸ This led Baghdad to withhold the 17% of the national budget that is constitutionally guaranteed to go to the KRG.¹⁵⁹ The economic and political independence provided by the US permitted the KRG to perceive and denounce Baghdad's actions as a violation of the authority and rights granted to the Kurds by their most trusted ally, and thus emboldened the Kurdish leadership's cause for full statehood by democratic means. Seen by the KRG as a guarantee of Kurdish rights, and by the US as a way to maintain the flow of Iraqi oil into global markets, the Kurdish-American relationship deepened as the internal political landscape shifted. The Kurdish leadership saw the possibility of leveraging their democratic reputation and increased bargaining power to push for independence.

3.5 The Resurgence of the Independence Question

Despite the commitment to a unified Iraq by Kurdish political parties throughout earlier years, Iraqi Kurds engaged in independence movements well before their leadership did. The 2017 referendum was not the first Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum.¹⁶⁰ In 2005, the same year as the US-imposed constitution, an unofficial independence referendum was held by Kurdish activists. Although this referendum was a bottom-up initiative and was rejected by the KDP and PUK in favour of a unified Iraq, it acts as an important precursor to the 2017 referendum and highlights the shift from armed resistance to peaceful independence movements which could only occur with American-afforded protection.

The push for independence in 2017 gained momentum due to the perceived injustices following the centralisation efforts of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whose measures, including the withholding of the KRG's allocated share of the federal budget, were viewed by

¹⁵⁷ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 201.

¹⁵⁸ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 120.

¹⁶⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2020.

Iraqi Kurds as attempts to undermine the autonomy of the KRG.¹⁶¹ On July 3, 2014, Barzani instructed parliament to begin preparations for an independence referendum.¹⁶² In an address to an international audience on July 7, 2014, he announced that “from now on, we will not hide that independence is our goal”. Thus, although the over-hasty timing of the eventual referendum can be explained by the internal political turmoil, preparations for it had already been set in motion. Moreover, Barzani and the KDP anticipated that with the defeat of ISIS looming on the horizon, the substantial economic, military and political support they had been receiving would diminish, which would weaken their bargaining power relative to Baghdad.¹⁶³ Consequently, Barzani began to talk seriously of an independence referendum in early 2016.¹⁶⁴

Even Iraqi Kurdish politicians who rejected the 2017 referendum, on the grounds that it was illegal and unconstitutional, agreed that Baghdad was stoking antagonism and that al-Maliki’s sectarian policies were contributing to the fractionalisation and partitioning of a unified Iraq.¹⁶⁵ On September 24, 2017, at a press conference in Erbil, Barzani said that “the partnership with Iraq has failed”, signalling the frustration, of the Iraqi Kurdish citizenry and leadership alike, with the central government’s apparent constant violation of Article 140.¹⁶⁶

Therefore, the 2017 referendum was not only about political rivalry, as there was a consensus that Baghdad was not respecting its commitments to the 2005 American-introduced constitution. Although it is necessary to acknowledge the internal political dynamics of the referendum and their role in the vote’s timing and reception, an intermediary step is needed to explain Barzani’s decision to risk his legitimacy and power, even if political instability was decisive in determining the timing of the vote. The 2017 referendum was about rushing to solve these political instabilities by wrongly assuming that the US would support the KRG when sufficient power and legitimacy could not be sourced from domestic voters.

¹⁶¹ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 110.

¹⁶² Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2273.

¹⁶³ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2028.

¹⁶⁴ O’Driscoll and Baser, 2028.

¹⁶⁵ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 207.

¹⁶⁶ Park et al, 201.

3.6 Discourse Surrounding Independence

The “failed partnership–right time” narrative highlighted historical grievances and aspirations for self-determination as the key drivers for the independence referendum. At the core of this narrative lies Barzani’s promise of imminent independence, backed up by a critique of Baghdad’s historical marginalisation of Kurds. His public statements between 2014–2017 regarding the referendum unveiled his determination to achieve an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, an aim which he promoted by reminding his constituents of the historical injustices suffered by the Kurds at the hands of the Central government, and by lamenting the failure since 2003 to bring about a fully democratic federal Iraq.¹⁶⁷

The “failed partnership–right time” narrative contends that Baghdad’s systematic disregard for Kurdish rights renders the prospect of meaningful negotiation futile.¹⁶⁸ It argues that the time has come to consult the Kurdish people, and to open negotiations on the basis of the outcome of the referendum.¹⁶⁹ Barzani’s assertion that Kurdish autonomy within Iraq was beginning to erode under al-Maliki’s government and its punitive policies translated into a rally-around-the-flag effect amongst the population.¹⁷⁰ Barzani claimed that “we went to Baghdad to create a democratic and federal Iraq. I now admit that in 2003, we made a great mistake by returning to Baghdad with good intentions and good hearts. That is why we should not be criticised; today, we want to separate from Iraq because Baghdad rejected friendship and partnership with us”.¹⁷¹

During the referendum campaign, the perception that Iraqi Kurdistan’s progression towards independence was backsliding added to this perceived emergency and heightened the level of urgency in the region.¹⁷² This quotation also highlights the shift from a bottom-up independence movement to a top-down one. At KDP rallies during the build-up to the referendum, Barzani promoted the belief that Kurdish independence is a long-overdue solution to the injustices faced by Iraqi Kurds: “Due to the Iraqi government and the Iraqi

¹⁶⁷ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 111.

¹⁶⁸ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 205.

¹⁶⁹ Park et al, 205.

¹⁷⁰ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 110.

¹⁷¹ Hama, 112.

¹⁷² Hama, 112.

political leadership's exclusive policies, violations of the constitution, and ignoring the rights and demands of the people of Kurdistan [...] we reach the conclusion that we have to return to our people's opinion and will, and let them decide on our future".¹⁷³ "We tried all the alternatives to independence, but none succeeded. Today we believe that Kurdish independence is a solution to the problems that we face; it is medicine to our pains".¹⁷⁴

3.7 Conclusion

The leading narratives surrounding the 2017 independence referendum are indicative of Barzani's prioritisation of outward engagement and international support as a remedy for the KRG's grievances with Baghdad.

Although the timing of the referendum was significantly influenced by internal factors – with Barzani prematurely holding the referendum as a distraction from the economic and political crises of 2017 – this political mistake clouds the fact that the quest for independence by means of a public vote, in the context of unprecedented external backing, had already been on the cards for years. When asked in an interview about the political disputes over his presidency and the referendum, Barzani emphasised that "the independence of Kurdistan is bigger than parliament and political parties".¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Hama, 112.

¹⁷⁴ Hama, 112.

¹⁷⁵ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2277.

4. The Role of the International Community

4.1 Introduction

Many scholars in recent years have connected the 2017 independence referendum to the process of maintaining political power within the Kurdish political landscape. However, to comprehensively understand the referendum's genesis, it is essential to consider its geopolitical context. Kurdish aspirations for independence are not a new trend and are marked by decades of struggle and resistance against the Iraqi state's policies towards Kurds. However, as discussed earlier, the trajectories and strategies of the independence movement have gradually shifted from armed resistance to democratic initiatives, often with external actors, notably the US, shaping these quests for self-determination. Moreover, the Barzani family's long-standing advocacy for Kurdish rights and independence began long before the economic and political turmoil in which the referendum eventually took place.¹⁷⁶

Crucial questions can be raised concerning the geopolitical factors behind the 2017 referendum. For example, the 2005 referendum, in which Kurdish voters had already overwhelmingly expressed their desire for independence, prompts scrutiny regarding the need for another referendum during a time when international engagement with, and support for, the KRG was at an all-time high. Other questions emerge concerning the economic viability of Kurdish statehood without international support, and the seemingly naive decision to gamble on an independence referendum if no real intention to actually achieve independence existed.¹⁷⁷

According to O'Driscoll & Baser, unrecognised states carry out processes of democratisation to gain international recognition.¹⁷⁸ However, there exists a tension between democratisation efforts and the imperative to maintain a unified and stable national liberation movement to pursue independence successfully. Despite various democratisation processes carried out by the KRG since autonomy was consolidated in 2003, the dominance of the KDP and PUK in

¹⁷⁶ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2021.

