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**U.S. perspectives on Kurdish independence from Iraq,  
1972-2011**

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Politics and International Relations

By:

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## ABSTRACT

Kurdish attempts in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, to gain self-rule represent a potentially serious source of conflict and instability in the region. Since the creation of Iraq in 1921, Iraqi Kurds have struggled to achieve autonomy as their minimum goal and independence as their ultimate objective. And, indeed, Iraqi Kurds have a compelling case for statehood.

Secessionist conflicts constitute a challenge to the American hegemonic position in the Middle East and the Kurdish case remains a central concern for the U.S. However, U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan has been ambivalent, if not contradictory, in that it has supported *de facto* autonomy for the Kurds of Iraq, while continually stopping short of supporting their independence.

This highlights how the issue of Kurdish independence is problematic for both the U.S. and the Kurds themselves. This thesis sets out to consider the extent to which concern for regional stability determines U.S. attitudes towards the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. It does so by examining aspects of U.S. policy in relation to Kurdish independence from Iraq, both from a historical and a current perspective. It looks at the nature of Kurdish nationalist ambitions in Iraq and the effectiveness of Kurdish promotion of these ambitions. Further, it considers U.S. policy options for the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, including the possibility of endorsing an independent Kurdish state.

The thesis draws a number of conclusions. Importantly, it is clear that U.S. policy towards the Kurds has to be seen in the context of U.S. attitudes towards Iraq more generally. This policy, moreover, has been influenced by weaknesses and divisions in the Kurds' own approach to independence. It would appear that, while a desire for regional stability underpins U.S. policy in the area, specific decisions have been taken by Washington on a pragmatic, case-by-case basis.

Finally, my research has revealed that developments since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq have raised concerns about the unity of Iraq while provoking greater expectations among Iraqi Kurds for fully-fledged self-determination. The U.S. response to these developments has been to favour a form of federalism which would accommodate Kurdish aspirations rather than full independence.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their endless love and support throughout my life. It is also dedicated to my lovely wife, Kanar, my little son, Las, and our unborn baby, without whose love, affection and encouragement this work would not have been possible.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS/ ABBREVIATIONS

AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
Bopd	Barrels of oil per day
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.)
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CUFI	Christians United for Israel
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> – (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> – (and others)
EU	European Union
i.e.	<i>id est</i> – (that is)
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
IPC	Iraq Petroleum Company
ITF	Iraqi Turkmen Front
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
loc. cit.	<i>loco citato</i> – (in the place cited)
MOSSAD	Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (Israel)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSD	National Security Directive
op. cit.	<i>opus citatum est</i> – (work cited)
ORHA	Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance

PEJAK	Party for Free Life in Kurdistan
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
SAVAK	Iranian National Intelligence and Security Organisation
TAL	Transitional Administrative Law
Tcf	Trillion Cubic Feet
U.S.	United States of America
U.S.S.R.	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSCOM	United Nations Special Commission
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

## Chapter 1:

# INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introduction

This study investigates the role of “regional stability” as a major factor determining U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence. The Kurdish quest for self-rule in Iraq, and indeed in the greater Middle East, represents one of the sources of conflict and instability in the region.<sup>1</sup> In addition to this, the fact that there are 24–27 million Kurds,<sup>2</sup> which makes them the largest nation in the world without their own independent state<sup>3</sup>, has inherently destabilised the region.<sup>4</sup> The Kurdish nation spans Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey; the focus of this research, however, will be the Kurdish region within Iraq. Thus, whenever I refer to “Kurdish independence”, I will be addressing the issue of Kurdish independence from Iraq.

Since the creation of Iraq in 1921, the Kurds have struggled to achieve autonomy as their minimum goal and independence as their

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<sup>1</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> To see the Kurdish-inhabited area in the Middle East, see Map 3, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Gunter, “Kurdish Affairs with Expert Michael Gunter”, *The University of Central Florida*, 2009. [Online Video]. Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\]HzqVN9T2ys](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=]HzqVN9T2ys) [Accessed: 11 June 2010]

ultimate objective.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is this that constitutes the Kurdish question in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> In their search for national statehood and as a result of their status as a stateless nation, the Kurds of Iraq have suffered greatly.<sup>7</sup> Most notably, they were the victims of the genocidal Anfal campaigns of 1987–1988, which led to the death and displacement of more than 182,000 Kurdish civilians.<sup>8</sup> They have also been the victims of Kurdish in-fighting.

This unfortunate history of the Kurds, resulting from their long-existing aspirations for independence, illustrates that the Iraqi Kurds have quite a compelling case for statehood.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this, and the factors mentioned in the previous paragraph, however, I argue in this thesis that recent developments, such as the rising Arab–Kurdish tensions in post-2003 Iraq and fears about the nature of and conditions in a unified Iraq in the future, have also given rise to Kurdish expectations of independence, which the U.S. could play a major role in supporting or hindering.

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<sup>5</sup> Hanna Yousif Freij, “Alliance Patterns of a Secessionist Movement: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Iraq”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 18, issue 1, 1998, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gunter, “The Kurdish Question in Perspective”, *World Affairs*, vol. 166, no. 4, 2004, p.197.

<sup>7</sup> Philip S. Hadji, “The Case for Kurdish Statehood in Iraq”, *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, vol. 41, no. 2 & 3, 2009, p. 518.

<sup>8</sup> Peter W. Galbraith, “What Went Wrong”, In Brendan O’Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Salih (Eds.), *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 235-236; Human Rights Watch, “Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds”, July 1993. Available at: <http://hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/ANFALPRE.htm> [accessed 20 April 2009]

<sup>9</sup> Hadji (2009), *loc. cit.*

This study, which deals with the Iraqi Kurdish struggle for independence and the complex role of the U.S. in regard to this endeavour, is important. Each year, there are ongoing secessionist demands in at least three states.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that secessionist movements tend to proliferate and, as a result, constitute a great source of instability that can compromise international security through civil wars and ethnic conflicts, etc.<sup>11</sup> Given that secessionist conflicts constitute an enduring challenge to the U.S. as the world's sole superpower, as well as to the international community,<sup>12</sup> secessionist attempts, including the Kurdish case, remain as a central concern for the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2. Research Problem

Since the 1970s, the U.S. has developed a unique relationship with the Kurds of Iraq. U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan appears ambivalent, or contradictory, in that it has supported *de facto* autonomy for the

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Barry, "Self-Determination, Project Description", *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 2003. Available at: [http://fpif.org/selfdetermination/about\\_body.html](http://fpif.org/selfdetermination/about_body.html) [accessed 29 April 2009]

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Paquin, "Explaining Variations in the American Response to Secessionist conflicts in the Post-Cold War era: A Rational Stability Theory", Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 15-18 April 2004, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> David Callahan, *Unwinnable Wars: American Power and Ethnic Conflicts*, (New York: Hill and Wang Editions, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> David Callahan, *The Enduring Challenge: Self Determination and Ethnic Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New York: Carnegie Challenge, 2002).

Kurds of Iraq, especially in the wake of the 1991 and 2003 U.S. wars against Iraq, without supporting their independence.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of Kurdish independence is problematic for both the U.S. and the Kurds themselves. Declaring a Kurdish state independent from Iraq would create further instability in the region. It would entail the possibility that the Kurds would face a newly aroused Iraqi-Arab nationalism. In addition to this, a declaration of independence would greatly irritate Iraq's neighbouring states, some of which have strong Kurdish nationalist movements among their Kurdish populations.<sup>15</sup>

Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, it seems that U.S. policy towards Kurdish independence may be changing.<sup>16</sup> This is partly because the U.S. may fail in its effort to unite Iraq as a state. The question of state-building in post-war Iraq is especially significant for the U.S. because its political and economic interests in the region will be affected by the outcome. Therefore, the future of Iraqi Kurdistan remains vital to policy makers in the U.S., Iraq and neighbouring states with a Kurdish population.

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<sup>14</sup> See Peter Lambert, *The US and the Kurds: Case Studies in US Engagement*, (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 1997); Mark A. Dewhurst, *Assessing the Kurdish Question: What is the Future of Iraq*, (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College., 2006); Aram Rafaat, "An Independent Kurdish State: Achievable or Merely a Kurdish Dream?" *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Olson, "An Independent Kurdistan", The National Association of British Arabs, 2006. Available at: [http://www.naba.org.uk/CONTENT/articles/Analysis/Olson\\_Independent\\_Kurdistan.htm](http://www.naba.org.uk/CONTENT/articles/Analysis/Olson_Independent_Kurdistan.htm) [accessed 10 May 2009]

<sup>16</sup> See Dewhurst (2006); Michael Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Henri J. Barkey, *Preventing Conflict over Kurdistan*, (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009).

As noted previously, the U.S. has dealt with the Kurdish question in Iraq in a contradictory manner. The academic literature on this topic, which is most often historical in nature, has failed to explain this policy variation. Moreover, a theoretical explanation of U.S. policy concerning the Iraqi Kurdish struggle for independence is missing in the existing literature.

I suggest in this thesis that the U.S. has strategic and economic interests in maintaining regional stability, which have combined with weaknesses in the Kurds' presentation of their own claims to preclude real hope for U.S. support for an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. Therefore, I seek to answer the following question:

“Why and how does the strategy of maintaining “regional stability” determine U.S. attitudes to the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan?”

To answer this question, this thesis will examine competing and/or complementary strategic and economic considerations that influence U.S. attitudes to the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. These include regional factors such as Turkey, Israel, U.S.-Arab relations and the issues of concern for the U.S. such as the oil factor, anti-Americanism, democratisation of the Middle East and countering Islamism.



### **1.3. Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this research is to identify and analyse the factors that determine U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurdish aspiration for independence. To achieve this overall aim, the thesis has four specific objectives:

- 1) To provide a historical analysis of various U.S. administrations' foreign policy approaches to the Kurdish question in Iraq.
- 2) To assess the nature of Kurdish national ambitions in Iraq and the effectiveness of Kurdish promotion of these ambitions.
- 3) To identify the areas and issues of U.S. Middle East policy in relation to its attitudes to Kurdish independence from Iraq.
- 4) To investigate U.S. policy options for the future of U.S.-Kurdish relations by examining the possibility of endorsing the independence of a Kurdish state.

### **1.4. Theoretical Framework**

This section presents the theoretical foundations of the present study. The theories that form the basis of the theoretical paradigm used in this study are "defensive positionalism" (Section 1.4.1), "stability-seeking argument" (Section 1.4.2), and "theories of state and state formation" (Section 1.4.3).

### 1.4.1. Defensive Positionalism

This study will employ a defensive positionalist perspective to trace the processes of U.S. foreign policy formulations vis-à-vis the Kurds of Iraq. This framework requires the acquisition and analysis of primary and secondary sources from a number of U.S. bureaucracies and branches of government that attempt to direct U.S. foreign policy towards Iraq in general and the Iraqi Kurds specifically.

The term “defensive positionalism” was initially coined by Joseph Grieco, and describes and refines defensive realism.<sup>17</sup> In fact, both defensive and offensive realism, as two variants of political realism, share many assumptions. However, they fundamentally disagree about what the anarchic structure of the international system implies for states. Offensive realists argue that international anarchy causes states to want to increase their power as much as possible in order to achieve more security. “As much as possible” includes “aggressively” competing with one another whenever necessary or advantageous – conditions that often prevail.<sup>18</sup>

Defensive realists contend that the best way to maximise security under anarchy is to preserve the status quo. They argue that anarchy

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism”, *International Organization*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1988, pp. 485–507.

