

# Kurdistan's Attempted Secession from Iraq: Major Powers' Responses and Regional Implications

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## Abstract

*Through legal and political means, the Kurdish referendum has created a de facto state in the north of Iraq. This development will have short and long-term impacts on security of the Middle East in general, and Iraq in particular. The paper explores various dimensions of the secession attempt by the Kurdistan Regional Government. It concludes that the independence of Kurds from Iraq is likely to destabilise the Middle East; and encourage other ethnic communities to attempt secession. On the other hand, various extra-regional actors may also try to capitalise on the vacuum to advance their interests in the region.*

**Keywords:** Secessionism, Middle East, Ethnic Divisions, Iraq, Kurds.

## Introduction

The political, security and geostrategic circumstances of the Middle East are changing rapidly. In the past few years, the world has witnessed several developments in the region, including brewing Saudi-Iran rivalry, the Syrian civil war, dawn and demise of democracy in Egypt, Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, rise and fall of the Islamic State (IS), Saudi-led military alliance, Saudi-Qatar diplomatic crisis, and the 2017 Kurdish vote for independence by the Kurdistan Regional

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Government (KRG). Kurdistan's secessionist attempt will have a profound multidimensional impact on the national security of Iraq, the Middle East and beyond. The referendum held on September 25, 2017 allowed the Kurdish region to announce its secession as a semi-autonomous region under Iraq.

This is not the first time that the Kurdish region has opted to secede. Since 1991, the Kurds have consistently tried to establish an independent state.<sup>1</sup> However, various factors such as extreme repression by former President Saddam Hussein, internal political rift between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP),<sup>2</sup> lack of external legitimacy, and most importantly, the United States (US)-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and subsequent adoption of a new constitution in 2004 kept delaying secession plans.

The KRG became known as a *de facto* regional 'government' in 1993 according to Gunter who was the first Western academic to identify emergence of a new state in northern Iraq. This was the first comprehensive study which suggested that Kurdistan will likely emerge as a new state.<sup>3</sup> Since then, various studies have discussed Kurdish self-rule which appears to be driven by two major factors: Kurdish nationalism and economic grievances.<sup>4</sup>

While examining existing literature related to Kurdish nationalism, the central theme of this paper revolves around the post-Kurdish referendum and how it will impact existing regional tensions amongst various players. It is argued that this development has not only provided

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<sup>1</sup> Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 40-68.

<sup>2</sup> PUK and KDP are two major political parties from the Iraqi Kurdish region. KDP is considered sympathetic to the central government of Iraq; while PUK is largely known for its pro-Western and pro-democratic values. From 1994-97, both parties were engaged in civil war. About 5000 people, including civilians and fighters, were killed.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gunter, "A De Facto Kurdish State in Northern Iraq," *Third World Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1993): 295-319.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Robert Oslan, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East* (Kentucky: The University Press, 1996); and Paul J. White, *Primitive Rebels or Revolutionary Modernizers? The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

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sufficient room to external players to exploit the situation in Iraq, but also further destabilise the Middle East.

#### **Background**

The Kurds are an indigenous people of the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands. Between 25 and 35 million Kurds inhabit a mountainous region straddling the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Armenia. They make up the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, but despite being unique geographically, politically, linguistically and tribally, they have never been a permanent nation state.<sup>5</sup>

The Kurds claim that their history dates back to Sixth Century B.C.; and that their forefathers were Medes (ancient Iranians).<sup>6</sup> Apart from Kurdish claims, Russian historian Vladimir F. Minorsky also observes that the language and culture of Kurds is similar to Medes.<sup>7</sup> According to Mcdowall despite their presence in the region for more than two thousand years, Kurds were never politically active.<sup>8</sup> Strong influence of the Ottoman and Persian Empire on Arabs, Turks and Persians molded Kurdish nationalist sentiment. In the Nineteenth Century, this sentiment became politically active.<sup>9</sup> According to Gunter, Sheikh Ubeydullah's unsuccessful revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1880 represents the first indication of modern Kurdish nationalism.<sup>10</sup> After this revolt, Turkey and Iran started perceiving Kurdish nationalism as a threat and began marginalising them.

Kurds in Iraq and Turkey are politically stronger and active as compared to their counterparts in Syria and Iran because they form more than 20 per cent of the total population in the respective countries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Who are Kurds," *BBC.com*, October 31, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>.

<sup>6</sup> John Limbert, "The Origins and Appearance of the Kurds in Pre-Islamic Iran," *Iranian Studies* 1, no. 2 (Spring, 1968): 41-51.

<sup>7</sup> Hakan Özoğlu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 25.

<sup>8</sup> David Mcdowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> "Who are Kurds," *BBC.com*.

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These Kurds are distinct from their host states. For instance, in Iran, they are distinct due to their sect as majority of the Iranian population is Shiite, while the Kurds are predominantly Sunnis. In Iraq, Turkey and Syria, their language and culture are distinct from their host states.

The Kurds have been a unique community in Iraq and are known as great fighters. They used to raid Persia in the Nineteenth Century and had a long history of tribal uprising against the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Since 1880, after the revolt of Sheikh Ubeydullah, they have been trying to find independence or autonomy from the central governments. World War I, Russian meddling and collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to strengthening of Kurdish nationalist sentiments.<sup>13</sup> During this time, major powers further divided the Kurds and Arabs.<sup>14</sup> The tendency to fight against central and repressive governments augmented a collective desire for independence. Furthermore, the 25,000 Kurd diaspora living in the US has also been politically and financially active in supporting Kurds in Turkey and Iraq for an independent homeland.<sup>15</sup>

Successive governments in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria found such political activism a challenge to their national security. Hence, they used various means to suppress them. Saddam Hussein's repression of the Kurd population aggravated their nationalist sentiment and perception of marginalisation. In 1990, his misadventure in Kuwait, and subsequent Operation Desert Storm, put Hussein under pressure, and provided enough space to the Kurds to proliferate the idea of independence.<sup>16</sup> The US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003 further paved the way for the autonomous Kurdish region to seek secession.<sup>17</sup> Active support of Iraqi Kurds to the US forces helped develop a cordial relationship between the two,<sup>18</sup> due to which they were given outstanding leverage in the new Iraqi

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<sup>12</sup> Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, *Kurdistan and the Kurds* (Prague: Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, 1965), 40; Hussein Tahiri, *The Structure of Kurdish Society and the Struggle for a Kurdish State* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2007), 38; and Nader Entessar, *Kurdish Ethno-nationalism* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 81-82.