¹⁷⁷ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2018.

¹⁷⁸ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2021.

the Kurdish political landscape has hindered significant progress in this regard, due to increasingly authoritarian tendencies and corruption in both parties.¹⁷⁹

The KRG's determination to proceed with the 2017 referendum without the consent of the Central government exemplifies this recession in democratisation and raised concerns about the referendum's legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.¹⁸⁰ It was for this reason that the referendum was not recognised by any UN member state (with the sole exception of Israel).

The critical and often overlooked intermediary step between determining an independence referendum in the first place, and prematurely holding it amid political turmoil, is the KRG's reliance on US support, which played a pivotal role in gambling on a political project that was to cost Barzani and his government their position of power. The prospect of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence faced significant challenges, notably due to the lack of support from neighbouring states, particularly Turkey and Iran. However, recognition, or at least support for increased autonomy, was expected from powerful actors further afield. This chapter examines the implications of the international community's role in and response to the 2017 referendum.

4.2 Self-Determination as a Tool for Nation-Branding

During the war on ISIS, Barzani and his factional allies strategically utilised soft power tactics to garner international support and portray Iraqi Kurdistan as a deserving candidate for autonomy and independence. While Barzani's aspirations for independence were primarily directed towards his constituents, they were also aimed at gaining recognition from the international community.

Barzani actively engaged in various international events and conferences, particularly those focused on counterterrorism efforts, to showcase Iraqi Kurdistan as a credible, friendly and responsible ally of the West, deserving of the right to self-determination. For instance, he and accompanying KDP delegates played prominent roles in the Munich Security Conference in

¹⁷⁹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 112.

2015, 2016 and 2017.¹⁸¹ Their participation, notably always separate from Iraqi government representatives and featuring greater involvement in panel discussions and meetings, underscored Kurdish foreign policy as being separate from Iraqi foreign policy, as well as the distinctness of their region and ethnicity.¹⁸²

Furthermore, in the lead-up to the referendum, numerous world leaders and foreign envoys made official visits to Erbil in addition to Baghdad, signalling increased international engagement with the KRG.¹⁸³ German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen's four visits to Erbil during the war on ISIS exemplify this strengthening relationship between the KRG and its Western allies. These official visits and public interactions served to elevate the global profile of the KRG and bolster its credibility and alignment with the West on the global stage.

As mentioned earlier, Barzani strategically framed the referendum's motivations within the framework of the US-imposed constitution. A key part of the referendum's justification hinged on fears that Baghdad would seek to roll back Kurdish territorial gains and regional rights after ISIS was defeated, reverting to pre-existing borders and undermining the notion of Kurdish independence. Citing the legal mandate of the Iraqi constitution, Barzani made these public statements during the war on ISIS: "I swear by God if I am certain about the status quo, we would have left the project of independence to the next generation. However, I fear, and I am sure that when the Islamic State is defeated, Baghdad will return and demand that we leave Khanaqin, Kirkuk, Shingal and Makhmoor and tell us that we must go back to the 2003 border."¹⁸⁴ "After the IS war, Baghdad wants us to go back to the 'green line', in order to attack Erbil with mortars [...] The culture of resorting to military force to resolve the Kurdish issue has not changed in Baghdad, after decades of genocide against Kurds at the hands of the Iraqi government."¹⁸⁵

By highlighting the Kurdish right to self-determination, enshrined in Article 140 by the US, as well as harking back to the historical state-sponsored oppression pre-US involvement, a traumatic collective memory for the Iraqi Kurds, Barzani aimed to garner support from both domestic and external sources for Kurdish autonomy and independence.

¹⁸¹ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2275.

¹⁸² Palani et al, 2275.

¹⁸³ Palani et al, 2275.

¹⁸⁴ Palani et al, 2275.

¹⁸⁵ Palani et al, 2275.

Overall, Barzani's soft power efforts in the lead-up to the referendum were multifaceted, encompassing diplomatic engagements and participation in international security conferences, all the while strategically framing Kurdish territorial gains and the independence referendum as consistent with US-backed legal frameworks. These efforts sought to present Iraqi Kurdistan as a responsible, viable and strategic ally of the West, deserving of exercising its promised right to self-determination, and capable of doing so democratically and legally.

4.3 The Role of Iraqi Kurdistan's Neighbours

Prior to (and following) the independence referendum, Turkey and Iran vehemently opposed the move, issuing warnings of a response and threats of a 'price to pay'.¹⁸⁶ Both of these neighbouring states made it clear that they would not support Iraqi Kurdistan's bid for independence and were prepared to take punitive measures, including isolating the region, in response to the vote.¹⁸⁷ This opposition stemmed from Turkey and Iran's fears that an independent Kurdish state in Iraq would embolden their own Kurdish populations – a sizable ethnic minority in each state – in their aspirations for independence. This perceived threat to their national security led many Iranian officials to express concerns that an independent Kurdistan could be 'the second Israel'.¹⁸⁸

Similarly, Turkey viewed the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq as a potential catalyst for Kurdish separatism within its own borders.¹⁸⁹ Home to the world's largest ethnically Kurdish population, Turkey regarded the prospect of Kurdish independence in Iraq as a direct threat to its territorial integrity and national security. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan categorically stated that Kurdish independence was unacceptable to Turkey and that his country was prepared to do anything necessary to prevent Kurdish independence in Iraq, framing this as a "matter of survival".¹⁹⁰

The lack of regional support for Iraqi Kurdish independence underscored Barzani's perceived need for external backing from powerful actors further afield – preferably actors that shared

¹⁸⁶ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017'.

¹⁸⁷ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2026.

¹⁸⁸ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 113.

¹⁸⁹ Hama, 113.

¹⁹⁰ Hama, 113.

the KRG's vision of the right to self-determination and would guarantee a continued flow of oil and gas into global markets.

4.4 The Role of the International Community Further Afield

The referendum sparked significant attention and reaction from the international community. Despite the Iraqi Kurdish political leadership's efforts to leverage its counterterrorism successes to win over Western support for independence, the aftermath of the referendum revealed a significant lack of backing from global powers including the US.

While the KDP successfully appealed to the sentiments of the Iraqi Kurdish population, in the absence of consent for the referendum from the central government in Baghdad, it failed to secure the necessary support and recognition from the international community to proceed with a formal secession from Iraq.¹⁹¹ Key global powers and international organisations, including the US, UK, Germany, France, Russia, the UN and the EU unanimously expressed their opposition to the unilateral holding of the referendum during the lead-up to the vote and actively sought to dissuade the KRG from proceeding with it.¹⁹² Statements issued by the US and the UK suggested that maintaining focus on combating ISIS should take precedence over aspirations for self-determination.¹⁹³

However, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership's decision to proceed with the referendum was based on three key assumptions regarding Western support.¹⁹⁴ ¹⁹⁵ Firstly, they believed that the economic, financial, military and political support received from the US during the war on ISIS would continue, especially given the trauma suffered within the region in the fight against terrorism.¹⁹⁶ The sacrifices made by the *Peshmerga* forces and the genocide of the Yezidi population during the war created a sense of a debt owed to the KRG by the US on account of the KRG's support for American interests in the Middle East at a heavy cost.