<sup>18</sup> See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001); John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions”, *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, (1994/95), pp. 5-49; Randall L. Schweller, “Neorealism’s Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?” *Security Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1996, pp. 225-58; Eric J. Labs, “Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims,” *Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1997, pp. 1-49.

causes states to become obsessed not only with security, but with the need to exercise prudence as well. States thus seek to balance power and counter threats in order to prevent vulnerability and gaps in stability.<sup>19</sup>

Michael Mastanduno argues that defensive realists expect nation-states to avoid gaps that favour their allied partners, but not necessarily to maximise gaps in their own favour.<sup>20</sup> This notion is further developed by the defensive positionalists, who assert that states are unitary-rational players that select a strategy of choosing the most efficient available means to achieve their ends. Preferring to work in favour of the status quo, these states seek to maintain their relative position and are “sensitive to any erosion of their relative capabilities”.<sup>21</sup>

Given that the international system is one that is maintained by the prevention of power losses and that international instability directly affects U.S. power worldwide, it can be said that defensive positionalism applies extensively to the U.S.<sup>22</sup> This is why the U.S. is

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<sup>19</sup> See Michael Mastanduno, “Do Relative Gains Matter? America's Response to Japanese Industrial Policy”, *International Security*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1991; Robert Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate”, *International Security*, vol. 24, issue 1, 1999, pp. 42-63; Stephen Van Evera, “Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War,” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1998, pp. 5-43; Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security*, vo. 19, no. 3 (1994/95), pp. 50-90.

<sup>20</sup> Mastanduno (1991), *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Grieco (1988), *op. cit.*, p. 498.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Paquin, “Managing Controversy: U.S. Stability Seeking and the Birth of the Macedonian State”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2008, p. 438.

concerned about regional stability, because it helps the U.S. to maintain its powerful position and sustain its security. Furthermore, Paquin asserts that minimising stability gaps is a definitive factor in furthering U.S. interests.<sup>23</sup>

While the theories of realism in international relations – the defensive positionalist perspective in particular – offer theoretical explanations for the interest-orientated U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan, we cannot analyse the U.S. approach towards Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence; only explanations from a defensive positionalist viewpoint are possible. I aim to empirically demonstrate that stability concerns are critical motives behind foreign intervention in intra-state conflicts abroad, so I will employ a “stability-seeking argument”, which is built on defensive positionalism. Using this theory is important for the completion of my study’s theoretical foundation and helps to understand and analyse the motives behind U.S. attitudes to Kurdish independence from Iraq. Moreover, this theoretical model is centred on a “regional stability” argument to explain why the U.S. intervenes (or does not intervene) in foreign secessionist conflicts. The “regional stability” argument is a major prism through which my research question will be answered.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

### 1.4.2. Stability-Seeking Argument

The “stability-seeking argument” attempts to explain the variation of American behaviour towards secessionist attempts abroad. It was first developed by Jonathan Paquin.<sup>24</sup> According to this perspective, the maintenance – or restoration – of “regional stability” is the paramount U.S. interest when dealing with foreign secessionist conflicts. To pursue this goal, the theory argues, the U.S. will support “host states”<sup>25</sup> as long as they demonstrate an ability to maintain (or restore) regional stability. However, if the host states become a major obstacle to regional stability, the U.S. might support the secessionist movement(s) as a credible alternative for the restoration of stability.<sup>26</sup>

Aiming to define the notion of regional stability and establish a connection between U.S. foreign policy and regional stability, Paquin argues that both internal and external dimensions of stability influence the U.S. approach to secessionist attempts. According to this argument, the domestic definition of sovereignty, that is, “the organisation of public authority within a state and the level of effective control exercised by those holding authority”, forms the internal dimension of stability. As for the external requirements of stability, a

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Paquin, *A Stability-Seeking Power: U.S. Foreign Policy and Secessionist Conflicts*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Here, “host state” refers to the sovereign state struggling against secession.

<sup>26</sup> Paquin (2010), *op. cit.*, p. 6.

secessionist group must accept its former internal boundaries as its new international borders.<sup>27</sup>

The stability-seeking argument is built on the assumption that rational choices determine U.S. attitudes to secessionist attempts. The argument also recognises that U.S. foreign policy involves a complex political process within which several actors are competing.<sup>28</sup> However, the stability-seeking argument focuses on the U.S. executive branch of government because, according to this model, the power to support and/or recognise secessionist movements and groups is an exclusive prerogative of the president and Congress cannot legally oppose such a presidential decision.<sup>29</sup>

Arguing that it is in the interest of the United States to manage and contain secessionist claims within state borders, the stability-seeking model asserts that a state's territorial integrity is not always a guarantee of stability and can actually be a serious cause of regional disruption. Therefore, according to this argument, supporting territorial integrity is not always in the best strategic interest of the U.S. Thus, aiming to maximise regional stability, the U.S. will choose to support secessionist groups under certain circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Paquin (2008), *op. cit.*, pp. 439-440.

<sup>28</sup> Paquin (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Paquin (2008), *op. cit.*, p. 439.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Paquin, "*The United States, Secessionist Movements, and Stability*", Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 3-5 June 2004., p. 16.

In sum, in light of the arguments made by the defensive positionalists and the stability-seeking argument informed by Jonathan Paquin, the theoretical perspective that this study will engage can be summarised as follows: The U.S. seeks stability as its standard diplomatic operating procedure and defensive positionalism is thus an inertia-based policy. When instability and crisis confront the U.S. foreign policy makers, however, the U.S. revisits and possibly changes standard operating procedures. The longer the crisis and instability continue, the greater the likelihood that the U.S. will deviate from standard policy and support secessionist movements.

### **1.4.3. States and State Formation**

The aim of this section is to provide a theoretical foundation enabling better understanding of the arguments surrounding state-building and state failure, which is part of this study's overall aim.

This study recognises that the Kurdish question in Iraq arose out of the state-building process in the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War. Therefore, as Gareth Stansfield contends, Kurdish historical and political development has to focus on the concept of the "state" as an entity, which, paradoxically, the Kurds have been oppressed by, yet aspire to.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 13.

As an attempt to test the eligibility of the Kurdish case for statehood, relevant theories and definitions of the state will be reviewed in this section. Although various scholars have tried to define the state, there is no universally accepted definition. One of the most widely accepted sources for a definition of statehood, however, is the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933). According to the Montevideo Convention, the “state” should possess the following qualifications: it should have a permanent population, a defined territory, a government exercising overarching authority and, finally, a capacity to enter into relations with other states.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, Max Weber defines the state as a “human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”<sup>33</sup> For Weber, the state is best defined in terms of meanings specific to its functions, namely the control and organisation of the force that underpins its rule. In this context, as argued by Vivienne Wee and Graeme Lang, the state’s failures to manage its internal ethnic conflicts could be taken as symptomatic of the inability of the state to monopolise force and thereby establish itself

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<sup>32</sup> “Convention on Rights and Duties of States: Article 1”, 26 December 1933, 49 Stat. 3097, 165 L.N.T.S. 19.

<sup>33</sup> Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”, In Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 78.



as a “legitimate” state.<sup>34</sup> This inability to consolidate power will, consequently, interrupt the state-building process.<sup>35</sup>

Aiming to establish a link between foreign intervention, the state-building process and intra-state conflicts, Michael Rear argues that the result of external interference in an ethnic conflict will be to leave the fundamental issues of state building unresolved, which will subsequently lead to what is typically referred to as a “failed” state. Moreover, according to Rear, such a “state” under these circumstances will witness further conflict and tension when outside forces withdraw.<sup>36</sup> As Rear demonstrates, the state failure might produce sub-state fragmentation by stimulating ethnic conflict as various sub-state groups are confronted with a security dilemma.<sup>37</sup>

In light of the definitions of “the state” demonstrated above and from a merely theoretical viewpoint, the Kurdish region of Iraq might satisfy the criteria for statehood. However, this study advocates that for an entity to become a state and survive as a state more complicated requirements need to be met other than the legal criteria outlined by the Montevideo Convention. First, as Georg Schwarzenberge stresses, the state must have “the ability to stand by itself”. For Schwarzenberge,

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<sup>34</sup> Vivienne Wee and Graeme Lang, “Ethnic Violence and the Loss of State Legitimacy”, In Santosh C. Saha (Ed.), *Perspectives on Contemporary Ethnic Conflict: Primal Violence or the Politics of Conviction?* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Rear, *Intervention, Ethnic Conflict and State-building in Iraq: A Paradigm for the Post-colonial State*, (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 169.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

this is a prerequisite to statehood.<sup>38</sup> In other words, it is impossible to think that wherever a “territory” and “population” are found, a “state” will be found too.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, this study recognises that in order for a state to survive, international support followed by recognition (especially from the U.S. – the world’s sole superpower) are the major influential factors of success. In Oppenheim’s view, “a state is, and becomes an ‘international person’ through recognition only and exclusively.”<sup>40</sup> However, as noted by David Raič, this is not to claim that recognition creates the state. What is claimed is that the act of recognition endows the already existing state with “international personality” and maintains its survival.<sup>41</sup> Recognition is therefore “a matter of law”, while the formation of a state is considered to be “a matter of fact”.<sup>42</sup> Aiming to survey U.S. practice in recognising/not recognising states, Robert J. Delahunty and John Yoo argue that the U.S. does not apply the Montevideo Convention tests of statehood in a value-neutral manner. Instead, the U.S. decision about whether or not to recognise a

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in Thomas D. Grant, “Defining Statehood: The Montevideo Convention and its Discontents”, *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1999, p. 412.

<sup>39</sup> Robert J. Delahunty and John Yoo, “Statehood and the Third Geneva Convention”, *Virginia Journal of International Law*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2005, p. 146.

<sup>40</sup> Lassa Francis Lawrence Oppenheim, *International Law*, (London: Longmans, 1952), vol. 1, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> David Raič, *Statehood and the Law of Self-determination*, (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002), p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

state is highly policy-laden and is heavily influenced by the strategic interactions between states.<sup>43</sup>

### **1.5. Methodology of the Study**

This research will use interview method as the primary methodology to obtain the data that go beyond what is already known in the existing literature about U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds.

Aiming to enrich the research with some unique information, this study provides an analysis of selective exclusive interviews with key political figures on the U.S. and the Kurdish sides, think tank scholars and academics. The interviews include informal conversational interviews, semi-structured interviews and interviews that use open-ended questions. Different types of topics are covered as part of the interview questions. In particular, the feelings and knowledge of U.S. and Kurdish policy makers have been evaluated to assess their attitudes and values and “to unfold the meaning of their experiences”.<sup>44</sup>

My personal contacts with certain key Kurdish officials, who have provided their own unwritten knowledge and experience, have been helpful in obtaining another aspect of current primary sources of information. On the Kurdish side, I have interviewed senior officials

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<sup>43</sup> Delahunty and Yoo (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> Steinar Kvale, *InterViews: An introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

and prominent Kurdish politicians and party leaders. On the U.S. side, the Kurdistan Regional Government Liaison Office in the U.S. has provided assistance by making arrangements for me to meet and interview senior U.S. officials from the State Department, the Defense Department and Congress. I have also conducted interviews with think-tank scholars, academics, political figures and former government officials who have played a role in U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds.