<sup>13</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Sheikh and State: The Social and Political Structure of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 275-276.

<sup>14</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 115-24.

<sup>15</sup> Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 68-75.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-86.

<sup>18</sup> Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*, 15.

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constitution of 2004. Formation of the KRG with autonomous powers helped Kurds develop their institutions independent of the central government of Iraq.

After attaining greater autonomy under Iraq's 2004 constitution, there was no major reason to demand self-rule or independence. However, economic grievances and confidence to govern became primary reasons for demanding independence. Constitutionally, they were allowed to form an autonomous government and allocated 17 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>19</sup> Over the years, Baghdad gradually reduced this to 12 per cent in 2017.<sup>20</sup>

In case of oil, Baghdad and Erbil (capital of the Kurdish region) have a contradictory stance regarding distribution and extraction. KRG believes that it is legally allowed to ink deals with foreign countries for oil extraction, while the central government of Iraq thinks otherwise, outlining that the Iraqi constitution does not allow KRG to sign such agreements. This conflict of interest, based on decades-long confrontation over resource distribution and Kurdish nationalism, led the Kurds to choose secession as a last resort.

### **Secession: Two Basic Challenges**

Since 2000s, there have been several secessionist movements. Britain's 'exit' from the European Union (EU) in 2016;<sup>21</sup> Catalan's vote for independence from Spain in 2017;<sup>22</sup> and the Kurdish referendum for independence from Iraq. Existing literature identifies various types of

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<sup>19</sup> "Iraq Parliament Agrees on 17 per cent Budget Share for KRG," *Rudaw*, December 16, 2015, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/161220153>.

<sup>20</sup> "Erbil Rejects its Reduced Share in Iraq's 2017 Budget as Unconstitutional," January 5, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/051120173>.

<sup>21</sup> Miguel Tell Cremades and Petr Novak, *Brexit and the European Union: General Institutional and Legal Consideration*, report (European Parliament: Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, January 2017), [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/571404/IPOL\\_STU\(2017\)571404\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/571404/IPOL_STU(2017)571404_EN.pdf); and, Alex Hunt and Brian Wheeler, "Brexit: All You Need to know about the UK leaving the EU," *BBC.com*, October 26, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32810887>.

<sup>22</sup> Alasdair Fotheringham, "Catalan Independence Referendum: Region Votes Overwhelmingly for Secession from Spain," *Independent*, October 1, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/catalan-independence-referendum-catalonia-vote-secession-spain-violence-police-a7977676.html>.

secessions, including peaceful secession like Norway and Slovakia, violent secessions such as Biafra, Bangladesh, Chechnya and multiple secessions from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Yugoslavia.<sup>23</sup> Basque (Spain), Corsica (France), South Ossetia (Georgia), Abkhazia (Georgia), Chechnya (Russia), Xinjiang (China), West Papua (Indonesia), Tamil Elam (Sri Lanka), South Sudan, and the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iran and Iraq are examples of violent attempts and/or successful secessions.

Secession and attempt of secession change the status of a particular region into that of a '*de facto* state'. According to minimalist approach, a *de facto* state can be a 'political entity whose leadership has wide autonomy in domestic policies and limited autonomy in foreign policies.'<sup>24</sup> However, the maximalist approach expands the scope of a *de facto* state by providing it complete autonomy to enter into relations with other states, which might enable it to join regional and international bodies, like the United Nations (UN). A *de facto* state has all the requisite characteristics – civil institutions, political parties or political processes, nationhood, territorial identification - which distinguishes it from non-state actors. It is pertinent to mention that secession in international law is entirely different from Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter and resolutions of UN General Assembly (UNGA), which endorse the 'territorial integrity' of any state from external aggression.<sup>25</sup> Experts of international law believe that this article clearly points out that the threat or actual use of force by any other state is unacceptable.

However, the UN Charter and resolutions of UNGA clearly define the 'right to self-determination' for the people of a defined territory. It is debateable whether the approach of secession should be unilateral or with the consent of the host state.<sup>26</sup> In majority cases, secession and attempts at secession have been unilateral in nature which led to violent conflicts. On the other hand, there are a few examples where the host state gave consent for the secession of a particular community. The most recent example is

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<sup>23</sup> Aleksandar Pavkovic and Peter Radan, *Creating New States: Theory and Practice of Secession* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 33-129.

<sup>24</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 12-40.

<sup>25</sup> "All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or actual use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

<sup>26</sup> "Host state" refers to the state from whom a community wants to secede.

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the referendum of Scotland's secession from the UK<sup>27</sup> as well as that of Quebec Province of Canada.