¹⁹¹ Hama, 113.

¹⁹² Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 212.

¹⁹³ Park et al, 212.

¹⁹⁴ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 115.

¹⁹⁵ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2280.

¹⁹⁶ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 115.

Secondly, there was a perception that historical US support for Kurdish rights would translate into further support for Kurdish self-determination, and an assumption that in the event of an offensive by the central government following the referendum, the US would side with the Kurds, as it had done during multiple instances of civil war in the past.

Finally, there was an assumption that even if independence was not feasible for the time being, the US would at least protect the Kurdish autonomy that it had enshrined in the 2005 constitution, especially if the *Peshmerga* were attacked by Iranian-aligned militias present in the Iraqi Armed Forces.¹⁹⁷ According to an interview with an unnamed senior KDP official, this strategy was based on the American foreign policy of reducing Iranian influence in Iraq and the broader Middle East, and preventing its expansion towards the Mediterranean Sea and, ultimately, the borders of Israel.¹⁹⁸

However, this assumption proved to be a gross miscalculation, as the international community, including the US, unanimously rallied behind Baghdad when Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi asserted his commitment “as commander-in-chief of the armed forces to take all legal and constitutional steps to protect the unity of Iraq and its people”, which included the deployment of the Iraqi Armed Forces to reclaim Kirkuk and the disputed territories and replace the *Peshmerga* there.¹⁹⁹ This unanimous international support for Baghdad highlighted the limitations of the Kurdish leadership’s assumptions and underscored the complexities of international relations in the region.

4.5 The Role of the United States

The KRG’s most trusted ally, the US, was not in favour of the referendum taking place in 2017. Instead, it attempted to broker deals between the Kurdish leadership and the central government of Iraq before the referendum was held.²⁰⁰ This was evident in a meeting held on September 15, 2017, where representatives from the US, UK and UN discussed alternative proposals with the Kurdish leadership (Palani et al., 2021). Although the US did not explicitly oppose the idea of an independence referendum in the future, due to its key role in

¹⁹⁷ Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2280.

¹⁹⁸ Palani et al, 2280.

¹⁹⁹ Palani et al, 2281.

²⁰⁰ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2026.

proposing a democratic solution to the status of Kirkuk and the disputed territories in Article 140, it strongly discouraged its occurrence in 2017.

One of the alternatives proposed by the US was a one-year negotiation process between Erbil and Baghdad, to be sanctioned by the UN.²⁰¹ This negotiation would address all matters of concern regarding Baghdad and Erbil's future relationship, including the recognition of an independence referendum in the case that these negotiations failed. Additionally, the UN offered another proposal, suggesting a two-year postponement of the referendum "until a meeting in the United Nations discusses the Iraqi file, including the Kurdistan Region and the independence referendum" could take place.²⁰² Heather Nauert, spokesperson for the US Department of State, described these alternatives as "a serious and sustained dialogue with the central government, facilitated by the United States and United Nations, and other partners, on all matters of concern, including the future of the Baghdad-Erbil relationship".²⁰³

Washington had warned Erbil that "if this referendum is conducted, it is highly unlikely that there will be further negotiations with Baghdad, and the above international offer [referring to the US's proposed alternatives] of support for negotiations will be foreclosed".²⁰⁴ Just two days before the referendum, former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent a last-ditch letter to Barzani, urging him to postpone the referendum, whilst acknowledging the constitutional rights of Iraqi Kurds to self-determination.²⁰⁵ However, Barzani and the Kurdish leadership ultimately rejected these alternatives, opting instead to push ahead with the referendum with the expectation that their allies would adapt to new realities on the ground and, more importantly, defend them from any military reaction from Baghdad.²⁰⁶

Following the referendum, there was a sense of disbelief among diplomats regarding the Kurdish leadership's call for international mediation between Erbil and Baghdad after making it very clear that the KRG would stand on its own if it went ahead with the referendum.²⁰⁷ Despite the fact that US proposals were rejected, they represented a

²⁰¹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 2028.

²⁰² Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2279–80.

²⁰³ Palani et al, 2279.

²⁰⁴ Palani et al, 2281.

²⁰⁵ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 213.

²⁰⁶ Park et al, 213.

²⁰⁷ Park et al, 213.

significantly higher degree of engagement with Iraqi Kurdistan, which was not seen with any other global power and bore witness to the historically close relationship between the KRG and the US. Indeed, the US allocation of US\$365 million for the *Peshmerga* under the US's defence bill a year after the referendum exemplified the persistence of strategic US–Kurdish relations.²⁰⁸ Similarly, the visit of US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry to the Kurdistan Region that same year to “express the US interest to invest in the semi-autonomous KR [...] and the view that the KR is important [therefore] the US is interested in working with Erbil in the sector of energy and natural resources” is also indicative of the continued US–KRG strategic partnership.^{209 210}

However, the US and its allies did not provide political or military support to the KRG when the Central government seized the Kurdish-held disputed territories following the referendum.²¹¹ This raises questions about how the Kurdish leadership were planning to defend their cause for independence and maintain their control of the disputed territories.

Since the post-2003 economic boom, the KRG has heavily invested in the *Peshmerga* and recruited significant numbers into its security forces.²¹² By seizing their economic opportunities and making use of their legally mandated 17% share of the annual Iraqi budget, the KRG more than doubled the size of the *Peshmerga* between 2003 and 2014.²¹³ Thus, the *Peshmerga* was significant enough in size to hold off any military reaction by the Iraqi Armed Forces when they marched on Kirkuk and the disputed territories, in the same manner as they had done against ISIS. Morale was also at an all-time high, following the successive victories against ISIS between 2014–2017, as exemplified in an interview with former KRG vice president Kosrat Rasul: “[Our] morale was high due to the fight against ISIS [following the Iraqi army fleeing in 2014], the control of all the disputed areas including Kirkuk (until

²⁰⁸ Charountaki, ‘Non-State Actors and Change in Foreign Policy’, 386.

²⁰⁹ Sangar Ali, ‘Barzani: Kurdistan Doesn’t Regret Referendum; US Didn’t Push to Delay Election’, *Kurdistan24*, 7 August 2018, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/16867-Barzani:-Kurdistan-doesn%27t-regret-referendum;-US-didn%27t-push-to-delay-election>.

²¹⁰ Sangar Ali, ‘US Secretary of Energy Meets Senior Kurdish Leaders in Erbil after Leaving Baghdad’, *Kurdistan24*, 11 December 2018, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/56a20c49-b25e-496c-8380-e3364c6ba071>.

²¹¹ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 115–16.

²¹² Hama, 116.

²¹³ Hama, 116.