In addition to telephone and face-to-face interviews, I have also employed electronic mail (email) correspondence for conducting interviews in this study. The use of email correspondence not only costs considerably less to administer, but it also decreases the cost of transcribing. Since data from e-mail interviews are generated in electronic format, they required little editing or formatting before they have been processed for analysis.<sup>45</sup> The usage of email correspondence as a qualitative tool in this research has been very useful as I have managed to interview relevant U.S. officials, academics and scholars, irrespective of their geographical location or time zone.

Some of the face-to-face and telephone interviews have been recorded, with the permission of the interviewees, and subsequently

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<sup>45</sup> For more information on the usage of email correspondence in qualitative research, see Lokman I. Meho, "E-Mail Interviewing in Qualitative Research: A Methodological Discussion", *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 57, no. 10, 2006, pp. 1284-1295.

transcribed. However, where permission was not granted, anonymity and confidentiality have been maintained.

The interview data have been analysed using various methods, including the use of computer software programmes that have assisted me in categorising interview statements and counting key words. In addition to the interview data, relevant documents and sources such as U.S. presidential speeches on foreign policy and acts of Congress dealing with issues affecting the Kurds, as well as specific media sources that represent or comment on U.S. policy have been decoded through the analysis of the choice of words. For example, I have attempted to understand the interviewees' position on the topic of my research through the analysis of their use of certain words and expressions, such as "sympathy" (instead of "support"), "Northern Iraq" (instead of "Kurdistan Region"), "folks" (referring to the Kurds).

## **1.6. Structure of the Thesis**

In order to achieve the objectives set out earlier, the thesis is organised into seven chapters.

Chapter 1 begins by providing relevant background information about the topic of this research. It also identifies the research objectives, the theoretical framework, the methodology and the

research questions to be addressed. Finally, the structure of the thesis is explained.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Kurdish question in general with a special focus on the Kurdish question in Iraq.

Chapter 3 examines the literature on foreign intervention in secessionist conflicts abroad, paying a closer attention to U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurdish case.

Chapter 4 looks at the case studies of U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds, with a special focus on the period from 1972 to the present.

Chapter 5 looks at the key regional players/ factors affecting the U.S. approach to Kurdish independence from Iraq.

Chapter 6 discusses U.S. policy options for the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, focusing on federalism, the recentralisation of Iraq and the creation of a Kurdish state independent from Iraq.

Concluding this study, chapter 7 presents a review of the research objectives and highlights the contributions that this thesis has attempted to make to knowledge in this field of study.

## Chapter 2:

# THE KURDISH QUESTION: AN OVERVIEW

### 2.1. Introduction

With the aim of understanding the Kurdish struggle for independence, this chapter commences with a succinct historical background of the Kurdish question, outlining the geopolitical context of the stateless Kurds in general with a special focus on the Kurdish question in Iraq. It then moves on to explain how the Kurdish quest for autonomy and independence has led to cycles of regional instability. Finally, this chapter provides an account of the political and historical development of Iraqi Kurdistan and outlines the factors affecting the evolution of the Kurdish question.

The Kurdish struggle for autonomy and independence constitutes the Kurdish question.<sup>1</sup> Despite having a strong sense of “Kurdishness”, the Kurds have not been able to develop a unified nationalist movement or pursue full sovereignty. The Kurds’ failure to achieve independence and their delay in developing a strong nationalist movement result mainly from the geopolitics of their particular region, which has been strongly shaped by other powers without consultation with the Kurds themselves. This is in large part due to their lack of organisation and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gunter, “The Kurdish Question in Perspective”, *World Affairs*, vol. 166, no. 4, 2004, p.197.

internal divisions.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, different arguments on this issue have been made out among Kurdish scholars. The traditional view of the “classic” writers is that the Kurds failed to establish a state of their own because of “intra-Kurdish conflict” and “disunity among the Kurds”.<sup>3</sup> Analysing this issue from different angles, “modern” scholars have provided different explanations. For Muhammad Amin Zaki Bag, “Kurdish immaturity and lack of science and wealth” are the major reasons why the Kurds have been unable to have an independent state.<sup>4</sup> Aladdin Sujadi and Jamal Nabaz, however, link the issue of Kurdish independence to “Kurdish Muslimness”<sup>5</sup> and the fact that the Kurds have “no special religion or sect”.<sup>6</sup> Providing a rather different explanation, Masoud Muhammed says that it is the geopolitics of “Kurdistan” that has effectively precluded the formation of an independent Kurdish state, especially the “economic bleeding” caused by the neighbouring countries.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Amir Sharaf-Khan Badlisi, *Sharaf-Naama*, (Baghdad: Kori Zanyari Kurd, 1972) (In Kurdish); Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985*, (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992) for Ahmedi Khani’s views on Kurdish independence; Haji Qadir Koy, *Diwani Haci Qadiri Koyi* (Collection of Haji Qadiri Koyi’s Poems), (Baghdad: Emindreti Gishti Roshinbiri w Lawani Nawcey Kurdistan, 1986). These authors, respectively, believed that conflict among the Kurds themselves has been the major barrier to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Amin Zaki Bag, *Khulasayaki Taarikhî Kurd u Kurdistan* (A Short History of the Kurds and Kurdistan), (Baghdad: Dar al-Islami, 1931). (In Kurdish)

<sup>5</sup> Aladdin Sujadi, *Shorshakani Kurd* (The Kurdish Revolutions), (Baghdad: Al- Ma’arif, 1959). (In Kurdish)

<sup>6</sup> Jamal Nabaz, *Kurdistan u Shorshakay* (Kurdistan and its Revolutions), (Munich: NUKSE, 1985). (In Kurdish)

<sup>7</sup> Masoud Muhammed, *Haji Qadiri Koyi*, (Baghdad: Kori Zanyari Kurd, 1973). (In Kurdish)



As the Kurds inhabit a region that spans not only Iraq but also Turkey, Iran and Syria, a historical background outlining the evolution of the Kurdish question in these countries and the region's geopolitical context is necessary to understand the Kurdish issue in Iraq, which is the focus of this study.

Given the current status of Iraqi Kurdistan, both politically and economically, the prospect of "Kurdish independence" is more relevant to Iraqi Kurdistan than the Kurdish parts of other countries.<sup>8</sup> In addition, efforts of successive Iraqi governments to repress the Kurds and betray promises of Kurdish autonomy have revived Iraqi Kurdish aspirations to achieve a special status, or even some form of independence, within the Iraqi state. While keeping the Kurdish question unsettled, this has exacerbated the existing regional tensions and instability.<sup>9</sup>

## **2.2. Pre-WWI History: Kurds in the Ottoman Empire**

The Kurdish question can only be understood in its historical context. Recognising that Kurdish nationalism is "one of the most explosive and critical predicaments in the Middle East", Hakan Ozoglu defines Kurdish nationalism as "an intellectual and political movement that is based mainly upon two premises: "the belief in a consistent Kurdish

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<sup>8</sup> Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division*, (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 217-218.

<sup>9</sup> "The Kurdish Question", Defense Report, Association of the United States Army, 2009, p. 1.

identity, which is rooted in ancient history; and the conviction of an unalienable right for self-determination in a historic Kurdish homeland or territory.”<sup>10</sup>

Although the history of the Kurds begins with the Arab conquest in the seventh century,<sup>11</sup> it is not clear when precisely a distinct Kurdish identity emerged. David McDowall argues that the equilibrium between the battling Ottoman and Safavid empires in the sixteenth century created the conditions for a more stable political structure for Kurdistan.<sup>12</sup> Since that time, Kurds have attempted to preserve their culture, language and territory despite the efforts of various central governments to prohibit or deny their identity. Because the Safavid state was organised around a Shiite identity, the political struggle with the Ottomans took on a sectarian character. When the Kurds consequently fell under Ottoman rule, their primary form of identification was religious in that Sunni Islam occupied the top tier in the hierarchy. As most Kurds are Sunni, they were identified more easily with the Ottoman than Safavid authorities, and they were more successfully integrated by the former than the latter. This created a

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<sup>10</sup> Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 1-10.

<sup>11</sup> Gerard Chaliand, *The Kurdish Tragedy*, (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> David McDowall, *The Kurds: a Nation Denied*, (London: Minority Rights Publication, 1992), p. 25.

situation where religious belief played no role in Kurdish distinctiveness.<sup>13</sup>

Some scholars trace Kurdish nationalism back to the early nineteenth century. According to this view, the Ottoman state's policies paved the way for the emergence of Kurdish nationalism because the Ottoman intervention in the affairs of the Kurdish principalities affected the Kurdish sense of nationalism, which initially manifested itself in attempts to establish principalities independent of central government.<sup>14</sup> However, apart from the extension of direct Ottoman control, other factors played a significant role in reviving Kurdish nationalism. Kendal contends that using the Kurdish territory as the theatre for the destructive Russo-Turkish and Turko-Persian wars eventually awakened feelings of exasperation and hostility towards the Ottoman authorities amongst the Kurdish population.<sup>15</sup>

David McDowall believes that the demise of the Kurdish principalities and the emergence of "*sheikhs*" as new actors in Kurdish politics marked the point when the Kurds began to conceive of belonging to one single nation.<sup>16</sup> In light of this argument, many scholars regard Sheikh Ubeydullah's rebellion in the 1870s, which aimed to establish a state for the Kurds on the territories occupied by

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2; McDowall (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Chaliand (1992), *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>15</sup> Kendal, "Kurds in Turkey", In *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> McDowall (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 29.

the Ottoman and Persian empires, as the first stage of emerging Kurdish nationalism.<sup>17</sup> However, Hakan Ozoglu argues that Sheikh Ubeydullah's rebellion was "more like a trans-tribal revolt" and "it seems very unlikely that the participants in his revolt were motivated by nationalist designs".<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Amir Hassanpour contends that Sheikh Ubeydullah's revolt was not nationalist because, apart from treating the majority population as subjects rather than citizens, it aimed at the formation of a feudal mini-state that did not have any semblance to a modern state with an elected representative government, citizenship, the rule of law and separation of powers, etc.<sup>19</sup>

Another view suggests that Kurdish national identity emerged following the Young Turk Revolution in 1908, in which pan-Turkism replaced pan-Islamism as a unifying concept that gathered all Turkic-speaking peoples into a single political unity.<sup>20</sup> This view advocates that the nationalisms of the Muslim minorities inside the Ottoman Empire, including Kurdish nationalism, emerged largely as a response to an increasing prominence of Turkish nationalism and pan-Turkish

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<sup>17</sup> See Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880-1925*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); McDowall (2004); Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origin and Development*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006)

<sup>18</sup> Ozoglu (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>19</sup> Amir Hassanpour, "Review of Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*," H-Turk, H-Net Reviews, 2007. Available at: <http://www.hnet.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13540> [accessed 16 December 2010]

<sup>20</sup> See Bulent Gokay, "A Quest for Identity: The Kurds in the Late Ottoman Empire", In *Emerging Identities in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 14 May 1998, The Skilliter Centre for Ottoman Studies- University of Cambridge; Janet Klein, "Kurdish Nationalists and Non-nationalist Kurdistans: Rethinking Minority Nationalism and the Dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1909", *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2007, pp. 135- 153.

aspirations in the region.<sup>21</sup> The Young Turk Revolution heralded numerous important changes for the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, mainly the revival of the Ottoman Constitution, which led to campaigns, elections and new kinds of politics. Influenced and encouraged by this, leading Kurdish intellectuals and notables established a small number of political clubs and committees in the Empire's capital and provincial centres, which consequently led to the advancement of the new political activity of Kurdish nationalism.<sup>22</sup>

Providing a detailed analysis of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism, Janet Klein illustrates that "the Kurdish nationalist movement" has been the product of several different movements, each with a different vision of the political entity that its participants hoped to create or protect through their activities.<sup>23</sup> So as far as one line of argument in the relevant literature on the emergence of Kurdish national identity is concerned, leaders of Kurdish nationalist movements obtained their influence and exhibited a sense of national identity at different stages, which led to cycles of regional instability. This suggestion is in opposition to the other line of argument in the literature, which suggests that the Kurds, like Iraq, had no pre-WWI identity. Abbas Vali, for example, maintains that "Kurdish nationalist

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<sup>21</sup> Gokay (1998), *loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Klein (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

historical discourse is a product of modernity, following the emergence of centralised territorial states in Turkey, Iran and Iraq.”<sup>24</sup>

Given that different periods in history have contributed to the development of nationalism, Denise Natali’s study on the development of Kurdish national identity is particularly important, as she acknowledges that the factors discussed previously, as well as party politics, have directed developments in Kurdish nationalism since the late 1800s.<sup>25</sup> However, some prominent scholars advance a more tenable analysis, placing the emergence of a fully fledged, significant Kurdish nationalist movement soon after World War 1.<sup>26</sup>

### **2.3. The Kurdish Question in Iraq: 1921–present**

The Kurds did not become an issue on the international agenda until the Kurdish question emerged following the fall of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>27</sup> This brought about the creation of a number of new nation-states as part of the new Middle East geopolitical arrangement. In this process, however, the Kurds were left without a state of their own and were largely divided among the newly created states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

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<sup>24</sup> Abbas Vali, *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, (London: Mazda Publishers, 2003), p. 97.