In this context, the Kurdish region has many characteristics of statehood, including a defined territory, symbols of sovereignty – anthems, language, flag, a security force (Peshmerga), and a functional government which has governed the area far better than Iraq's central government in the post-Saddam era.<sup>28</sup>

The Iraqi government has taken drastic measures to thwart Kurdistan's decision to secede. These include blockade of the airport at Erbil and Sulaymaniyah; appeal to other countries to withdraw their diplomatic missions from the region; and, replacing the Kurdish governor from Kirkuk.<sup>29</sup> Later, Iraqi forces launched a major operation to seize control of Kirkuk and took over military bases of Peshmerga, which killed and displaced many people in the region.<sup>30</sup> Though Iraqi troops have not entered into KRG defined territory, including Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, tensions between the two forces can turn into violent conflict in the future. The Kurdish desire of secession may become more violent as existing literature suggests that majority of secession attempts have been violent.<sup>31</sup>

Kirkuk has Iraq's richest oil fields which constitute approximately 40 per cent of total known reserves.<sup>32</sup> Its loss will severely damage the Kurd economy as it has been supplying oil to Israel since KRG regained control of the city from the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. According to an

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<sup>27</sup> Rob Merrick, "UK Government Agreed Referendum Could Not Be Legally Binding," *Independent*, October 17, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-senior-conservative-mps-seize-on-a-forgotten-government-pledge-to-let-parliament-decide-the-a7366316.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Sandra H. Berry et al. *Designing a System for Collecting Policy-Relevant Data for the Kurdistan Region – Iraq*, report (California: RAND Corporation, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Ahmed Rasheed and Raya Jalabi, "Baghdad Piles Pressure on Iraqi Kurds to Reverse Overwhelming Independence Vote," *Reuters*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum/baghdad-piles-pressure-on-iraqi-kurds-to-reverse-overwhelming-independence-vote-idUSKCN1C1127>.

<sup>30</sup> "Iraqi and Kurdish Forces Battle over Kirkuk as 'Major Operation' Launched," *Telegraph*, October 16, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/16/iraqi-kurdish-forces-battle-kirkuk-major-operation-launched/>.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksandar Pavkovic and Peter Radan, *Creating New States: Theory and Practice of Secession* (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 5-30.

<sup>32</sup> "Oil-rich Kirkuk Grows in Importance for Iraq," *Financial Times*, March 17, 2010, <https://www.ft.com/content/ae796cae-314b-11df-9741-00144feabdc0>.

Israeli think-tank, KRG is earning around USD 8 billion annually from Kirkuk's oil fields.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, due to historic ties, Kurds consider Kirkuk their forgotten homeland. The Kurd population has been heavily concentrated in this area throughout the Twentieth Century. According to the national census of 1957 and 1977, Kurds made up 48 per cent of the total population in Kirkuk, while Arabs were 29 per cent.<sup>34</sup> However, Saddam Hussein's Arabisation policy in the late 1980s changed its demographics. Thousands of villages were destroyed and more than 200,000 Kurds were forced to leave.<sup>35</sup> Ali-Hassan al Majid (popularly known as Chemical Ali) relentlessly used chemical weapons to kill and terrorise the population.<sup>36</sup> Resultantly, the national census of 1997 showed an extraordinary reduction, as low as 21 per cent, Kurdish population in Kirkuk.<sup>37</sup> However, the US invasion of Iraq changed the situation for Kurds. Since 2007, a de-Arabisation programme started in Kirkuk. The central government of Iraq had control of the region until June 2012 when Iraqi forces fled due to the IS invasion. However, the Peshmerga successfully regained control in 2014, and since then, the city was under KRG rule until the Iraqi forces took back control.<sup>38</sup>

### **Dangerous Leap by Kurds?**

The KRG has taken a risky and extraordinary step.<sup>39</sup> History bears witness that aspirants for new states often face extreme internal and external

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<sup>33</sup> Eldad Shavit and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Baghdad Regains Kirkuk: Strategic Implications" (paper, Insight no. 984, Institute for National Security Studies, October 23, 2017), <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/baghdad-regains-control-kirkuk-strategic-implications/>.

<sup>34</sup> Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Cooperation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>38</sup> "Iraqi Forces Claim Rapid Progress in Operation to Impose Security in Kirkuk," *Guardian*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/iraqi-army-advances-kirkuk-kurds>.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Winkler, "Iraq's Kurds just Voted to Secede. Here's Why that Could Cause a New Civil War," *Vox*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/27/16374148/kurdish-referendum-vote-independence-oil-iraq-baghdad>.



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challenges. Newly emerged states often face two major challenges: completion of successful transition of power; and international legitimacy.<sup>40</sup> Host states obstruct secession through various means such as using force, freezing assets etc. as is happening in Kurdistan and Catalan. In such a case, aspirants of new states require international legitimacy and support to run state affairs normally.

The Iraqi central government and its allies, Iran and Turkey, have altogether rejected the Kurdish referendum. While the Kurds declared it a historic day, the Iraqi government took measures to regain control; seized Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports; demanded the international community to close their diplomatic missions in KRG; and took over military bases near Kirkuk in order to hinder transition of the Kurdish region. The Supreme Court of Iraq also declared the referendum void and unconstitutional.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Iraq's neighbours, particularly Iran and Turkey, also opposed secession.<sup>42</sup> Turkish rejection is a severe blow for KRG as it is the only country which provides access to international markets for oil supplies and imports through its seaport. Hence, this will have long-term impact on viability of the newly declared state.

In international law, there are two 'competing' theories - Constitutive Theory and Declaratory Theory of State Creation Recognition. According to the former, recognition by other states is legally necessary for statehood. Declaratory theorists, however, believe that recognition is a mere formality as attributes of statehood are 'based on fact' which cannot be denied on the basis of 'individual state discretion.'<sup>43</sup> Recognition by other countries provides economic and political support to Newly Independent States (NIS). Hence, seeking

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<sup>40</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 12-40.

<sup>41</sup> "Iraq Court Rules No Region can Secede after Kurdish Independence Bid," *Reuters*, January 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/iraqcourt-rules-no-region-can-secede-after-kurdish-independence-bid-idUSKBN1D6170>.