October 20, 2017), and [the belief that] Iraq would never be in a position to fight the Peshmerga".²¹⁴

As mentioned earlier, the rejection of these proposals and the premature timing of the referendum can be explained by Barzani's and the KDP's faltering political legitimacy at home, but the push for independence in the first place finds greater explanatory power in the Kurdish leadership's desire to maintain close ties to the US by carrying out its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East and leveraging the enshrined right to self-determination found in the US-written constitution. Nonetheless, amidst the political turmoil, the referendum rhetoric had to increase, and the population's expectations inevitably increased with it, highlighting the equally important role of internal political dynamics.²¹⁵

Instead of preparing to mobilise the *Peshmerga* and fight for independence if necessary, the KRG saw their degree of power and autonomy significantly reduced as the Central government quickly claimed the disputed territories with virtually no resistance. This suggests that the Kurdish leadership were relying on external backing to protect them, a conception that is obvious when examining what they perceive to be a betrayal by their closest ally.

4.6 Perceived Betrayal

The aftermath of the referendum and its ensuing consequences inflicted by Baghdad represented a perceived betrayal by the US in the eyes of the KRG. Having played a pivotal role in countering ISIS and having enjoyed increased international engagement as a result, the KRG expected support from its most trusted ally, the US, in its pursuit of independence. However, this expectation was met with disappointment when the US did not defend the KRG during Baghdad's armed response.

Barzani expressed the sentiment that the sacrifices made by the *Peshmerga* in combating ISIS warranted recognition and support for Kurdish self-determination from the US and its allies. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Barzani confirmed, referring to the right to self-

²¹⁴ Charountaki, 'Non-State Actors and Change in Foreign Policy', 386.

²¹⁵ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2028.

determination: “After the big sacrifice of the Peshmerga and breaking the myth of ISIS, we thought they would respect this right”.²¹⁶

The belief was that the *Peshmerga*'s war efforts were in line with the international norms and values championed by the US. Moreover, in the war on ISIS, the *Peshmerga* sacrificed 1,800 fighters, 9,000 were injured and 60 were missing and there was a belief that this sacrifice should have warranted the seemingly rightful implementation and recognition of the referendum's result.²¹⁷ In another interview with Nechirvan Barzani, the President of the KRG following Barzani's resignation after the referendum, he expressed the perception amongst the Kurdish leadership that their efforts had gone unnoticed: “There was disappointment among the Kurdish people: the people of Kurdistan have had high expectations from the United States and they believe that the values the US cherishes, we also cherish”.²¹⁸

O'Driscoll & Baser argue that in the absence of international support, de facto states that declare independence unilaterally tend to regress along the statehood continuum and risk ending up becoming isolated unrecognised states or, more dangerously, becoming embroiled in civil war.²¹⁹ The authors point to cases such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, where independence is neither supported by the 'parent' state nor by the international community, which decreases the chances of gaining independence in the foreseeable future due to the political and economic isolation that these entities find themselves in.

However, more scholarly attention must be given to cases of de facto states whose state and nation-building trajectories are tied to multilateral geopolitical efforts such as counterterrorism, which prevent de facto states from becoming isolated and creates a perception of support for national liberation movements. According to El Kurd, there has been a recent trend in the last few decades of national liberation movements having to contend with increasing international pressures due to their operation in a globalised context.²²⁰ The effects of international involvement on the strategies employed by de facto states to garner support for independence – in the context of counterterrorism efforts – such

²¹⁶ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2278.

²¹⁷ Palani et al, 2277.

²¹⁸ Hama, 'Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 Independence Referendum', 115.

²¹⁹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 653.

²²⁰ El Kurd, 'The Impact of American Involvement on National Liberation', 275.

as the cases of Somaliland and Iraqi Kurdistan warrant deeper investigation, because their alignment with norms and values championed by their ‘patron’ states are perceived to be vital in building a case for international recognition.²²¹

As a result, lofty expectations for solidarity and support are often met with disappointment when it comes to pushing for independence. In the case of Iraq Kurdistan, when questioned about the risk of the region becoming isolated after the 2017 referendum, Barzani stated that: “We broke the myth of terror. We gave blood to break the myth of terror and defeat terror”.²²² Barzani’s assertion that his de facto state is immune from economic and political isolation due to its ideological and strategic alignment with the US shows that he was comfortable with taking the risky decision to push ahead with the independence referendum.

However, ultimately, the US refrained from backing the KRG’s bid for independence, leading to feelings of betrayal and disillusionment amongst the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. This perceived betrayal stemmed from the expectation that the US supports its trusted allies due to shared norms and values. This belief, which turned out to fall short of the expectations of the Kurdish political leadership, is exemplified in Nechirvan Barzani’s interview with Fox News following the Iraqi military response: “Over 1,846 Peshmerga soldiers have sacrificed their lives and more than 10,000 were wounded fighting ISIS [...] The Kurdish people were expecting that when a threat comes in, the US would stand by them. They were not expecting that American tanks would be used against them”.²²³

In a similar vein, Masoud Barzani said that “we thought the people who were verbally telling us they were our friends – and would support us – that they would have supported us or if not stay silent [neutral] [...] Not only did they not support the Peshmerga, but the Peshmerga is getting martyred by their weapons, and they were looking without doing anything”.²²⁴

²²¹ Charountaki, ‘Non-State Actors and Change in Foreign Policy’, 386.

²²² Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2277.

²²³ Hama, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan’s 2017 Independence Referendum’, 115.

²²⁴ Hama, 115.

4.7 The Gap Between Expectation and Reality

Barzani claimed that the intentions of the US were not clear and that the Iraqi Kurds were still expecting the US to stand up for them against Baghdad.²²⁵ When asked about the US's decision not to recognise the referendum, Barzani replied that “in the draft letter, that was brought to us in mid-September by the former US Secretary of State Tillerson, we needed assurances, [and] instead of “respect” we wanted the word “support””.²²⁶

The KRG's perception of betrayal can be explained by the gap between the Kurdish expectations of US support – given their close strategic cooperation during the war on ISIS – and the reality of US foreign policy following the war. Agreements between Baghdad and Erbil, brokered by the US, in practice granted Erbil authority over disputed territories and paved the way for the referendum. However, when Baghdad reclaimed these territories following the war and the referendum, the US did not intervene on Erbil's behalf, leading to a sense of abandonment by the Kurdish leadership and a perceived violation of these agreements by both Baghdad and Washington.²²⁷

As previously discussed, Barzani and other pro-referendum politicians argued that the liberation of Mosul, Kirkuk and the disputed territories in 2016 constituted an automatic implementation of Article 140. This de facto Kurdish control over the disputed territories was facilitated by the US in a 2016 agreement between the Ministry of *Peshmerga* Affairs, the Central government and the Pentagon that gave the *Peshmerga* authority to defend these territories against ISIS.²²⁸ As part of this agreement, the *Peshmerga* forces were authorised to take control over the disputed territories that had been lost by the Iraqi Armed Forces during the war on ISIS, including Kirkuk and Mosul, and they were permitted to maintain this control indefinitely in order to prevent ISIS from recapturing these territories.²²⁹

One of the conditions of this agreement was that Baghdad would not deploy militias – including Iranian-backed forces such as Hezbollah – to the disputed territories or bordering

²²⁵ Charountaki, 'Non-State Actors and Change in Foreign Policy', 387.

²²⁶ Charountaki, 387.

²²⁷ Charountaki, 387.

²²⁸ Charountaki, 387.