<sup>25</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005)

<sup>26</sup> Hakan Özoglu, “Nationalism’ and Kurdish Notables in the Late Ottoman-Early Republican Era”, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2001, p. 404, Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Fuller, “The Fate of the Kurds”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 2, 1993, p. 109.

Although the Kurds have historically enjoyed a considerable degree of semi-autonomy under the various regional powers seeking to exercise territorial control over the lands inhabited by them, the first opportunity for the Kurds to establish their own independent state came with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of WWI. Woodrow Wilson, in his "Programme for World Peace" (Point 12), recognised the right of the Kurds – among all other non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire – to self-determination.<sup>28</sup> That was followed by the 1920 Sèvres Treaty giving Kurds the right to independence. But neither Wilson's pledge nor the treaty was ever implemented because the subsequent War of Independence changed the situation and enabled Mustafa Kemal to impose different terms in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which destroyed Kurdish hopes of achieving independence.<sup>29</sup>

Subsequently, the Kurdish people, because of their demands for independence or autonomy, suffered from various forms of national oppression that led to the emergence of the Kurdish question in Iraq and in other countries that have a Kurdish population.<sup>30</sup> Nawshirwan M. Amin believes that the Kurdish question is an internal problem, not

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<sup>28</sup> Point 12 of Woodrow Wilson's 'Programme for World Peace' states: "The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees."

<sup>29</sup> Chaliand (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Gunter (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

a Western invention, produced as a result of depriving the Kurds of their basic rights to nationhood. Moreover, he thinks that the Kurdish question, as well as their conflicts and uprisings, will continue unless the oppression of the Kurds comes to an end.<sup>31</sup> The new Turkish, Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi states all pursued strong centralisation policies based on their respective majority national identities to the exclusion and detriment of Kurdish minorities in each state. In this context, David Romano explains that such differential policy eventually led to assimilation or politicisation of Kurdish ethnic identity in these states.<sup>32</sup> Romano agrees that this is in fact related to the view that contends that “where a state is captured by a particular ethnic community and operates as an agent of that community, the state becomes a party to ethnic conflicts”.<sup>33</sup>

As a result of the denial of the rights of the Kurdish people to have autonomy or their own independent state in the host states, the Kurdish question became an important reason for their instability.<sup>34</sup> Although the Kurds of Iraq have traditionally had a more recognised political status than the Kurds of other neighbouring states and have

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<sup>31</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa Amin, *Xulanewe lenaw Bazneda (Going around in Circles)*, (Sulaimani: Khak Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 110.

<sup>33</sup> Milton Esman, *Ethnic Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.



enjoyed a comparatively large amount of cultural freedom, they have been in a constant state of revolt since the inception of Iraq in 1921.<sup>35</sup>

There are different explanations for this rebellious situation. In terms of their population, the Kurds in Iraq have greater weight compared to Kurds in other countries: they represent more than 20% of the population. This, according to Omar Sheikhmous, has made the Kurds of Iraq have a stronger nationalist sense.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, as Michael Gunter explains, Iraq, as an artificial new state, has had less legitimacy as a political entity than Turkey and Iran; these are two states that have existed in one form or another for many centuries. Thus, discontent and rebellion came more easily to the Iraqi Kurds. Gunter also believes that the strong Sunni-Shiite Muslim division, which is less visible in Turkey or Iran, has further divided Iraq.<sup>37</sup> In addition, as Benjamin Smith notes, Iraqi governments' policy was more effective in breaking up Kurdish rural social structures. According to Smith, this policy "unwittingly created the foundation for waves of Kurdish nationalist rebellion in Iraq" by creating large urban Kurdish populations that could be mobilised.<sup>38</sup> Apart from this, the presence of certain national rights in Iraq, and the discrepancy between rights held

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Omar Sheikhmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Gunter (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Smith, "Land and Rebellion: Kurdish Separatism in Comparative Perspective", (University of Florida, 2009). Available at: [http://plaza.ufl.edu/bbsmith/smith\\_kurdish\\_separatism\\_march\\_2009.pdf](http://plaza.ufl.edu/bbsmith/smith_kurdish_separatism_march_2009.pdf) [accessed 10 February 2010]

in theory and those experienced in reality have also been factors stimulating Kurdish political activism in Iraq.<sup>39</sup>

The Kurdish issue has constituted a central problem confronting Iraqi governments ever since the state of Iraq was established according to the Sykes–Picot Agreement of World War I out of the amalgamation of three former Ottoman provinces: Mosul, Baghdad and Basra.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the conflicting claims on the territory and resources of Kurdish and other actors have become a major source of conflict and instability in Iraq.<sup>41</sup> As Saad Jawad argues, the Kurdish problem has comprised both internal and external aspects. In the domestic political context, the Kurds, on the basis of their ethnic and linguistic differences from the Arab majority, have fought for a special status within the Iraqi state. Yet on many occasions that desire has been exploited by external powers for their own interests.<sup>42</sup>

When Iraq was detached from the Ottoman Empire, it became a League of Nations mandate under British control. It was the British who initially overlooked the clear territorial and ethnic distinctions that existed in the region by combining the diverse provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. Courtney Hunt believes that the British had no

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<sup>39</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, interview with author, email correspondence, 28 February 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Tripp (2007), *loc. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, interview with author, email correspondence, 28 February 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Saad Jawad, “Recent Developments in the Kurdish Issue”, In Tim Niblock, *Iraq: The Contemporary State*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 47.

understanding of the cultural impact of combining the distinct segments of the “territory” into one country.<sup>43</sup> When Iraq was created, an emerging Kurdish nationalism, which was hindered by the British, existed in Kurdistan.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq has developed mainly in response to the building of an Arab-dominated state that would permit only a minimal amount of Kurdish autonomy.<sup>45</sup>

As the promises for Kurdish self-determination and autonomy outlined in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) were abrogated in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which was renegotiated with Mustafa Kemal of Turkey, Kurdish hopes of achieving independence were destroyed.<sup>46</sup> In addition, the British had already decided to attach the largely Kurdish-populated province of Mosul to Iraq. Gareth Stansfield explains the reasons behind this decision. As Stansfield says, the scale of the oil reserves situated around the province of Mosul was becoming increasingly apparent and thus it became of significant geopolitical value. In addition to its vast oil resources, Mosul was to be part of Iraq for financial considerations, because the British military at that time “remained seriously damaged by the exertions of World War I, and the depleted British treasury was also incapable of funding expensive

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<sup>43</sup> Courtney Hunt, *The History of Iraq*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), p. 62.

<sup>44</sup> Amin (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Saad Eskander, “Britain's Policy in Southern Kurdistan: The Formation and Termination of the First Kurdish Government, 1918-1919”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2000, p. 139.

<sup>46</sup> Carl Dahlman, “The Political Geography of Kurdistan”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2002, p. 286.

overseas defensive arrangements”.<sup>47</sup> The annexation of Mosul to Iraq, Stansfield argues, “effectively removed the possibility of a Kurdish state emerging for nearly the next century”.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy remained strong and became a major factor influencing British policy making on the ground. Likewise, the consolidation of Britain’s strategic, economic and political position to reconstruct a new regional order was bound to affect Kurdistan’s political future.<sup>49</sup> In particular, as Middle East oil became its major concern, Britain opposed Kurdish independence or autonomy to obtain oil concessions.<sup>50</sup>

A long series of tribal uprisings had taken place in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1919 to the mid-1940s, with the aim of achieving greater autonomy. Although the Kurdish leaders’ tendencies were nationalist, their revolts were nationalist only in the basic sense of the term. Driven by tribal interests, some Kurdish leaders were more interested in gaining the sort of “autonomy” that tribal leaders of the remote areas had enjoyed during the disintegrating period of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, some scholars contend that the

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<sup>47</sup> Gareth Stansfield, “The Kurdish Question in Iraq, 1914-1974”, *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974*, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Eskander (2000), *loc. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> Rafiq Helmi, *Yadashtakan* (Memoirs), (Sulaimani: Sardam, 2003), p. 54. (In Kurdish)

<sup>51</sup> Saad Jawad, “The Kurdish Problem in Iraq”, In Abbas Kelidar, *The Integration of Modern Iraq*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 171.

consolidation of a Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq occurred from the 1940s onwards.<sup>52</sup> In 1946, Mulla Mustafa Barzani formed the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as “an alliance between the tribal, rural-based Kurds and their urban-dwelling, generally leftist-orientated figures”,<sup>53</sup> to revive Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence. Barzani always focused his demands on achieving independence or autonomy for the Kurds. However, following his involvement with the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran, to which he had offered his military support, Barzani was forced to flee to the Soviet Union where he spent a decade in exile (1947–58).<sup>54</sup> In Barzani’s absence, the urban leftist “wing” in the KDP dominated the direction of the party. The increasing dominance of the leftists was also helped by socio-economic developments principally caused by the expansion of the oil industry in Iraq, which provided the KDP with ample opportunities to recruit among the rising number of urban Kurds.<sup>55</sup>

After Abdel-Karim Qasim seized power and overthrew the Iraqi monarchy in a coup in 1958, Barzani was allowed to return. The key point to note here is that Qasim brought Barzani back to provide him with support against his rivals in Baghdad: mainly the Communist Party and Nasserites. However, as Qasim consolidated his rule and

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<sup>52</sup> See Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics*, (London: Polity Press, 2007), p. 103; Edmund Ghareeb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Stansfield (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Gunter (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>55</sup> Stansfield (2006), *loc. cit.*

gained control of the political scene in Baghdad, his biggest challenge ceased to be these groups – and the next strongest rival was Barzani. Consequently, as Qasim attempted to weaken Kurdish influence in Iraq, Barzani refused to heed the government's orders. Moreover, Qasim accused the Kurdish movement of “harbouring secessionist designs backed by imperialism”.<sup>56</sup> Kurdish dissatisfaction with Qasim's regime finally came to a head in the September 1961 armed revolt against him. Between 1961 and 1970, the Kurdish situation in Iraq closely followed political developments in Baghdad. During this period, a number of negotiations between the Kurds and successive Iraqi governments failed, and therefore the Kurdish rebellion continued to revive the Kurdish nationalist movement.<sup>57</sup> This is why some scholars tend to argue that the emergence of Kurdish nationalism as a genuine social movement can be seen from the 1960s onwards.<sup>58</sup>