<sup>42</sup> "Turkey Raises Oil Threat after Iraqi Kurds Back Independence," *Reuters*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum/turkey-raises-oil-threat-after-iraqi-kurds-back-independence-idUSKCN1C31U8>; and "Khamenei says Iran, Turkey must take Measures against Kurdish Secession – TV," *Reuters*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iran-khamenei/khamenei-says-iran-turkey-must-take-measures-against-kurdish-secession-tv-idUSL8N1MF5IH>.

<sup>43</sup> William Thomas Worster, "Law, Politics, and Concept of the State Recognition Theory," *Boston University International Law Journal* 27: 115-171.

legitimacy from major powers in general, and other countries in particular, is of paramount importance for them.<sup>44</sup> Biafra's failed attempt to secede from Nigeria, and Katanga's attempted secession from Congo are examples where the NIS could not garner the international community's support. On the contrary, East Pakistan's secession, and subsequent recognition as Bangladesh by India, proved to be the catalyst for its viability.

In this regard, the Kurds have been facing challenges. They held a referendum with the hope that the international community, particularly the US and European countries will accept their independence. However, except Israel, no other country has openly accepted the Kurdish 'state.'<sup>45</sup> Silence of the US is perhaps more disturbing for the Kurd leadership since they hoped to find a strong partner after secession.

### **Role of International Actors in the Crisis**

#### ***The US***

The most dubious role, among all other major powers in the post-Kurdish referendum, is that of the US. Over the years, the US has supported Kurdish autonomy and maintained a cordial relationship with the Kurd leadership, and established its consulate in Erbil. During invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition in 2003, the Peshmerga helped them to enter Iraq.<sup>46</sup> During the post-Saddam era, particularly during formulation of the new constitution, Kurds were facilitated by the US.<sup>47</sup> They were also supportive of greater autonomy for KRG during this time.<sup>48</sup> Frequent visits of Kurdish leadership to the US have also been reported during the past one decade, and many Americans and their allies have invested in the region, mainly in the petroleum and education sectors.

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<sup>44</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*.

<sup>45</sup> "Why Israel Supports an Independent Iraqi Kurdistan," *CNN.com*, October 2, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/02/middleeast/iraqi-kurdistan-israel-support/index.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq*, 95.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-119.

<sup>48</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution of Kurdish Problem in Iran and Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15.

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During the rise of IS, the US provided weapons to the Peshmerga which helped them evolve from a militia into a regular army.<sup>49</sup> However, contrary to Erbil's expectations, Washington has not overtly supported Kurdish independence and remains silent on such an important issue in the region. This has encouraged Baghdad to take practical measures to thwart the secession attempt.

On the one hand, while the US has objected to the Kurdish vote for independence,<sup>50</sup> on the other, it has adopted an 'indirect approach' to support the *de facto* state by initiating efforts to stop the Iraqi Army from capturing more areas of the Kurdish region, and discourage the central government of Iraq from committing excesses against Kurds. The US has been supporting Syrian Kurdish forces since 2015. These Syrian Kurds have been mounting pressure on Iraq's border.<sup>51</sup> Resultantly, this has forced the Iraqi security forces to focus more on their border with Syria, rather than Erbil.<sup>52</sup> The US has also adopted role of a mediator in this crisis to defuse tensions between the two parties.<sup>53</sup>

### **Russia**

Russia has not given any official statement in favour or against the results of the Kurdish referendum. Moscow enjoys cordial relations with both parties. Mustafa Barzani (father of Massoud Barzani) spent almost a decade in exile in the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> However, it does not want to

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<sup>49</sup> International Crisis Group, *Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, report (no. 158, Brussels: ICG, 2015), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-inviting-conflict>.

<sup>50</sup> Rhyse Dubin and Emily Tamkin, "Iraqi Kurds Vote for Independence over US Objections," *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/25/iraqi-kurds-vote-for-independence-over-u-s-objections/>.

<sup>51</sup> David Romano, "The Bitter Harvest of Kurdish Division in Iraq," *Rudaw*, October 20, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/19102017>.

<sup>52</sup> Ahmed Aboulenein, "Iraqi Shi'ite Paramilitaries Deploy to Syrian Border," *Reuters*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-syria/iraqi-shiite-paramilitaries-deploy-to-syrian-border-idUSKBN1EG298>.

<sup>53</sup> "US Military Rushes to Defuse Looming Crisis in Kirkuk after Iraqi Army Advances," *Guardian*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/16/iraq-kurdish-forces-army-us-military>.

<sup>54</sup> Yury Barmin, "Kurdish Referendum a Double-Edged Sword for Russia," *Al-Monitor*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/iraq-kurdistan-referendum-double-edged-sword-russia-baghdad.html>.

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distance itself from Iraq and its allies, mainly Turkey, Syria and Iran either:

The Kurdish issue has implications beyond borders of present-day Iraq.... [may have] political, geopolitical, demographic and economic consequences.<sup>55</sup>

This is indicative that Kurdish referendum might encourage ethnic minorities in Russia, such as landlocked and resource-rich Muslim dominated Tatarstan, to demand secession.<sup>56</sup> Wary of such risks, Russian diplomats have overtly accepted Iraq's current territorial integrity and rejected any attempt or actual division.<sup>57</sup> But, since Moscow has economic stakes in the Kurdish region, it has not outrightly rejected their aspirations either. The Russian firm Rosneft signed a deal with the KRG's Ministry of Natural Resources for extension of a gas pipeline from Kurdistan to Turkey.<sup>58</sup> According to Russian media:

Moscow respects the desire of Kurds to have a national state, but believes the issue should be resolved through dialogue, not a unilateral declaration of independence.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, both Iraq and Kurdish leadership are seeking Russian support by offering various arms deals and energy security arrangements to pull Moscow to their side. It is more likely that Russia will

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<sup>55</sup> Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia, interview with Kurdish Television Channel, *Rudaw*, July 24, 2017, [http://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/video/-/asset\\_publisher/i6t41cq3VWP6/content/id/2822361](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/video/-/asset_publisher/i6t41cq3VWP6/content/id/2822361).