²²⁹ Charountaki, 386.

areas.²³⁰ As such, it was the KRG's assumption that this agreement was an American endorsement of Kurdish political legitimacy over the disputed territories, rather than the reality that it was simply a coordinated effort to rid Northern Iraq of ISIS. The gap between Kurdish expectations of American support for independence and the seemingly harsh reality of American foreign policy is highlighted in Barzani's expression of disappointment following the collapse of the 2016 agreement: "I asked the US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter – what if Iraq would not stick to the agreement? The US replied that we will guarantee and make sure of that. The US did not keep their promises and Iraqis violated the agreement. Instead, the Peshmerga were rewarded [with] an attack".²³¹

Thus, the 2016 Baghdad–Erbil deal, reached under the auspices of the US, became obsolete as a result of the 2017 referendum only a year later. It is noteworthy that the deal itself and the assurances made by the US to uphold it led to the events that ended up rendering the very same deal breached. This is indicative of the gap between the Kurdish expectations – of US support for independence in exchange for aligning with it in its counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East – and the reality – of American foreign policy to prioritise regional stability over demands for self-determination.

The decision by the US not to back the KRG's pursuit of independence despite its contributions to fight against ISIS led to feelings of disappointment and resentment towards the US among the Kurdish leadership. Overall, the lack of support by the US in the aftermath of the referendum left the KRG feeling isolated and disillusioned. Despite their significant sacrifices and alignment with Western norms and values, the perceived betrayal from the KRG's most trusted ally raises important questions regarding the place of self-determination and independence movements in the international community's geopolitical agenda.

4.8 Stability Before Self-Determination

The 2017 referendum led to the breach of the 2016 Erbil–Baghdad deal on the part of the Central government, as it mobilised its forces to reclaim the disputed territories in response to the vote. This development, and the support that Washington threw behind Baghdad despite

²³⁰ Charountaki, 385.

²³¹ Charountaki, 385.

assurances that the 2016 agreement would be upheld by the Pentagon, signalled a shift in the Iraqi Kurdish-American relationship. Despite the KRG being a key ally to Western powers such as the US, the UK and the EU, the shift in their support can be explained by a broader trend in international relations – the international community’s prioritisation of stability over support for self-determination. According to O’Driscoll & Baser, the global focus has increasingly shifted towards valuing stability over democratisation efforts and support for self-determination.²³²

This trend was evident during the war on ISIS when the KDP under Barzani, amidst increasingly authoritarian practices, received significant financial and military support from the US, and enjoyed an elevated status on the global stage instead of being pressured into conducting internal democratic reforms.²³³ Western powers, particularly the US and the UK, explicitly advised against pursuing internal political reforms during the war on ISIS. Muhammad Haji Mahmoud, the secretary-general of the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party, confirmed: “American and British representatives in the meeting both advised us and warned us [...] they told us this is not the right time to reform, with Kurdistan facing the Islamic State, and it can’t deal with other issues [...] The UK and US representatives told us that if Kurds distract themselves with internal issues, they won’t have the support of the UK and the US in fighting the Islamic State”.²³⁴

This stance illustrates how the KDP prioritised its counterterrorism efforts over internal processes of democratisation, gradually substituting its homegrown political legitimacy for external sources of power, including for their state and nation-building efforts. Barzani and his factional allies argued that a strong leadership was essential to move towards independence, even at the expense of internal democratic development.²³⁵ They believed that seizing the opportunity for independence should take precedence over internal political issues, reflecting a trend whereby geopolitical and outward-facing goals were increasingly prioritised over long-term and internal political goals such as democratic development. This approach is captured in Barzani’s sentiments: “If we wait and wait to solve all of the issues beforehand, and if we wait until the region is stabilised, we’re probably going to be waiting a

²³² O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2028.

²³³ Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2276.

²³⁴ Palani et al, 2276.

²³⁵ Palani et al, 2279.

long time”.²³⁶ “If we wait for all the problems to be resolved, we will have to wait forever”.²³⁷

As previously discussed, the international community’s response to the referendum was predominantly negative, emphasising the potential destabilising effects of the KRG’s unilateral decision.²³⁸ Prior to the vote, The UN Security Council issued a statement “expressing concern over the potentially destabilising impact of the Kurdistan Regional Government’s plans to unilaterally hold a referendum”.²³⁹ The day after the referendum, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres reiterated these concerns, and echoed the Security Council’s support for the territorial integrity of Iraq.²⁴⁰ He also highlighted the “particularly destabilising” nature of holding the referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories.²⁴¹ Similarly, the foreign ministers of the EU rejected this unilateral action, revealing the fact that the preference for stability over supporting self-determination was a consensus extending to the KRG’s Western allies.²⁴²

According to O’Driscoll & Baser’s view of Kurdish self-determination in Iraq, while the Kurds might have the capacity for self-determination in the form of autonomy within a unified Iraq, they currently lack the capacity to form a viable independent state.²⁴³ However, instead of prioritising internal processes of democratisation and pursuing increased autonomy within Iraq, the KRG pushed for independence in a top-down manner, relying on its allies to support it in its quest for increased autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad.

O’Driscoll & Baser argue that, in the absence of support from neighbouring countries, especially Turkey and Iran, who opposed the referendum and threatened repercussions, the Kurds were not in a position to sustain an independent state and thus the independence referendum cannot be taken at face value.²⁴⁴ While it is important to consider alternative motivations behind the referendum, especially when examining the timing and context of the

²³⁶ Palani et al, 2279.

²³⁷ Palani et al, 2279.

²³⁸ Park et al., ‘On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017’, 212.

²³⁹ Park et al, 213.

²⁴⁰ Park et al, 213.

²⁴¹ Park et al, 213.

²⁴² Park et al, 212.

²⁴³ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2026.

²⁴⁴ O’Driscoll and Baser, 2026.

vote, this thesis has argued that, although the KRG lacked regional backing in the build-up to the referendum, it calculated that it could have relied on its allies further afield to defend its push for independence. This came years after the first (2005) independence referendum on the political agenda of the KDP, against the backdrop of the KRG's elevated global status during the war on ISIS. Moreover, this context explains the logic of the perceived need for a second independence referendum, since the unofficial one in 2005 was rejected by the KRG itself. The Kurdish population's perceived necessity of Kurdish statehood had not changed, but the unprecedented status that the KRG enjoyed during the war on ISIS presented an apparent opportunity to win the sympathy of its Western allies and push for independence.

4.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, the international community's response to the 2017 Kurdistan Region independence referendum underscores a broader global trend of prioritising regional stability over supporting self-determination movements. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership's reliance on external validation and support from Western powers, coupled with the international community's emphasis on maintaining regional stability, ultimately led to the lack of support for the Kurdish bid for independence and the exposure of the expectation–reality gap that greatly disappointed the Kurdish leadership.

Although many scholars in recent years have connected the referendum solely to the process of maintaining political power, it is important to understand the geopolitics around the referendum, as referendums can be used as multi-purpose tools to achieve internal as well as external political aims. The 2017 independence referendum differed from the 2005 one in that it was a top-down opportunity for independence that was seized against the backdrop of unprecedented international support and engagement for the KRG.

An important factor behind the 2017 referendum taking place was the Kurdish leadership's assumptions about US foreign policy, rooted in the KRG's historical relationship with the US as well as the US's priorities in the Middle East during the war on ISIS. This chapter revealed the gap between the expectations of the Kurdish leadership for the US and its Western allies to back its cause for self-determination and the unexpected reality and perceived betrayal that set in once the international community began to perceive a risk of a potential destabilisation of the region posed by the referendum and decided to throw its unanimous support behind

Baghdad. Thus, as a key strategic ally of the US, the KRG was supported financially, militarily and politically, but only to the extent that Iraq was still politically stable. It is therefore interesting that this increased support, exemplified by strategic agreements, such as the 2016 Erbil–Baghdad agreement discussed earlier, led to the very actions that ultimately threatened the stability of a unified Iraq. It was also this reliance on the US that led the KRG to hold the referendum peacefully and not take up arms to assert its control over Iraqi Kurdistan and the disputed territories.