At the height of his power in the early 1970s, Barzani negotiated the March Agreement of 1970, which theoretically provided for Kurdish autonomy under his rule.<sup>59</sup> The recognition of the existence of the Kurdish nation within Iraq was the most important aspect of the agreement.<sup>60</sup> However, as Kerim Yildiz contends, the March Agreement

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<sup>56</sup> Stansfield (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 103; Edmund Ghareeb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> Stansfield (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, interview with author, email correspondence, 28 February 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Gunter (2004), *loc. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> McDowall (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 336.

of 1970 was little more than a ploy.<sup>61</sup> Granting the Kurdish region a limited autonomy was a “ruse” to let the Baath regime gain enough strength to impose direct control. Following the Baath takeover in 1968, the Kurds had made a number of attacks on the Iraq Petroleum Company’s installations in northern Iraq. By targeting the oilfields, these attacks highlighted the military capability of the Kurds and Iraq’s economic vulnerability. Playing for time, the Baath regime wanted to avoid the possibility of further attacks from the Kurds.<sup>62</sup> The peace agreement did not last long due to a failure to reach agreement on the boundaries of the autonomous Kurdish region and the issue of nationalisation of the Kirkuk oilfields.<sup>63</sup>

External factors also contributed to the failure of the agreement and, later, Barzani's defeat in 1975. The Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972, which was signed as a counter-balance to the close Iran-U.S. relationship that was developing,<sup>64</sup> indicated a lessening of previous Soviet support for Barzani.<sup>65</sup> Barzani's goals were also set back by the abrupt termination of Iranian and U.S. support for the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq in return for Iraqi concessions to settle disputes between Iraq and Iran over certain lands (such as the

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<sup>61</sup> Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> McDowall (2004), *op. cit.*, pp. 328-329.

<sup>63</sup> Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty and Self-determination: The Accommodation of Conflicting Rights*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 192.

<sup>64</sup> Edgar O’Balance, *The Kurdish Struggle: 1920-1994*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 97.

<sup>65</sup> Hannum (1996), *op. cit.*, p. 192.

Shatt al-Arab waterway and the Iranian Arab province of Khuzestan), an action that the then U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger described as a “covert action” that should not be confused with “missionary work”.<sup>66</sup>

Calling Barzani’s rebellion a nationalist one is debatable among scholars.<sup>67</sup> Emmanuel Sivan argues that Barzani’s revolt, unlike previous revolts, which were primordially tribal, was essentially nationalistic.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, David McDowall points out that there is little solid evidence that Barzani espoused the Kurdish cause during the course of his revolt. Instead, McDowall thinks that Barzani, like any tribal leader, was constantly seeking to widen his regional authority.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the Kurdish tribal leaders believed that the Kurdish nation would be best served by their leadership, and therefore they combined their own interests with some form of nationalism. Nevertheless, although Barzani’s ideology was more tribal, he succeeded in planting nationalist sentiment in the hearts of the Kurds, not only in Iraq but also in neighbouring countries.<sup>70</sup>

Aiming at “filling the political vacuum of 1975 in Iraqi Kurdistan”, Jalal Talabani formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in June

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<sup>66</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), pp. 576-96.

<sup>67</sup> Gareth Stansfield, Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 62.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> McDowall (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 293.

<sup>70</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, interview with author, email correspondence, 28 February 2011.



1975.<sup>71</sup> The formation of this new political party in Iraqi Kurdistan owes its origins to a number of conditions and factors that existed at the time. According to Omar Sheikmous, a founding member of the PUK, the major factor leading to its formation was an emotional reaction to the collapse of the Kurdish national movement in Iraqi Kurdistan and the defeat of the then leadership of the KDP, headed by Mustafa Barzani.<sup>72</sup> There are, of course, other factors that contributed to the formation of the PUK. As the heir of the old KDP politburo that had been engaged in a struggle with Barzani's tribal and traditional thinking in the earlier years,<sup>73</sup> the PUK was influenced by the Left, Modernist stream to take the leadership of the Kurdish movement. Moreover, the PUK received support from the states that were in conflict with Iraq and Iran, such as Syria, Libya and the Soviet Union, who considered the rapprochement between Iran and Iraq a threat to their interests and influence in the region.<sup>74</sup>

As a new political party in Iraqi Kurdistan, the PUK provided a sustainable base of recruits, which led to the survival of the Kurdish liberation movement despite numerous attempts by the Iraqi

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<sup>71</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa Amin, *Le Kenari Danubewe bo Xri Nawzeng* (From the Danub Shore to the Nawzang Valley), (Sulaimani: Khak Press, 1997), p. 43.

<sup>72</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis*, (New York: Palgrave, 1999), p. 72.

<sup>74</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

government to destroy it during the 1980s.<sup>75</sup> In fact, it was the popular mood of anger, outrage and animosity towards the U.S., Iran, Iraq and Israel for letting the Kurdish movement collapse that the founders of the PUK capitalised on and utilised for recruitment and mobilisation purposes.<sup>76</sup> Although the formation of the PUK revived Kurdish nationalist aspirations among the Iraqi Kurds, it also deepened existing intra-Kurdish divisions. The major division between Barzani and Talabani is based on political and ideological grounds, caused by them following two different political parties: Talabani's politics is urban-based and more leftist.<sup>77</sup> However, their division is also in line with clan-related and religious divisions, given that Barzani and Talabani belong to different Islamic Sufi orders (*tariqas*): Barzani to the *Qadiri* and Talabani to the *Naqshbandi*.<sup>78</sup>

The intra-ethnic conflicts and the lack of unity have always hampered secessionist movements (e.g. in Cyprus, India and Pakistan). In the Kurdish case in Iraq, however, the impact has been more challenging, and it has had divisive effects and hindered the development of strong national loyalties instead of helping to nurture

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<sup>75</sup> Smith (2009), *loc. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> Omar Sheikhmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Raphael Israeli, *The Iraq War: Hidden Agendas and Babylonian Intrigue*, (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 77.

<sup>78</sup> David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 197.

regional and tribal loyalties.<sup>79</sup> As noted by Michael Gunter, the Iraqi Kurds suffered from tribal, geographical, political, linguistic and ideological divisions that led to a stunted sense of nationalism compared to their more powerful surrounding enemies.<sup>80</sup> Given the scope of this study, however, the term “intra-Kurdish conflict” refers mainly to the political cleavages within the Kurdish political community in Iraq that have led to a number of conflicts over the years.

One of the most important factors that has given rise to intra-Kurdish conflict is the lack of both a democratic and a pluralist political culture within the parties and movements that exist in Iraqi Kurdistan. The character of the Kurdish political groups that were modelled on non-democratic nationalist, socialist and communist parties in the Middle East resulted in the use of violence to gain and maintain power. It is this tendency that has consequently led to extreme drives towards the monopolisation of power and to immense hindrances of tolerance of and acceptance of the other parties.<sup>81</sup> Regional states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria have also played a very important role in provoking and giving cause to intensified intra-Kurdish conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan by supporting one of the parties in the competition for power and resources, by inciting incidents of

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<sup>79</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Gunter, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, Issue 4836, 05 April 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011

disagreement and war, and by luring one of the parties with false promises and temptations.<sup>82</sup>

Explaining the impact of the intra-Kurdish conflict on Kurdish independence, David Romano argues that the internecine conflicts in Iraqi Kurdistan have undermined the efforts to achieve independence or autonomy. According to Romano, this has consequently created a situation where the Kurdish independence movement has been framed as pre-modern, divided and tribal, and hence incapable of representing Iraqi Kurdistan in any institutionally enshrined autonomy or political self-determination.<sup>83</sup> As former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger concluded: the Iraqi Kurds must deal with “forbidding geography, ambivalent motives on the part of neighbouring countries, and incompatible motivations within the Kurdish community itself”.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the deep internal rivalries between the various Kurdish factions became major obstacles to a permanent solution of the Kurdish dilemma in Iraq.

In the wake of Saddam Hussein’s defeat in the Gulf War of 1991, the Kurds rose up against the Baath regime. The Kurdish uprising subsequently led to the emergence of a *de facto* Kurdish state in

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Romano (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Kissinger quoted in Gunter (2009), *loc. cit.*

northern Iraq.<sup>85</sup> This *de facto* state was considered a threat to the regional state system, and therefore it did not gain any legal recognition within Iraq or internationally.<sup>86</sup> The events of 1991 nonetheless changed Iraqi Kurdish opportunity structures remarkably.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, more than anything else, the Iraqi Kurds benefited greatly from the rising international attention and awareness of the Kurds in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991.<sup>88</sup>

Enjoying a level of international support, the Kurds of Iraq moved a step closer to statehood when they held their first parliamentary election in 1992. In the mid-1990s, however, this experiment collapsed due to intra-Kurdish conflict that lasted until 1998 after the U.S. brokered a ceasefire – known as the Washington Agreement – between the KDP and the PUK.<sup>89</sup> Although it failed to stop the rivalry between the KDP and the PUK, the result of the Washington Agreement was “preservation of geographical areas of influence and security”.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the Kurdistan region was divided into two administrations along the existing lines of areas already controlled by each party.

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Gunter, “Kurdish Future in a Post-Saddam Iraq”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 1, April 2003, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Gunter (1999), *op. cit.*, pp. 111-126.

<sup>87</sup> Romano (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>89</sup> Hadji (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 519; Gunter (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>90</sup> Stansfield (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 102.

The Kurdish situation has witnessed a drastic change following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which paved the way for a Kurdish federal state to be legally recognised within Iraq's permanent constitution.<sup>91</sup> This forced the KDP and the PUK to end their division, and they signed the Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement on 21 January 2006, which outlined how the two parties would share power in one government: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>92</sup>

Describing the travails of the Iraqi Kurds, the above review of the historical and political development of Iraqi Kurdistan reveals that the present situation of Iraqi Kurds is a product of their struggle for self-rule, and this stands out as the "most significant modern Kurdish nationalist achievement".<sup>93</sup> After decades of oppression, the Kurdistan region is now recognised by Iraq's constitution and the KRG as the official ruling body of the region and exercises executive power according to the Kurdistan region's laws, as enacted by the Kurdistan Parliament.<sup>94</sup> Although the Iraqi Kurds currently enjoy the country's highest living standards and have more control over their region than

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<sup>91</sup> Hussein Tahiri, "Dialogue: The Kurdish Question in the Middle East", *Journal of Globalization for the Common Good*, Spring 2009. Available at: <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/jgcg/2009/sp09/jgcg-sp09-tahiri.htm>

<sup>92</sup> Hadji (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 519.