<sup>56</sup> Lena Smirnova, "Tatarstan, the Last Region to Lose its Special Status under Putin," *Moscow Times*, July 25, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/tatarstan-special-status-expires-58483>; and "Tatarstan: The Last Autonomous Republic in Russia," *Stratfor*, July 13, 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/tatarstan-last-autonomous-republic-russia>.

<sup>57</sup> "Iran, Russia Support Iraq's Territorial Integrity," *Xinhua*, September 25, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/25/c\\_136637563.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/25/c_136637563.htm).

<sup>58</sup> Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Russia becomes Iraq Kurds' Top Funder, Quiet about Independence Vote," *Reuters*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-russi/russia-becomes-iraq-kurds-top-funder-quiet-about-independence-vote-idUSKCN1BV1IH>.

<sup>59</sup> "Russia Says it Supports United Iraq in Wake of Kurdistan Independence Referendum," *RT.com*, September 27, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/404719-russia-supports-united-iraq/>.

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predominantly support Iraq's central government as it cannot afford to contradict Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey in the region.

#### **China**

More interested in the economy and less in the political affairs of the Middle East, China has categorically rejected Kurdistan's secession.<sup>60</sup> China and Iraq have developed their relationship over the years based on mutual interest. The war-torn Iraq required Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and China was eager to get oil and gas from the country. Hence, both countries entered into a partnership, under which China invested in electricity, oil industry, communication and infrastructure development of Iraq,<sup>61</sup> while it imports more than 3.5 million tonnes of oil from Baghdad annually.<sup>62</sup> Any interruption of oil flow may put a strain on the Chinese economy. Hence, Beijing wants *status quo* in Iraq and considers Kurdish independence a disturbing development which might disrupt energy supplies.

Moreover, China also shares the same concern with Russia regarding ethnic secessionism. China is facing secessionist movements from Xinjiang and Tibet.<sup>63</sup> Hence, it does not want to support unilateral secession on the basis of ethnicity. Moreover, it has developed cordial and fruitful economic relations with existing power structures in the Middle East which it does not want to damage.

#### **Iraqi Kurds Secession Attempt and Regional Implications**

The Kurdish referendum may have serious regional implications, including Iraq's division and further political instability, re-emergence of ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, Israel's enhanced role in the region,

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<sup>60</sup> "China Says Supports Iraq's Unity as Kurds Vote in Referendum," *Reuters*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurd-china/china-says-supports-iraqs-unity-as-kurds-vote-in-referendum-idUSKCN1C00V8>.

<sup>61</sup> George Eberling, *Chinese Energy Futures and their Implications for the United States* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011), 57.

<sup>62</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "China and Iraq Announce Strategic Partnership," *Diplomat*, December 23, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/china-and-iraq-announce-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>63</sup> Liselotte Odgaard and Thomas Galasz Nielsen, "China's Counterinsurgency Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2014): 535-555.

likely re-rise of IS, increased challenges to Iran and Turkey's national security, proxy wars between Gulf countries and Iran.

### ***Iraq's Division***

Undoubtedly, the most affected actor in this development is Iraq and its people. Already, a weak state faced with structural, economic and security challenges, Iraq has to deal with a greater challenge - protecting its territorial integrity in the wake of Kurdish quest for independence and its reintegration. While Baghdad appealed to the Kurdish people to avoid secession,<sup>64</sup> its reaction was severe. As discussed earlier, it took control of airports,<sup>65</sup> seized control of oil-rich Kirkuk, and upended the local bureaucracy making it difficult for the KRG to build state institutions by using all its resources.

The KRG has only two ways of connecting with the world. By sea - it is reliant on Turkey's seaport Ceyhan for exports and imports. By air - it has two airports Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Civil aviation of Iraq has control of both airports and selected flight operations are carried out with permission of the central government. In order to calm the situation, Kurdish leadership withdrew the Peshmerga from Kirkuk without any agreement with the central government.<sup>66</sup>

Though Iraq has been trying hard to pull back the Kurdish region into its fold, it seems unlikely that aspirations for self-rule will get buried. More than 100,000 Kurds have already fled from Kirkuk,<sup>67</sup> and more are likely to flee to the KRG. Likewise, thousands of Arabs fled Kurdistan to

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<sup>64</sup> Haider Al-Abadi's, Iraq's Prime Minister, statement to the Iraqi People, October 15, 2017, <https://twitter.com/iraqipmo?lang=en>.

<sup>65</sup> Bethan McKernan, "Kurdistan Referendum: Iraq Cuts off All Foreign Flights to Kurdish Capital Erbil," *Independent*, September 28, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdish-referendum-independence-iraq-flights-irbil-cancelled-baghdad-a7971296.html>; and David Zucchino, "Iraq Orders Kurdistan to Surrender its Airports," *New York Times*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/world/middleeast/iraq-kurds-independence.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Mina Aldroubi, "Why Kirkuk fell to Iraqi Troops without Kurdish Resistance," *National*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/why-kirkuk-fell-to-iraqi-troops-without-kurdish-resistance-1.668090>.

<sup>67</sup> "About 100,000 Kurds have fled Kirkuk since Monday: Kurdish Officials," *Reuters*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-refugees/about-100000-kurds-have-fled-kirkuk-since-monday-kurdish-officials-idUSKBN1CO13D>.