Throughout the campaign, although the KRG lacked explicit foreign support for the referendum to take place, Barzani sought to assure his population that the vote's outcome would eventually be accepted by the international community.²⁴⁵ Whilst enjoying unprecedented support and engagement, he suggested, mainly referring to the US, that initial resistance would ultimately give way to acceptance of new realities: “After years of experience, now I have learnt how to deal with the countries asking for postponing the referendum. They first threaten you, and then will deal with the facts on the ground”.²⁴⁶

Barzani's strategy reflected a belief that an assertive push for independence could force its powerful allies to acknowledge an irreversible step towards statehood, a sentiment in line with Palani et al.'s assertion that “minority communities and small nations must occasionally kick their big power allies in the teeth” to assert their rights to self-determination.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2281.

²⁴⁶ Palani et al, 2281.

²⁴⁷ Palani et al, 2281.

5. Sources of Legitimacy and the Economic Dimensions of the Referendum

5.1 Introduction

To comprehensively understand why such an expectation–reality gap came to be, it is essential to consider the effects of US involvement on the political power of the Kurdish leadership. After 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan enjoyed an elevated level of autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad due to US support. However, as discussed earlier, prospects for independence were neither realistic nor prioritised before the war on ISIS. The unprecedented levels of economic, military and political support during the war on ISIS, coupled with the crises that stemmed from this conflict, led Barzani and the KDP to gradually replace their homegrown political legitimacy with external support.

Although it is clear that during the economic and political crisis there was an urgent need to secure political survival, it is hard to imagine that the idea of holding an independence referendum was chosen to achieve this without expecting external backing in addition to internal support. Doing so would risk delegitimising the Kurdish leadership by losing political power and territorial control. Indeed, as a result of the referendum and the reaction from Baghdad, the political power and legitimacy that Barzani and the KDP have now is less than what they enjoyed prior to the referendum, as the KRG has seen its territorial control diminished, its oil and gas export capabilities reduced, and its economy and trade with its neighbours stifled.²⁴⁸

This chapter demonstrates how international involvement influenced the KRG's state-building efforts and those of de facto states more generally. The support from the US to combat ISIS fostered a sense of legitimacy and recognition for the KRG. However, the overreliance on external backing led to a miscalculation of 'patron state' support for self-determination. Throughout the chapter, the idea that referendums have simultaneous internal and external dimensions will be explored, and it will be argued that holding the 2017 independence referendum was indicative of a gradual swap of political legitimacy from internal sources for political legitimacy from external sources. This brings a new dimension

²⁴⁸ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 662.

to the understanding of the effect of international involvement on referendums and national liberation movements more generally.

5.2 Discourse Surrounding Internal Political Dynamics

Barzani's rally-around-the-flag cry for independence resonated deeply with the Kurdish populace, transcending partisan lines.²⁴⁹ In an interview in June 2017, Barzani said that "the referendum issue is about the destiny of a whole people. That's why this issue is bigger than any other political framework, or any political parties, or any political problems within the party system".²⁵⁰

His assertion that the referendum transcends political divisions, and that the destiny of the Kurdish people was being put in their own hands underscores the effectiveness with which he played his hand and galvanised the entire region to assist him in his mission for Kurdish independence. However, not everyone in the region shared his and his party's vision of what form an independent Iraqi Kurdistan would take.

5.3 Democratisation Before Independence

In contrast to Barzani and his allies' narrative advocating for immediate independence, an opposing voice emerged from opposition parties, notably Gorran, Komal and certain factions of the PUK, challenging the legitimacy and timing of the referendum and advocating instead for prioritising efforts to democratise the region and its government before holding an independence referendum. This coalition argued that statehood should not precede democratisation, and that the absence of independence does not necessarily preclude the development of democratic governance structures within Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁵¹ In the weeks preceding the vote, Gorran and its allies stated that "the referendum must be held when the proceedings for an independent state are already fulfilled. There is a need for the democratic means of a successful state to be met before a referendum of independence. The basis of

²⁴⁹ Park et al., 'On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017', 206.

²⁵⁰ Campbell MacDiarmid, 'Masoud Barzani: Why It's Time for Kurdish Independence', *Foreign Policy*, 15 June 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/15/masoud-barzani-why-its-time-for-kurdish-independence/>.

²⁵¹ Palani et al., 'The Development of Kurdistan's de Facto Statehood', 2277.

establishing a state must include a constitution and the social promise for the status of our nation. Peaceful and political coexistence between all different constituencies in the Kurdistan Region must exist”.²⁵²

Rabin Maroof, former leader of Gorran, emphasised the Kurdish aspiration for a democratic state. He and his allies in the political opposition promoted a vision of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan wherein an independence referendum should only take place once certain prerequisites for statehood were met, including fully-fledged democracy and the cessation of authoritarian practices by the KDP. In the build-up to the referendum, Maroof stated that “the Kurds do not only want a state, they want a democratic state, too”.²⁵³

One of the core assertions of this movement was that the extension of Barzani’s term and the unilateral decision to proceed with the referendum were undemocratic and unconstitutional (ibid). It was in this context that the “No for Now” narrative, spearheaded by Shaswar Abdulwahid, founder of the media conglomerate owning NRT TV, emerged.²⁵⁴ This movement questioned the motives behind the nature of the referendum, perceiving it as an attempt by Barzani and the KDP to maintain their power rather than as an opportunity to advocate for a democratic Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁵⁵

This movement centred on the need for the parliamentary and presidential elections, which were due to be held on November 3, 2017, to be held prior to any independence referendum, in order to ensure a fair, transparent and apolitical process for eventual independence.²⁵⁶ It expressed concerns that the timing of the referendum, given the extension of Barzani’s presidency, reflected political opportunism rather than a genuine commitment to a democratic Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁵⁷ Gorran and its factional allies underscored the importance of safeguarding any independence referendum from partisan manipulation, cautioning against using the promise of independence as a tool for political gains.²⁵⁸ They asserted that while “the right of

²⁵² Palani et al, 2279.

²⁵³ Palani et al, 2277.

²⁵⁴ Palani et al, 2278.

²⁵⁵ Palani et al, 2278.

²⁵⁶ Palani et al, 2277.

²⁵⁷ Palani et al, 2278.