<sup>93</sup> Romano (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 221

<sup>94</sup> "About the Kurdistan Regional Government", *Kurdistan Regional Government's Official Website*. Available at: <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?anr=32349&lngnr=12&rn=93&sm=04020000> [accessed 20 December 2009]

they used to, the territorial disputes between Arabs and Kurds have the potential to pose a serious risk of violence and instability. This illustrates that the Kurdish question is still unresolved and the Kurdish ambition for obtaining a fully independent sovereign state remains alive.<sup>95</sup>

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

After reviewing the historical evolution of the Kurdish issue, it can be concluded that the external aspects have played a major role in developing/weakening the Kurdish nationalist aspirations. On many occasions the Kurdish desire for independence has been exploited by foreign powers for their own interests.<sup>96</sup> Besides, as argued by Robert Olson, the Kurds have fallen victim to the great powers, who think that it is in their interests to cooperate with the new and increasingly strong states of the region and thus to acquiesce to the suppression of the Kurdish nationalist movements.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, when analysing the impact of external factors on the current status of Iraqi Kurdistan and its future, one is reminded of Thucydides' observation, made more than

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<sup>95</sup> Hadji (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 520.

<sup>96</sup> Jawad (1982), *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>97</sup> Robert Olson, "The Kurdish Question in the Aftermath of the Gulf War: Geopolitical and Geostrategic Changes in the Middle East", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 13. no. 03, 1992, p. 475.

2,400 years ago: “the powerful exact what they can and the weak grant what they must.”<sup>98</sup>

Regarding the internal factors, intra-Kurdish rivalries “have hindered Kurdish political development”<sup>99</sup> and have had a negative impact on the development of a Kurdish sense of national unity.<sup>100</sup> The lack of ability to develop a unitary vision among the Kurds has been one of the major reasons behind the failure to establish an independent Kurdish state.<sup>101</sup> As David McDowall asserts, there have been grounds for doubting “the Kurds’ capability of independence”, because of serious internal weaknesses within Kurdish society.<sup>102</sup> Apart from the fact that the Kurdish struggle for self-rule has been hampered by the bitter rivalry between competing nationalist groups, some of which have been used as pawns by the outside powers,<sup>103</sup> the weaknesses in the Kurds’ presentation of their claims have also played a part in this.

As examined above, the Kurdish issue in Iraq has been a source of instability there. In particular, as some scholars believe, Kurdish possession of natural resources is the main reason why the issue may

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<sup>98</sup> Thucydides, quoted in Gunter (2009), *loc. cit.*

<sup>99</sup> Peter Lambert, *The U.S. and the Kurds: Case Studies in US Engagement*, (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>100</sup> Fuller (1993), *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>101</sup> Yildiz (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>102</sup> McDowall (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>103</sup> Stephen Zunes, “The United States and the Kurds: A Brief History,” *Foreign Policy In Focus*, October 25, 2007. Available at: <http://www.fpif.org/fpifxt/4670> [accessed 15 December 2009]



become even more important in the future.<sup>104</sup> The dilemma the Kurds face has thus placed them high on the agenda of not only Iraqi politics but also that of the Middle East. This is why they can no longer be ignored.<sup>105</sup> In addition, and more importantly, the political momentum of the Kurdish movement has the potential to bring back post-Cold War issues. This might mean that the challenges associated with breakaway ethnic movements, the treatment of minorities, federalism and possibly the creation of new states, will be brought to the forefront of Middle East concerns.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Gunter (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

<sup>105</sup> Fuller (1993), *op. cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 3:

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of regional stability in determining U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence. In this chapter, a critical review of the literature that is relevant to this study will be made in order to better understand and to gain insight into the topic under investigation. To provide organisational structure to this chapter, it is arranged into two major sections plus a conclusion. The first section of this chapter will explore the theoretical literature on foreign powers' involvement in secessionist attempts. The second section will examine the determinants of U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds.

It should be noted that there is a lack of published literature on this second topic. The only relevant published work is a source book by Lokman Meho documenting U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds.<sup>1</sup> Lacking analysis of U.S. policy towards the Kurds, however, the only aim of Meho's book is "to provide the reader with a selection of

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<sup>1</sup> I am well aware that a new book by Marianna Charountaki, entitled "*The Kurds and U.S. Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*", has recently been published. However, for reasons related to the timing of the submission of this thesis, this book will not be discussed in this chapter. When the book was published, the final draft of literature review for this study had already been completed and approved by my supervisory team.

documents that provides the ideological and political grounds for the U.S. policy towards the Kurds”,<sup>2</sup> not only in Iraq, but also in the wider Middle East region. This book has thus not been included in the literature review conducted for this study. In fact, apart from some short articles and reports, some of which are heavily influenced by the preconceptions of their writers, there is a relative dearth of published political science literature on this topic.

### **3.2. Foreign Intervention in Secessionist Conflicts**

Most of the existing literature on secession suggests that foreign intervention in secessionist conflicts abroad is a crucial factor in the success or failure of secessionist attempts.<sup>3</sup> Scholars, however, offer different explanations for the reasons behind outside powers' involvement in foreign secessionist conflicts. Some scholars argue that a state's own vulnerability to secession restrain it from supporting separatist movements in other countries.<sup>4</sup> According to this argument, countries that have severe ethnic and identity conflicts do not want to

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<sup>2</sup> Lokman I. Meho, *The Kurdish Question in U.S. Foreign Policy: a Documentary Sourcebook*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert A. Young, “How Do Peaceful Secessions Happen?” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 27, no. 24, 1994, pp. 773-92; Alexis Heraclides, *The Self-determination of Minorities in International Politics*, (London: Frank Cass, 1991); Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> See Jeffrey Herbst, “Creation and Maintenance of National Boundaries in Africa”, *International Organization*, 1989, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 673-692; Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, “Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood.” *World Politics*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 1-24; Zdenek Cervenka, *The Organization of African Unity and its Charter*, (New York: Praeger Press, 1969).

engage in assertive foreign policies.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in this context, states tend to “embrace international norms of cooperation, such as the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states”.<sup>6</sup>

The vulnerability argument, however, is weakly supported empirically. As noted by Stephen M. Saideman, vulnerable third states are not necessarily prevented from supporting and/or recognising secessionist groups elsewhere (e.g. Albania recognised Kosovo, Italy recognised Croatia and Russia supported Trans-Dniester).<sup>7</sup> This framework fails to explain the Kurdish case, which is the focus of this research. Indeed, there are states with significant Kurdish separatist movements (e.g. Iran and Syria) that have supported the Kurdish struggle for autonomy in neighbouring countries, especially in Iraq, for their own interests.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the vulnerability argument is not appropriate in the case of the U.S., and therefore cannot explain U.S. policy towards secessionist self-determination. In fact, despite being rather vulnerable to its internal secessionist claims, the U.S. has

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Saideman, “Thinking Theoretically about Identity and Foreign Policy”, In Shibley Telhami and Michael N. Barnett (Eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Bélanger *et al.*, “Foreign Interventions and Secessionist Movements: The Democratic Factor”, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 38, no. 2, June 2005, p. 436.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Saideman, *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy & International Conflict*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 65-147.

<sup>8</sup> Saideman (2002), *op. cit.*, p. 172.

intervened in foreign intra-state conflicts more often than any other major powers.<sup>9</sup>

Stephen M. Saideman presents an alternative theory to explain the dimensions of foreign intervention in secession. He argues that ethnic politics is the most important factor affecting foreign policies towards secessionist conflicts.<sup>10</sup> According to Saideman, states support the side of an ethnic conflict with which they share an ethnic tie. Also, he asserts that “ethnic politics serves as a critical dynamic compelling some politicians to support secession elsewhere while constraining others.”<sup>11</sup> Obviously, as noted by Saideman himself, this approach, which is based on ethnic ties, cannot account for the foreign policy of a country lacking ethnic ties with a secessionist group abroad. Thus, U.S. attitudes to the Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence cannot be analysed within this framework.

Louis Bélanger, Erick Duchesne and Jonathan Paquin suggest an explanation other than ethnic ties and vulnerability arguments.<sup>12</sup> These scholars argue that a democratic regime bond between a third state and a host state constitutes an important explanatory normative variable that can account for the behaviour of foreign countries

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Paquin, “*Explaining Variations in the American Response to Secessionist conflicts in the Post-Cold War era: A Rational Stability Theory*”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Saideman, “Explaining the International Relations of Secessionist Conflicts: Vulnerability versus Ethnic Ties”, *International Organization*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1997, p. 722.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 725-26.

<sup>12</sup> Bélanger *et al.* (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 438.

towards secessionist claims. According to this view, third states that are democratic usually estimate the legitimacy of secessionist groups based on the nature of the host states' political regimes. Thus, secessionist movements evolving within democracies are unlikely to obtain support from democratic states, since these countries operate according to a normative principle that assumes that a liberal democratic order provides minorities with internal self-determination.<sup>13</sup> However, the U.S. approach of opposing secessionist attempts in undemocratic countries believed to have had oppressive regimes (e.g. Iran, Iraq and Syria) disproves this view.

Aiming to provide an explanation for the U.S. involvement in secessionist movements, Jerry Muller contends that the U.S. does not want to become involved in foreign secessionist and ethnic conflicts because "the U.S. generally does not give much attention to the role of ethnic nationalism in politics."<sup>14</sup> Ethnic nationalism is a form of nationalism wherein the "nation" is defined in terms of ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> Ethnicity matters, indeed, because it causes adverse effects on the peace, harmony and integration of national societies. Moreover, these

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 440.

<sup>14</sup> Jerry Muller, "U.S. and Them", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, issue 2, March/April 2008, pp. 18-35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

negative effects have consequently put regional stability around the world at risk.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of this, we have witnessed a change in the nature of warfare in the contemporary world. In many places, warfare has been taking place within states rather than between them (e.g. Burundi, Cambodia, Georgia, Rwanda, Somalia and Tajikistan). Thus, most of the armed conflicts in the world since 1989 have been the result of internal ethnic tensions.<sup>17</sup> However, demands for ethnic autonomy or self-determination can sometimes be met within an existing state. The claims of the Catalans in Spain, the Flemish in Belgium and the Scots in the United Kingdom have been resolved in this manner, at least for now.

Nevertheless, as argued by Jerry Muller, such arrangements remain precarious and are subject to recurrent renegotiation. In particular, in places like the Middle East, where states are more recent creations and where the borders cut across ethnic boundaries, there is likely to be further ethnic disaggregation and communal conflict.<sup>18</sup> Based on this consideration, Muller's argument can be applied to the Kurdish case in Iraq.

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<sup>16</sup> Okwudiba Nnoli, "Ethnicity", In Joël Krieger (Ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 265.

<sup>17</sup> Hal Kane, "Leaving Home: Refugees and Their Impact on World Demographics", *Society*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1995, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Muller (2008), *op. cit.*, pp. 18-35.