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adjoining areas resulting in major internal displacement. Division of Iraq will keep the central government weak and negatively impact post-conflict reconstruction and strengthening of governance institutions. Weak states often have to rely more on external help, hence, political stability of Baghdad will likely remain undermined in the foreseeable future.<sup>68</sup> Iraq's economy is under severe stress and this political development will further lead to economic meltdown as well as more human sufferings.<sup>69</sup>

### *Fuel for Ethnic Conflicts in Other Countries*

Secession attempts by the Iraqi Kurds as well as the Catalonians may further fuel the desire for secession of other dissatisfied ethnic communities in the region and beyond. In this regard, major ethnic fault lines exist in many countries that are distinctive in nature and believe in their own 'cultural identity'.<sup>70</sup> These include Muslims in Xinjiang, Tibetan Buddhists, and the Tatars in Russia. These ethnic communities have been attempting secession under various movements.

### *Impact on Turkey*

Historically, the Kurdish region was not part of Turkey until the Seventeenth Century, when almost 550,000 square km of land was divided between the Ottoman and Safavid empires under the Qasr-e-Shirin Treaty of 1639 (also called the Treaty of Zuhab).<sup>71</sup> This led to the displacement of Kurds between various countries. This has, over decades, become a source of conflict between the Kurds and their central governments. For example, since the Seventeenth Century to date, more than 30 uprisings against the central government of Turkey have been

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<sup>68</sup> Mehran Kamrava, ed. *Fragile Politics: Weak States in the Greater Middle East* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), 14.

<sup>69</sup> "Iraq's Parliamentary Elections set for May 12, 2018," *Rudaw*, October 22, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/22102017>.

<sup>70</sup> Raman Grosfoguel, "Race and Ethnicity or Racialized Ethnicities?" *Ethnicities* 4, no. 3, (2004): 315-336.

<sup>71</sup> Ali Kavani, "The Treaty of 1639 and its Consequences for Armenia and the Armenians," *Armenian Review (Armenia and Armenians in International Treaties)* 52, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2010): 14.

reported by Turkish Kurds,<sup>72</sup> who have been trying to acquire self-rule. In this regard, these Kurds have adopted different approaches to achieve their desired political objectives. During the late 1970s, a largely peaceful movement turned into an armed struggle. Since then, this conflict has claimed the lives of more than 40,000 Turkish Kurds and Turkish security forces.<sup>73</sup> Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), preferred armed struggle over political struggle.<sup>74</sup> His views have dramatically changed the Kurds' struggle,<sup>75</sup> which continues to date, and is considered a national security challenge by Turkey. The government has detained many political activists for using Kurdish language in their speeches. In early 2016, more than 30,000 Kurds fled to other areas.<sup>76</sup>

### *Impact on Syria*

Syrian Kurds have also been alienated from mainstream Syrian politics for many years. Rise of IS and subsequent overt support of arms and ammunition by the US and its allies to curb this group has increased the power of Syrian Kurds to challenge the security forces. Hence, aspiration for greater autonomy among Syrian Kurds has re-ignited in the recent past.<sup>77</sup> This is also a by-product of Iraq's situation.

In the aftermath of the secession attempt by Iraqi Kurds, Turkey launched an offensive in Afrin, Turkish-Syrian border region in January 2018 to eliminate the growing force of Syrian Kurds known as the

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<sup>72</sup> Mehmet Ali Birand, "How Many Kurdish Uprisings till Today?" *Turkish Daily News*, January 3, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> "Council of Europe's Turkey Report calls PKK Militants 'Activists', Sparking Outcry," *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 23, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/council-of-europes-turkey-report-callsppk-militants-activists-sparking-outcry.aspx?pageID=238&nid=45517>.

<sup>74</sup> Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution: War, Peace and the Global System* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 54.

<sup>75</sup> Mag. Katharina Kirchmayer, "The Case of the Isolation Regime of Abdullah Öcalan: A Violation of European Human Rights Law and Standards?" *GRIN Verlag*, 2010, <https://www.grin.com/document/151592>.

<sup>76</sup> Jasmine Qureshi, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016: Events of 2015*, report (UK: Minority Rights Group International, 2016), 180-181.

<sup>77</sup> "Syrian Kurds hold Local Elections, Press on with Autonomy Plans," *Reuters*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/syrian-kurds-hold-local-elections-press-on-with-autonomy-plans-idUSKBN1DV4XE>.



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People's Protection Units (YPG).<sup>78</sup> This operation continues to date as YPG has adopted guerilla tactics to fight against Turkish forces. However, this military operation, and subsequent loss of life and property from both sides is a direct consequence of Kurdish attempt to secede from Iraq as it has raised concerns about national security in Turkey and Syria.

#### ***Impact on Iran***

Iran has also been targetting Kurd dissidents economically and socially, making it almost impossible for them to raise their voice for secession. Growing Kurdish nationalism and the current developments in Iraq might encourage Syrian, Iranian and Turkish Kurds to raise their voices again for a separate homeland with more zeal and enthusiasm.

#### ***Israel's Greater Role***

Weak states in the Middle East are providing ammunition to non-state actors (NSAs), as well as ensuring Israel's national security. The adage 'enemy of my enemy is my friend' can be witnessed between Kurdistan and Israeli bilateral relations.<sup>79</sup> Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani hinted in 2005 that there is no harm in establishing a relationship with Israel.<sup>80</sup> Since then, many reports of Israel-Kurdistan relationship surfaced in the media.<sup>81</sup> According to Israel's own foreign ministry, the country has been extensively supporting Kurd refugees of Iraq through economic aid, which

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<sup>78</sup> YPG is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, while the US viewed the group as a partner in the fight against ISIS.

<sup>79</sup> Rauf Baker, "The Syrian Kurds: Israel's Forgotten Ally," *Arutz Sheva*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/21140>.