²⁵⁸ Palani et al, 2277.

independence is a natural and a just right for all Kurdistan people”, it must be pursued within a framework of democratic governance and respect for party pluralism.²⁵⁹

5.4 The Effects of International Involvement on Iraqi Kurdish State-Building

The economic and political situation of Iraqi Kurdistan after the war on ISIS, combined with the breakdown of the political patronage system and the tense relationship between the KRG and its neighbours, rendered the prospect of independence impractical without external backing.²⁶⁰ Meanwhile, in the years leading up to the referendum, the KRG had received substantial financial and military assistance from the international community, particularly from the US, to combat ISIS.²⁶¹ In order to garner political power and legitimacy from alternative sources, the KRG enhanced its cooperation with the West, including by signing several agreements with the US, including a 2016 Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Ministry of *Peshmerga* affairs and the US Department of Defense that boosted bilateral cooperation.²⁶²

These agreements were crucial for the US as cooperation with the KRG facilitated its counterterrorism efforts in Iraq. For the KRG, these agreements signified a new level of international visibility and engagement and provided new opportunities to invest in its state-building efforts by expanding the *Peshmerga*. Additionally, the crisis of millions of internally displaced people (IDPs) and minorities that ended up in *Peshmerga*-controlled territory due to the war on ISIS necessitated the formulation of policies that allowed foreign governments, international organisations and NGOs to interact directly with the KRG, treating it as a de facto state with Erbil as its capital.²⁶³

This increased interaction enabled the KRG to diversify its sources of power and employ a strategy to gain international recognition by promoting the notion that Iraqi Kurds are tolerant, capable peace-builders who align themselves with Western values.²⁶⁴ The growing strategic alignment and trust between the KRG and the US fostered a belief that the US (and

²⁵⁹ Palani et al, 2278.

²⁶⁰ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Referendums as a Political Party Gamble’, 661.

²⁶¹ O’Driscoll and Baser, ‘Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric’, 2025.

²⁶² Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2275.

²⁶³ Palani et al, 2274.

²⁶⁴ Palani et al, 2274.

the wider Western world) owed them the reward of acknowledging their right to self-determination and recognising an independent Kurdish state, or, failing that, supporting their quest for increased autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad.

5.5 The Economic Dimensions of the Referendum

By the time of the 2017 independence referendum, the KRG had been grappling with a severe economic and political crisis for some years, primarily stemming from its inability to pay salaries since 2014.²⁶⁵ The KRG employed approximately 60% of the working population within the territories it controlled at the time of the referendum, with an average monthly state salary budget of US\$700–800 million.²⁶⁶ However, this expenditure was only sustainable if oil prices remained above US\$100 per barrel, and this patronage system was therefore severely impacted by compounding issues such as the war on ISIS and the global drop in oil prices at the end of 2014.²⁶⁷ To make matters worse for the KRG, it had accrued significant debt – estimated to be between US\$19–22 billion.²⁶⁸

When oil prices plummeted in 2014, the KRG's financial system, which is heavily reliant on oil and gas revenues, could no longer sustain its political patronage system.²⁶⁹ In response to the economic downturn, the KRG drastically reduced civil servant salaries and, in several cases, delayed payments for several months.²⁷⁰ Given the importance of the patronage system in Iraqi Kurdish political and social life, these cuts severely threatened the political leadership's legitimacy amongst the populace. The economic crisis led segments of the Iraqi Kurdish population, including grassroots members of the KDP, to begin questioning the political establishment, especially as the perception grew that the wealthy were not affected in the same way as the rest of society.²⁷¹ Given the precarious political position that Barzani found himself in, urgent action was needed. This political crisis significantly hastened the independence referendum, but the decision to hold a referendum in the first place cannot be solely put down to internal political factors.

²⁶⁵ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2025.

²⁶⁶ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 660.

²⁶⁷ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁶⁸ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁶⁹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁷⁰ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁷¹ O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric', 2025.

Rather than focusing on rebuilding domestic trust and sourcing political power and legitimacy through internal democratic reform, the Kurdish political leadership increasingly turned to its international allies to sustain their political power amidst economic and political turmoil. They also blamed Baghdad's failure to pay them their share of the federal budget, the cost of the war on ISIS and the economic strain caused by the sudden influx of IDPs from the rest of Iraq during the war for the economic crisis.²⁷²

Facing an existential threat to the Iraqi Kurdish political structure, the KRG prioritised the influx of finance from external sources – such as international organisations, NGOs and the US – to fund state salaries, cover the costs of the refugee crisis and invest in the *Peshmerga*. This switch from homegrown legitimacy to external sources of power came despite the political opposition's growing calls to prioritise democratic reform over foreign policy objectives and to address domestic issues such as rising authoritarianism before the question of international recognition could be considered.²⁷³

5.6 Diversifying Sources of Power and Legitimacy

As previously discussed, one of the critical paths towards independence taken by de facto states is the implementation of democratisation processes to garner international support.²⁷⁴ However, the need to maintain unity and security often conflicts with processes of democratisation, as seen in the opposing views of the “failed partnership–right time” and “No for Now” movements that emerged in the build-up to the referendum. This tension led to the stagnation of democratisation in Iraqi Kurdistan, with Barzani and his factional allies seeking external sources of power – at the expense of democratic reform and internal unity – to safeguard their political hegemony.

In the lead-up to the referendum, a growing protest movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, advocating against corruption and increasingly authoritarian practices, emerged, forming the core of the political opposition's agenda.²⁷⁵ New political parties, such as the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) and the New Generation Movement (NGM), used this discontent in their

²⁷² O'Driscoll and Baser, 'Referendums as a Political Party Gamble', 660.

²⁷³ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁷⁴ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁷⁵ O'Driscoll and Baser, 660.

anti-referendum approach, and prioritised instead the end of corruption, the dismantling of nepotism in the political sphere, and the timely payment of state salaries in their campaigns.²⁷⁶

Given the economic and political crisis, which could not be resolved using solely domestic means – at least not without capitulating to Baghdad on multiple fronts such as the return to shared ownership and management of oil and gas extraction capabilities, the KRG adopted a multifaceted strategy to maintain political hegemony through an independence referendum. This strategy would involve rallying the population around the flag as a distraction from the economic and political turmoil whilst simultaneously seizing the opportunity to appeal to international allies to support the Kurdish leadership in exchange for the sacrifices it had made on behalf of the US and the wider ‘free world’ during the war on ISIS.

The protests and political opposition movements underscored the necessity for the KRG’s political elites to rebuild domestic political trust, which only deteriorated as a result of the referendum. Instead of advancing towards independence, the KRG found and still finds itself contending with power-sharing issues with the Central government, the return to the question of the disputed territories and the implementation of Article 140, and the overdue payment of state salaries. These must be resolved before any serious negotiations can take place regarding independence.²⁷⁷ Thus, the KRG must move beyond its dependence on external actors to overcome the internal unity–democracy paradox, the resolution of which is a prerequisite to embarking on the path towards fully-fledged statehood.

5.7 Conclusion

While the aspiration for Kurdish independence from Iraq remains a common goal shared by Iraqi Kurdish politicians and voters alike, the approach to achieving it diverges along political factional lines. Barzani and his factional allies prioritised outward engagement, seeking international support and legitimacy, particularly from the West, in the context of substantial Western support garnered during the war on ISIS. This outward-looking orientation,

²⁷⁶ O’Driscoll and Baser, 660.

²⁷⁷ O’Driscoll and Baser, 662–63.

however, led to criticisms of increasingly authoritarian tendencies, delegitimisation and political crisis at home.

On the other hand, the opposition, spearheaded by Gorran, emphasised internal democratisation and advocated for homegrown legitimacy as prerequisites for independence. Despite efforts to promote the “No for Now” movement – calling for the postponement of the independence referendum until internal political reforms were achieved – its traction remained limited outside of opposition-controlled territories, highlighting the sacredness of independence for the majority of Iraqi Kurds.²⁷⁸

To progress towards the long-desired end of the statehood continuum, the KRG attempted to diversify its sources of political power and legitimacy. This involved deepening strategic and diplomatic ties with its international allies, particularly the US, to bolster its international status and secure vital financial support. However, this strategy also led to increasing dependency on external sources of political and military power, undermining and destabilising internal unity and security, as well as eroding democratic development. In future, shifting the focus away from international alliances and prioritising domestic political reforms, as the political opposition suggested, is crucial for the KRG to build a sustainable foundation for its aspirations for statehood.