Ethnic nationalism has been an important contributing element in the internal divisions within Iraq. For many decades, Kurdish ethnic nationalism has been expressed in the form of secessionist and irredentist movements, which have brought the Kurds into conflict with pan-Arab nationalism and territorialism.<sup>19</sup> Underlying the Kurdish question there is a set of disputes and issues arising from the clash of identities in Iraq. As Carole O'Leary notes, many Iraqis "view their own communal identities in primordial or essentialising terms".<sup>20</sup> As such, there is an emerging form of a new Kurdish identity based on the aims for Kurdistan and less rooted in the feeling of belonging to Iraq. This, as argued by Gareth Stansfield, has consequently made the Kurds a real threat to Iraq's territorial integrity, while also challenging the notion of Iraq's dominant Arabness.<sup>21</sup>

Case studies indicate that the U.S. has a clear anti-secessionist bias. It views secession as a disturbing action and as a severe obstacle to international stability.<sup>22</sup> The U.S., therefore, favours the containment of secessionist claims within existing sovereign states, where possible, as a way to preserve regional stability. This scenario is not always

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<sup>19</sup> Aram Rafaat, "An Independent Kurdish State: Achievable or Merely a Kurdish Dream?", *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2007, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> Carole A. O'Leary, "The Kurds of Iraq: Recent History, Future Prospects", *Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2000. Available at: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue4/jv6n4a5.html> [accessed 20 January 2009]

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics*, (London: Polity Press, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Paquin, "What Leads the United States to Recognize Secession", *The International Studies Association Convention*, 2004, p. 6. Available at: [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/0/7/3/6/7/p73677\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/7/3/6/7/p73677_index.html) [accessed 25 January 2009]



possible, though, because a central state could be the cause of instability or could even collapse as a result of civil unrest or secession (e.g. Yugoslavia).<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Paquin argues that the U.S., in such cases, will shift its position and might support the independence of a secessionist movement if the new emerging state can strengthen the level of stability in the region affected by secessionism.<sup>24</sup>

### **3.3. The Determinants of U.S. Policy towards the Iraqi Kurds**

This section will look at the major determinants of U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds as discussed in the relevant existing literature. As examined in the previous chapters, one of the reasons why the Kurds have failed to establish their own state is that foreign powers and, more recently, modern Middle Eastern states have continued to suppress Kurdish national aspirations. In return, various Kurdish factions have regularly served these external powers by weakening host regimes as a way of maintaining their own survival.<sup>25</sup>

Among the major powers, the U.S. has been noticeably involved with the Kurdish question in Iraq. Because of its national interests, as well as for other reasons, the U.S. has pursued different policies

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<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Paquin, "Managing Controversy: U.S. Stability Seeking and the Birth of the Macedonian State", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2008, p. 439.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Graham Fuller, "The Fate of the Kurds", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 2, 1993, p. 108.

towards the Kurds. Located at the crossroads of the world<sup>26</sup>, Iraqi Kurdistan is of compelling geopolitical interest.<sup>27</sup> However, as a landlocked territory, it is surrounded by states which are of considerable attention to the U.S.: Turkey, Iran and Syria. Given the geopolitical importance of Iraq, which currently has the world's third-largest oil reserves, amounting to 8.3% of the global total<sup>28</sup>, and seeing that Iraqi Kurdistan is in a perfect strategic spot for monitoring the unfriendly states in the region, the U.S. has had more engagement with Iraqi Kurds than with the Kurds of other countries. However, the U.S. role in the Iraqi Kurdish struggle for independence is largely understudied in terms of the key causal factors identified in the previous section. Instead, most of the existing literature on this issue has focused on the question of the "betrayal" of the Kurds by the U.S. and other Western powers.<sup>29</sup>

Peter Lambert argues that the U.S. policy approach to the Kurdish question, after failing to help establish a state for the Kurds

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<sup>26</sup> See Map 1, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Ewan Anderson, "Foreword", In Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. xi.

<sup>28</sup> The BP Statistical Review of World Energy listed Iraqi reserves as of end-2010 as 115,000,000,000 barrels. For more details on Iraqi oil, see BP Statistical Review of World Energy June 2011, BP. Available at: [http://www.bp.com/assets/bp\\_internet/globalbp/globalbp\\_uk\\_english/reports\\_and\\_publications/statistical\\_energy\\_review\\_2011/STAGING/local\\_assets/pdf/statistical\\_review\\_of\\_world\\_energy\\_full\\_report\\_2011.pdf](http://www.bp.com/assets/bp_internet/globalbp/globalbp_uk_english/reports_and_publications/statistical_energy_review_2011/STAGING/local_assets/pdf/statistical_review_of_world_energy_full_report_2011.pdf) [accessed 11 February 2012]

<sup>29</sup> See Stephen Zunes, "The United States and the Kurds: A Brief History", *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 25 October 2007. Available at: <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4670>; Diane E. King, "A 16-Year Cycle of Treachery: Iraqi Kurds and the U.S.", *The International Herald Tribune*, 11 January, 2007; Liam D. Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp. 180-181; Michael J. Kelly, *Ghosts of Halabja: Saddam Hussein's Trial for the Kurdish Massacre*, (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 46.

following WWI, in its support for the Kurdish right of self-determination, became one that supported regional allies to the detriment of the Kurds.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Lambert argues that self-determination in the post-WWI era had little to do with the demands of the peoples concerned unless those demands were consistent with the geopolitical and strategic interests of the Great Powers.<sup>31</sup> Lambert fails to defend this argument, however, so it remains at best an assertion only.

In the aftermath of WWI, there was a new preoccupation with the political status of minority groups, driven by strategic political considerations rather than concerns for individual and group protection.<sup>32</sup> Olson argues that the major geopolitical reason favouring the creation of a Kurdish state after WWI, apart from to create a buffer state between emergent nationalist Turkey and the autonomous republic of Azerbaijan in the U.S.S.R., was to place a buffer between the Turks of Anatolia and the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia, especially in the Caucasus and specifically in Azerbaijan. A Kurdish state would also be able to reduce the potential power of the states of Central Asia and Turkey.<sup>33</sup> There were other aspects to consider,

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Lambert, *The U.S. and the Kurds: Case Studies in U.S. Engagement*, (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq: The Past, Present and Future*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Olson, "The Kurdish Question in the Aftermath of the Gulf War: Geopolitical and Geostrategic Changes in the Middle East", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1992, p. 479.

namely the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the threat posed by the nascent Soviet Union, the status of the Catholic Armenian population and Britain's desire to preserve stability in and around its colonial possessions.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, as Stephen Zunes argues, the U.S. policy towards the Kurds has been far less supportive and often cynically opportunistic by supporting the Kurds only when they advance U.S. interests in the region.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, and as discussed in the existing literature, there are many major determinants of U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurds. Considering democracy an important element of U.S. foreign policy, Maggy Zanger describes the democratic experience as pursued in the Kurdish region of Iraq as a determinant of U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurds. Zanger also notes the impact of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) fighting a fratricidal war between 1994 and 1997, which hampered the Kurdish democratic experience. This is why, ultimately, the bitter legacy of U.S.–Kurdish relations can only be overcome by a substantive U.S. engagement based on a clear vision of a democratic future. The existence of a failure to consider the Kurds' role is critical to this argument, however.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, Michael Rubin argues that the unreliability of Iraqi Kurdish

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<sup>34</sup> Yildiz (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Zunes (2007), *loc. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Maggy Zanger, "The U.S. and the Kurds of Iraq: A Bitter History", *MERIP Press Information*, 2002. Available at: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero080902.html> [accessed 10 March 2009]

leadership makes any long-term U.S.–Kurdish alliance unwise. Rubin thinks that the current Iraqi Kurdish leadership appears intent on replicating more autocratic models rather than becoming a beacon for democracy.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, as argued by Jalil Roshandel, the Kurds of Iraq, because of their unique socio-political situation, represent a model that is transitioning from authoritarianism towards a more democratic model.<sup>38</sup>

The region of Kurdistan, like the rest of Iraq, is rich in natural resources.<sup>39</sup> Scholars thus argue that the vast oil resources that exist within the current borders of the Kurdistan region – and control of the disputed oil-rich territories that the Kurds claim are part of the Kurdistan region – bring the issue of Kurdish independence closer to the parties concerned.<sup>40</sup> Criticising the argument that the Kurdish control of oil in their region or in the “disputed territories”<sup>41</sup> is linked to the Kurds’ aspirations for independence, Liam D. Anderson and Gareth Stansfield argue that there is very little that is plausible about this argument. As Anderson and Stansfield note, the views of Kurdish

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Rubin, “Is Iraqi Kurdistan a Good Ally?”, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2008). Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/27327> [accessed 12 March 2009]

<sup>38</sup> Jalil Roshandel, “U.S.-Kurdish Relationship”, *Kurdistani Nwe Newspaper*, Issue 4791, 08 February 2009, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> According to Kurdistan Regional Government’s Minister of Natural Resources, Kurdistan Region owns at least 45 billion barrels of oil and as much as 100-200 trillion cubic feet of gas. See *Aso Newspaper*, 21 August 2010. Available at: <http://www.asoxendan.com/dreja.aspx?hewal&jmara=5431&Jor=1> [in Kurdish] [accessed 22 August 2010]

<sup>40</sup> See Kenneth Katzman, “The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq”, *CRS Reports for Congress*, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> “Disputed territories” in Iraq refer to the regions disputed between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). These regions are defined by the article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq as being Arabised during the Baath Party rule in Iraq (1968–2003). For further details, see Map 2, p. 212.

leaders in Iraq have been consistent and have resulted in ensuring unequivocally that Kurdish independence is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future.<sup>42</sup>

However, and as indicated in the previous chapter, Anderson and Stansfield agree that oil has played a significant role in most of the important developments in Iraq's modern history, ranging from the initial British decision to append Mosul to Baghdad and Basra to create Iraq, to the efforts of successive Arab governments to ensure an Arab majority in the oil-rich regions.<sup>43</sup> In fact, the significance of this issue is not only perceived in Iraq but also in neighbouring countries with a Kurdish population, and in the U.S. and the Arab world, as there is a perception that this gives the Kurds enough economic strength to support a drive for independence.<sup>44</sup> Mark A. Dewhurst is in agreement that these issues have the potential to determine the future of Kurdistan and the direction of U.S. policy towards the Kurds in Iraq. Considering these concerns as vital ones, Dewhurst suggests that U.S. foreign policy should be more cautious towards the Kurds to prevent a grave impact on the political structure of the region.<sup>45</sup> However, the presence of natural resources within the current borders of Iraqi

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<sup>42</sup> Liam D. Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: the Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 235.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>44</sup> Katzman (2008), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Mark A. Dewhurst, *Assessing the Kurdish Question: What is the Future of Iraq*, (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2006) p. 5.

Kurdistan, and its vital role in advancing U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds, is subsequently ignored.

Indeed, the impact of Kurdish independence on regional stability and the issue of the territorial integrity of the states of the region are great concerns for the U.S. Consistent with this argument, Kenneth Katzman contends that a stronger, autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq will have serious regional implications. Above all, Katzman believes that the political autonomy and greater strength of the Iraqi Kurds causes a backlash in the Arab parts of Iraq and in Iran and Turkey.<sup>46</sup>

The question of Kurdish pro-Americanism and its impact on the U.S. approach to Kurdish independence is investigated relatively superficially in the existing literature on U.S.–Kurdish engagement. Presenting an anthropological account of U.S. engagement with the Iraqi Kurds, Diane E. King shows the implications of a close Kurdish–American cooperation in Iraq. King considers Kurdish pro-Americanism as potentially dangerous for the Kurdish people in Iraq and also believes that it places a potential moral burden on the U.S. to protect them. King demonstrates the opportunistic policies pursued by the Great Powers towards the Kurds. The latter, unlike the Shiites and the Sunni Arabs of Iraq, have no friends in the region. For that reason, as noted by King and indicated earlier, Iraqi Kurds have sought patrons

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<sup>46</sup> Katzman (2008), *op. cit.*, p. 1.

outside the boundaries of their own states.<sup>47</sup> Failing to demonstrate the importance of Iraqi Kurds in serving the interests of the U.S., King does make clear that despite the difficulties, the U.S. should maintain strong ties with the Iraqi Kurds, if only because the U.S. depends so heavily on the people of Iraqi Kurdistan for its mission in Iraq.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the fact that Iraqi Kurds are pro-American, Jalil Roshandel contends that the U.S. policy of disengagement in Iraq necessitates not going beyond the limits of the existing relation. The Kurdish question could thus be undermined by other constraints.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. always perceives that a strong central government in Iraq is necessary, at least a stronger government than any combination of provinces arranged in some kind of federative scheme. Hence, keeping Iraq as a “unified state” is another determinant of the U.S. engaging with Iraqi Kurds. It has been evident for the U.S. that Iraqi territorial integrity is dependent on Iraq’s ability to integrate its Kurdish population into a successful federal framework.<sup>50</sup> As suggested by Maggy Zanger and articulated by statements made by Kurdish politicians, the Kurds were only willing to support U.S.-instituted

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<sup>47</sup> King (2007), *loc. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Roshandel (2009), *loc. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> Henri J. Barkey, *Preventing Conflict over Kurdistan*, (Washington, D.C.: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009), p. 11.



regime change in Iraq if their future could be secured by introducing federalism to Iraq.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.4. Conclusion

The picture that emerges from the review of the literature is that the Kurdish question is an important factor when it comes to assessing instability in Iraq and the Middle East. This review also illustrates that the U.S. cannot ignore the Kurdish question in Iraq because the status of the Kurds in Iraq has geopolitical implications for the region, and U.S. interests are affected by this accordingly. Of the numerous motives behind the U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurds, only Kurdistan's democratic model, its possession of natural resources, and Kurdish pro-Americanism are superficially noted here.