<sup>80</sup> "Iraq's Kurds Support Relations with Israel, Massoud Barzani," *E Kurd Daily*, May 8, 2005, <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2005/6/independentstate187.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> "Israelis Using Kurds to Build Power base," *Guardian*, June 21, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jun/21/iraq.syria>; and Baker, "The Syrian Kurds."

has enhanced its soft image in the Kurdish region.<sup>82</sup> In case of Kurdistan's secession, Israel has recognised it as an independent state.<sup>83</sup>

Strategic and economic factors compelled Israel to recognise and extend its support. First, Israel wants to fight or pre-empt any attempted attack from the Arab world. Therefore, it wants a state or region within the Arab world to use against any aggressor in times of crisis. In this regard, an independent state of Kurdistan – which is also seeking friends in the international community – will be a blessing for Israel. It is also likely that Kurdistan may serve as its first overseas military base. Concern about this development was shown by former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki 'Iraq will not allow the creation of a second Israel in northern Iraq.'<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, as international relations are often modified according to mutual interests, mutual security or defence agreements between *de facto* state Kurdistan and Israel will serve the interests of both. Establishment of a foreign military base or bilateral security agreement will provide Kurdish leadership protection from aggressive Iraqi forces and hostile elements such as Iran and Turkey. This will also serve the strategic interests of Israel as it can closely observe and react in time against Iran, Iraq and Turkey while sitting in their backyard.<sup>85</sup>

On the economic front, Israel already imports 77 per cent of its oil from Iraq's Kurdish region.<sup>86</sup> According to Bloomberg, the Kurdish region pumped about 544,600 barrels of oil a day in 2016, and is expected to boost output to 602,000 barrels.<sup>87</sup> It has been estimated that KRG has the tenth largest oil reserves in the world. Therefore, Israel will try to ink

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<sup>82</sup> Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "IsraAID Winter Relief Operation in Northern Iraq," February 9, 2015, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Aid/Pages/IsraAID-scales-up-winter-relief-operation-in-northern-iraq-9-feb-2015.aspx>.

<sup>83</sup> Zvi Bar'el, "Netanyahu, Sole Leader to Endorse Independent Kurdistan, Hits Back at Erdogan for Supporting Hamas," *Haaretz.com*, September 17, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.812469>.

<sup>84</sup> "VP Maliki tells US Ambassador No 'Second Israel' allowed in Iraq," *Rudaw*, September 17, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/17092017>.

<sup>85</sup> "Israel is Using Kurds to Build Power base," *Guardian*.

<sup>86</sup> Lamis Andoni, "Why is Israel Supporting Kurdish Secession from Iraq?" *Al-Jazeera*, October 7, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/israel-supporting-kurdish-secession-iraq-171006105039473.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Angelina Rascouet and Khalid al Ansary, "How Iraq's Kurdish Independence Referendum Could Impact Oil Markets," *Bloomberg*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-20/iraq-s-kurds-seek-independence-what-impact-for-oil-markets>.

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more agreements related to energy security with them. Hence, Kurdish secession has opened an opportunity for Israel to extend its role in the region and improve its energy security.

#### ***Likely Re-Rise of IS***

IS was a relatively small terrorist group which gradually emerged as a powerful terrorist organisation after capturing many parts of Iraq and Syria.<sup>88</sup> Due to civil war in Syria, IS found a power vacuum and took over many areas declaring itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL).<sup>89</sup> It strengthened its bases due to weak state institutions, bad governance, and internal instability. The Iraqi army was dispelled by IS fighters from many cities, including Kirkuk, Tel Afar, Mosul and Ramadi.

Peshmerga fighters helped in liberating territories, including Kirkuk, which were held by the IS. Recently, they held a referendum in these disputed territories which are not Kurd majority areas. In retaliation, the central government of Iraq launched a military operation and seized control of Kirkuk and surrounding areas. Later, Baghdad replaced Najmaldin Karim, Kirkuk's governor,<sup>90</sup> leading to tensions between the Arab and Kurd population. This power struggle and internal rift provided a window of opportunity to IS fighters who took control of some areas in Kirkuk after Kurdish troops withdrew due to military operations by the central government.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, another militant group who call themselves 'White Flag' has emerged in Northern Iraq. This group often attacks oil refineries in the area.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Foreword," in Charles R. Lister, *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), vii, <https://www.brookings.edu/book/the-islamic-state-a-brief-introduction/>. 16.

<sup>89</sup> Richard York, *Know Thy Enemy: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (Raleigh: Lulu Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>90</sup> David Zucchino, "Iraqi Forces Sweep into Kirkuk, Checking Kurdish Independence Drive," *New York Times*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/world/middleeast/kirkuk-iraq-kurds.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Mohammed Ebraheem, "Paper warns of Islamic State Capture of Kirkuk following PMFs Withdrawal," *Iraqi News*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/islamic-state-regained-control/>.

<sup>92</sup> Tom Westcott, "No Surrender: 'White Flag' Group Rises as New Threat in Northern Iraq," *Middle East Eye*, January 31, 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-islamic-state-white-flag-hashd-al-shaabi-1282818812>.

### ***Role of Other Gulf Countries***

Saudi Arabia officially appealed to Iraqi Kurds to refrain from secession.<sup>93</sup> However, an independent country in the shape of Kurdistan carries various strategic and economic opportunities for Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) have gradually developed cordial relations with the KRG and Massoud Barzani over the past one decade.

Saudi Arabia and UAE were amongst the first countries that opened their consulates in the KRG. Moreover, Massoud Barzani also visited both kingdoms in 2015. The Dubai Chamber of Commerce also opened its office in Erbil in 2014. Since then, more than 150 companies have registered in the KRG.<sup>94</sup>

Arab monarchs can kill two birds with one stone by deepening their ties with the Kurdish independent state and enhancing influence in the country by encouraging and supporting their independence. First, Saudi Arabia can influence Turkey's national interest, which supported Qatar during the 2017-19 diplomatic crises, by fanning Kurdish nationalism. Second, Gulf countries can strategically counter Iranian influence in Yemen by increasing their presence and influence in the former's backyard. Economic support of Gulf countries can provide some leverage to the KRG in nation-building.