²⁷⁸ Palani et al., ‘The Development of Kurdistan’s de Facto Statehood’, 2278.

6. Future Implications and Considerations

Regardless of one's view of the motivations behind the 2017 referendum, one cannot deny that Barzani did not achieve what he had set out to do for Iraqi Kurdistan. US support for an ally that fights on behalf of its interests turned out to become less reliable once the stability of the region comes under threat, regardless of the closeness of the allies' strategic relationship. Ultimately, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan, who believed they were exercising their democratic right to self-determination, unknowingly voted for the destabilisation of Iraq. Confidence in unconditional US support for Kurdish self-determination was, in the end, misplaced, and the repercussions of the referendum point to a failure in Barzani's geopolitical calculations.

The reliance on foreign involvement and subsequent heightened expectations of support for independence as a reward for upholding the norms and values of the 'patron state' have significant implications for national liberation movements in de facto states. The lack of support from the KRG's allies following the 2017 referendum highlights the limitations of relying on external powers to achieve political objectives. The Iraqi Kurdish case serves as a cautionary tale for other de facto states, and as a warning to seek alternative routes to independence that do not solely rely on foreign backing. One need only look at other de facto states such as Nagorno-Karabakh – and its overreliance on Russia – to raise questions about shifting alliances and new strategies for asserting self-determination and, ultimately, reaching the coveted end of the statehood continuum.²⁷⁹

Whilst the international community's rejection of the referendum and Baghdad's reassertion of control over the disputed territories may have bolstered regional stability, it has also distanced Iraqi Kurds from their goal of independence. This raises questions about future relationships with traditional allies, potential shifts in alliances, and new strategies for pursuing independence.

²⁷⁹ Tim Whewell, producer, "Armenia's Lost Garden" Assignment (podcast), 23 April 2024, accessed 23 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct5msk>.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that, despite the recent trend in the literature that argues that the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan was held entirely due to internal political motivations, the vote was held with the belief that the US would support Barzani and his government's push for self-determination, or at least defend them against an armed response from Baghdad.

This argument was made with three key considerations in mind. First, the discourse of the pro-referendum politicians featuring language surrounding the US-imposed constitution of 2005 and the need to implement its Article 140. Second, the expectation that the KRG's Western allies would recognise and reward its efforts in fighting on the behalf of the 'free world' in the war on ISIS. Third, the gradual swap of homegrown legitimacy and political power for external backing due to the elevated international engagement enjoyed by the KDP from 2014 onwards. The analysis found that the motivations behind the referendum are more complex than merely internal or external factors – the multi-purpose nature of an independence referendum itself indicates that such internal and external factors are not mutually exclusive and that both can be in play when a de facto state attempts to solve a political crisis.

Today, Iraqi Kurdistan remains a de facto state with the ultimate goal of achieving fully-fledged statehood. The 2017 independence referendum, however, significantly impacted its position on the statehood continuum and revealed the entity's non-linear path to independence. During the war on ISIS from 2014 to 2017, the KRG enjoyed unprecedented international support and engagement, owing to its longstanding and close strategic relationship with the US. This increased support, coupled with territorial gains made towards the end of the war, strengthened the KRG's position vis-à-vis Baghdad at the bargaining table to negotiate for increased autonomy.

Iraqi Kurdistan had long sought to preserve its status as an autonomous region, as international recognition had seemed unattainable before the war on ISIS. The 2005 unofficial referendum, driven by a bottom-up independence movement that was rejected by the KRG, underscored its original prioritisation of autonomy within a unified Iraq. However,

the 2017 referendum marked a switch to a top-down approach, seizing a perceived opportunity for international recognition.

Despite ultimately facing opposition from the Central government, neighbouring states, and global powers, Barzani aimed to reap the benefits of his elevated international status and decided to hold the referendum in September 2017. Referendums are often seen as democratic processes, and an independence referendum had been an ambition that was on the Kurdish leadership's political agenda for years. The expected result was to consolidate power with external support in the short term and negotiate for increased autonomy – and eventual independence – from Baghdad in the long term.

Due to the strategic Erbil–Washington alliance being at an all-time high, and the impending defeat of ISIS, Barzani calculated that this was the most opportune moment that he would enjoy in the foreseeable future to assert Iraqi Kurdish rights to self-determination. He expected the US to commit to defending its most trusted ally in Iraq from an armed reaction from Baghdad, and thus prevent Iraqi Kurdistan from regressing along the statehood continuum. Thus, even if Iraqi Kurdish independence was unattainable, the KRG's overreliance on the US has had a significant influence on the 2017 independence referendum. Although political and economic crises were not the primary drivers for the referendum, they hastened its execution and determined its timing.

The referendum revealed a gap between the Kurdish leadership's expectations – reflecting those of its populace – for Western support for Kurdish self-determination, and the seemingly harsh realities of US foreign policy priorities in the Middle East. Faced with a choice between Kurdish independence and stability, the international community, including the US, opted for stability, breaking the trust of its long-standing ally and constituting a perceived betrayal of its oft-championed norms and values regarding self-determination. This highlights that the US, alongside the wider international community, prioritises maintaining the territorial integrity of a state over upholding norms and values of self-determination. This thesis underscores that the international community values regional stability and is likely to prioritise it over supporting secessionist movements, regardless of how peaceful an independence movement may be.

Barzani and the KDP's decision to pursue a peaceful route to independence, instead of preparing for armed conflict to defend their control over Iraqi Kurdistan and the disputed territories, indicates their reliance on external military support, particularly from the US. This thesis has found that a declaration of independence could not have been contemplated by the KRG had it not assumed that it could rely on the US for support and defence, meaning that geopolitical considerations are just as important as internal political ones. In sum, regardless of whether the referendum was about clear-cut Kurdish independence in Iraq, the need to consolidate political power, or a combination of both, any motive behind the referendum relied on misplaced trust in US support, as the project was simply not feasible without it. The motivations behind the referendum were multifaceted.

It is important to acknowledge that internal political dynamics also played a crucial role in determining the premature timing of the referendum and the agency of civil society requires equal consideration to the effects of global powers. The premature timing of the referendum can be tied to Barzani and the KDP's need to maintain political hegemony and divert public attention from their political and economic failures. However, the lack of external support for the KRG's push for self-determination resulted in a significant loss of the political power and control over the disputed territories that Barzani was trying to maintain. Barzani's gamble on Western support for self-determination ultimately failed, leading to a continuation of the status quo as far as Iraqi Kurdish non-statehood is concerned and to Baghdad's reassertion of control over disputed regions.

This thesis has demonstrated that independence referendums can be used as political tools to exert pressure inwards and outwards and simultaneously influence domestic and foreign policy. The fact that support was needed from both the population and the international community shows that Barzani and the KDP had multiple overlapping motivations to hold the referendum. No single motivation is sufficient to explain the decision to go ahead with the vote, given the internal and external risks involved. Given the decision to pursue a peaceful route to independence and not take up arms against the Central government, Barzani and the KDP must have been aware of the improbability of a successful independence movement with no external support. Additionally, they were unaware of the significance of the expectation–reality gap that saw the US and the KRG's other Western allies throw their unanimous support behind Baghdad, even though Baghdad was less ideologically and politically aligned with the US than Erbil.

8. References

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