### ***Impact on Pakistan***

For Pakistan, Iraq's ethnic divisions, and subsequent imprudent geopolitics in the region, have significant political implications, but not economic ones.

Iraq hosted around 70,000 Pakistani workers from 1971-2001. Subsequently, this figure reduced to 453 in 2017<sup>95</sup> due to the fragile

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<sup>93</sup> "Saudi Arabia wants Kurds to Drop Referendum," *Khaleej Times*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/region/saudi-arabia-wants-kurds-to-drop-referendum>.

<sup>94</sup> Sinem Cengiz, "The Gulf's Stance on the Kurdish Referendum," *Arab News*, September 15, 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1161761/columns>.

<sup>95</sup> Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, "Country Wise Emigrations," September 30, 2017, <http://www.beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2017/country.pdf>.

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political, security and economic situation of Iraq. Pakistan neither imports Iraqi oil,<sup>96</sup> nor has substantial bilateral trade with the country.<sup>97</sup>

However, there are political aspects linked with Iraq's situation about which Pakistan should be cautious. The country shares similar concerns about secession attempts by disenfranchised ethnic communities as China, Russia, Iran and Turkey. Moreover, Turkey and Iran have severely condemned the Kurdish referendum. In this backdrop, Pakistan cannot afford to annoy these two important Muslim countries for a less significant and weak newly born state with an uncertain future. Moreover, Pakistan cannot distance itself from Iraq by recognising Kurdistan given its own Shiite population as they have strong and sensitive linkages with Najaf and Karbala. Thousands of Pakistani pilgrims visit these holy places annually. The two countries share the same challenge of dealing with violent NSAs. Pakistan helped Iraqi security forces regain control of Mosul from IS by providing arms, ammunition and medical assistance.<sup>98</sup> Hence, the government has categorically rejected this development in Iraq and favoured territorial integrity.<sup>99</sup>

Though, grievances of Balochistan are being addressed by the Centre, there are separatist elements, especially within the Baloch diaspora,<sup>100</sup> that want the province to secede from Pakistan. While few in number, these elements use various means to highlight their agenda. On January 18, 2017, exiled Baloch leaders tried to meet in Geneva.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> "Pakistan Fails to Tap Trade Opportunities in Iraq," *Pakistan Today*, August 27, 2011, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2011/08/27/pakistan-fails-to-tap-trade-opportunities-in-iraq/>.

<sup>97</sup> Ministry of Commerce, "Pakistan's Country-wise Exports and Imports 2010-2011," accessed March 4, 2018, [http://www.commerce.gov.pk/Trade\\_Analysis/Direction\\_of\\_Trade\\_2010-2011.pdf](http://www.commerce.gov.pk/Trade_Analysis/Direction_of_Trade_2010-2011.pdf).

<sup>98</sup> "Pakistan helped Iraq in Defeating IS, says Iraqi Envoy," *Dawn*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1345432>.

<sup>99</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, "Pakistan Concerned over Iraqi Kurdistan Referendum," press release, October 2, 2017, <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?mm=NTQ2Mw>.

<sup>100</sup> Baloch diaspora from Australia, the US, Scandinavian countries, Europe and the Gulf states has gradually become more organised. In 2008, they formed the Baloch Human Rights Council and organise protests at the United Nations, White House, and other important places.

<sup>101</sup> "Exiled Baloch Leaders set to Congregate in Geneva on January 18," *Pakistan Tribune*, January 9, 2017, <http://paktribune.com/news/Exiled-Baloch-leaders-set-to-congregate-in-Geneva-on-January-18-279818.html>.

However, the government's active diplomacy stopped the meeting from taking place. In January 2017, London was swarmed by cabs carrying the *#FreeBalochistan* slogan, which was subsequently removed by the British authorities after the government's protest.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, such campaigns ensure internationalisation of Baloch grievances to embarrass Pakistan diplomatically.

### **Conclusion**

Secession, without consent of the host state, is highly difficult and often turns into violent conflict. Major powers often use such fault-lines according to their geopolitical interests. Although, the US had cordial relations with the Kurdish leadership, it has not openly supported the referendum and an independent state of Kurdistan.

Kurdistan has been facing severe pressure from the host state (Iraq), neighbouring countries (Turkey, Iran and Syria) and from other regional players to back off from the decision. It is unlikely that this will happen. While the central government has successfully held parliamentary elections in Kurdistan, voter turnout was very low. According to Iraq's Election Commission, voter turnout was 55 per cent in Duhok, 48 per cent in Erbil, and 40 per cent in Sulaymaniyah, and severe irregularities were also reported in the region.<sup>103</sup> Contrary to efforts of the central government, the Kurdish leadership is also facing immense pressure from their own population (especially diaspora) following the referendum to stay the course.

This bold step by Iraqi Kurds may also encourage other disgruntled ethnic communities to demand greater autonomy or independence from their respective countries.

Unfortunately, Kurdish attempt to secede from Iraq will further destabilise the Middle East. Such internal conflicts will allow regional and extra-regional countries to exploit the situation according their vested interests. Likewise, non-state actors may try to fill the vacuum amidst the

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<sup>102</sup> Caroline Mortimer, "TfL removes 'Free Balochistan' Adverts from London Black Cabs after Pressure from Pakistani Government," *Independent*, January 5, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/pakistan-london-black-cabs-adverts-free-balochistan-remove-condemned-a8040641.html>.

<sup>103</sup> "Kurdish Election Commission 'More Professional' than Iraq's Parties," *Rudaw*, May 14, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/140520182>.

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power struggle between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.■