The existing literature also demonstrates that the U.S. has a crucial role in determining the future of Iraqi Kurdistan. The U.S. position on the Iraqi Kurds is that the U.S., for many reasons, supports *de facto* independence without supporting *de jure* sovereignty to Iraqi Kurdistan. With growing fears over the future of Iraq as a unified state and the future of democracy there, however, the possibility of an independent Kurdish state emerging in Iraq does become more real. Also, history has shown that multi-national states such as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia have, in recent times, broken up into new

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<sup>51</sup> Zanger (2002), *loc. cit.*

states. Additionally, as Jerry Muller argues, “the creation of a peaceful regional order of nation-states has usually been the product of a violent process of ethnic separation. In areas where that separation has not yet occurred, politics is apt to remain ugly.”<sup>52</sup>

In conclusion, the existing literature demonstrates that the U.S. has consistently opposed Kurdish independence; it fails, however, to provide a comprehensive account of the reasons behind the U.S. stance on independence for the Kurds of Iraq. Although there is a rich body of literature on a third state’s intervention in intra-state conflicts in general, most of the arguments are not convincing enough to specifically explain U.S. attitudes to the Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence. As noted by Jonathan Paquin, the scholars who developed systemic models are mainly interested in generating large scale theories of third party intervention rather than foreign policy arguments adapted to particular cases.<sup>53</sup> Thus, a theoretical explanation of U.S. policy concerning the Iraqi Kurdish struggle for independence in terms of the causal factors shaping the U.S. response is missing in the debates in the relevant literature.

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<sup>52</sup> Muller (2008), *op. cit.*, pp. 18-35

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Paquin, “*The United States, Secessionist Movements, and Stability*”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 3-5 June 2004.

## **Chapter 4:**

# **UNITED STATES ENGAGEMENT WITH IRAQI KURDS**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter looks at the historical evolution of U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds. Covering various stages, this chapter highlights the most important interactions between the U.S. and Iraqi Kurds, with a special focus on the period from 1972 onwards. It first provides a brief historical background covering the pre-1972 period, which is predominantly marked by unsuccessful attempts by the Kurdish leaders to establish contacts with the U.S. Then, the chapter proceeds to look at the significant American engagement with the Iraqi Kurds, which, according to this study, has passed through three phases in the past 50 years: 1972–1975, 1990–1996, and the period since the outbreak of the Iraq War in 2003.

The overall aim of this chapter is to understand the twists and turns of U.S. policy towards the Kurdish issue in Iraq and also to identify the factors shaping U.S. policy towards the Kurds of Iraq.

#### 4.2. The U.S. and the Kurds of Iraq: Pre-1972 History

U.S. policy started affecting the Kurds following the formation of a pro-American defence pact among the states of the “Northern Tier”<sup>1</sup> (i.e. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan) to contain the Soviet Union. The pact, known as the Baghdad Pact, was first signed between Iraq and Turkey in 1955 “to resist outside aggression”.<sup>2</sup> This was later expanded to include other countries in the region. Soon after, the United Kingdom announced its intention to adhere to it, and it was followed by Pakistan and, finally, Iran.

Although it was the prime mover in planning the Middle East's “Northern Tier” grouping of anti-communist states back in 1953, the U.S. never joined the Baghdad Pact. Instead, it signed individual agreements with each of the nations in the Pact, taking part in committee meetings as an observer.<sup>3</sup> The major reason behind this position, according to the then U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, was related to Israel, because “if the U.S. had moved to join the Pact, Israel would have asked for similar guarantees and the U.S. would have had to refuse them, thus provoking pro-Israeli pressures in the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> The “Northern Tier” refers to the line of countries that formed a border between the U.S.S.R. and the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup> “The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)”, U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/CENTO> [accessed 16 February 2011]

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

and blocking Senate ratification of the treaty.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, the U.S. was certain at that time that forging an alliance including both Israel and Western colonial powers was difficult, mainly due to the nature of some of the ongoing tensions in the region, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and Egyptian-led anti-colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

Although no specific mention of the Kurds was made in the Baghdad Pact, it allowed Iraq to work with Iran and Turkey to suppress its Kurdish threat.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the Kurds regarded the Pact as indirect opposition to their national aspirations, and thus they became more receptive to Soviet overtures.<sup>7</sup> During the Cold War, the U.S. Middle East policy was driven primarily by the desire to counter Soviet influence in the region. As Iraq was the only Arab member of the Baghdad Pact, the U.S. paid little attention to the Kurdish question in Iraq until after the 1958 revolution led by Abdel-Karim Qasim.

The new regime withdrew from the alliance and opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> As the containment of the Soviet Union was one of the major concerns of the U.S. at that time,

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<sup>4</sup> “The Middle East: After the Baghdad Pact”, *Time Magazine*, 11 August 1958. Available at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,825407,00.html> [accessed 23 February 2011]

<sup>5</sup> “The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)”, U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/CENTO> [accessed 23 February 2011]

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Kostiner, *Conflict and Cooperation in the Gulf Region*, (Wiesbaden:VS Verlag, 2009), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), p. 271.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Jentleson, “Iraq: the Failure of a Strategy”, In Richard Nelson & Kenneth Weisbrode (Eds.), *U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 126.

Qasim's pro-Soviet policies gave a window of opportunity to the U.S. to further its influence in Iraq through its relations with the Kurds.<sup>9</sup>

Kurdish dissatisfaction with Qasim's regime played a part in the conflicted interests of the U.S.<sup>10</sup> On a number of occasions, Qasim accused the U.S. of supporting the Iraqi Kurds in their conflict against Baghdad.<sup>11</sup> However, being uncertain about the character of the Kurdish movement and the identity of its leader Mustafa Barzani, the U.S. was willing to engage with Iraqi Kurds but only to a limited extent. Therefore, the best that the U.S. could hope for at that time was to maintain a low profile in relation to the Kurds in Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

As Qasim's promises of Kurdish autonomy went unfulfilled, Iraqi Kurds sought support from the Western powers, especially the U.S., in their revolt against Qasim, which started in 1961. Kurdish hopes of gaining U.S. support were fading when the Baath party overthrew Qasim's government in a coup in 1963, allegedly with the aid of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Qasim's removal by the

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<sup>9</sup> Mohamoud A Shaikh, "How West Helped Saddam Gain Power and Decimate the Iraqi Elite", *Muslimedia*, 1997. Available at: <http://www.muslimedia.com/archives/features98/saddam.htm> [accessed 12 December 2010]

<sup>10</sup> Shafiq Qazzaz, interview with author, Erbil- Iraq, 10 August 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa Amin, *Le Kenari Danubewe bo Xri Nawzeng* (From the Danub Shore to the Nawzang Valley), (Sulaimani: Khak Press, 1997), p. 61. (In Kurdish)

<sup>12</sup> Shafiq Qazzaz, interview with author, Erbil- Iraq, 10 August 2008.

Baathists was cordially received by his enemies, including the U.S., which reportedly controlled the planning stages of the coup.<sup>13</sup>

The major reason behind U.S. support for the Baath Party's seizure of power in Iraq was to counter the communist threat.<sup>14</sup> However, other factors also made Qasim a growing threat to the U.S. and Western interests. Apart from resurrecting the historical Iraqi territorial claim to Kuwait, Qasim had set about nationalising parts of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), which was largely owned by Western companies.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the new Baath regime a "moderate regime",<sup>16</sup> the U.S. wanted the Baath Party to remain in power in Iraq. To achieve this, the U.S. policy objective in Iraq was to avoid any possible conflict between the Baath regime and the Kurds by forcing both the Baath government and the Kurds to resolve the Kurdish issue peacefully.<sup>17</sup> Declassified U.S. documents show that the U.S. expressed the belief that the Iraqi Baath regime "genuinely wanted to handle the Kurdish problem in a fashion which would reasonably satisfy the bulk of the

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<sup>13</sup> Said K. Aburish, *A Brutal Friendship: The West and the Arab Elite*, (New York: St. Martin's, 1998)

<sup>14</sup> Geoff Simons, *Future Iraq: U.S. Policy in Reshaping the Middle East*, (London: Saqi Books, 2003), p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See Robert C. Strong, "Airgram from the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State", U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, 1964. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v21/d162> [accessed 16 February 2011]

<sup>17</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa Amin, *Penjekan Yektiri Deşkênin* (The Fingers that Crush Each Other), (Sulaimani: Khak Press, 1998), p. 68. (In Kurdish)

Kurds and isolate the extremists”.<sup>18</sup> However, no peace agreements between the Kurds and the new Baath government ever materialised and the Kurdish issue remained unresolved.

Through the course of the Iraqi Kurds’ conflict with the successive Iraqi governments during the 1960s, the Kurdish leadership had enlisted active support for the two primary American allies in the region – Israel and Iran.<sup>19</sup> By doing so, the Kurds aimed to attract U.S. attention and secure U.S. support.<sup>20</sup> Trying in vain to establish ties with the U.S., the Kurdish leadership explicitly expressed their call for U.S. support via reporters travelling in the region. In an interview conducted with Dana Adams Schmidt in 1962, Mustafa Barzani, then Kurdish leader, stated: “let the Americans give us military help, openly or secretly, so that we can become truly autonomous, and we will become your [U.S.] loyal partners in the Middle East.”<sup>21</sup>

However, the U.S. did not pay any attention to the Kurds for many years. Realising that external support was the key to success, the Kurds kept seeking U.S. support for their struggle against the Iraqi governments via Israel, Iran and Jordan. In 1965, the Kurds were close to establishing a permanent relationship with Israel after Israel agreed

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<sup>18</sup> Strong (1964), *loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Peter Lambert, *The US and the Kurds: Case Studies in US Engagement*, (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 1997), p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Amin (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, “The Kurdish Insurgency”, *Strategic Review*, vol. 2, 1974, p. 56.



to send representatives to Kurdistan to meet with Kurdish leaders. Such a relationship with Israel was of great significance for the Kurds, as they believed that the Jewish people, who have worldwide support, especially in the U.S., could open a “gate of friendship” between the Kurds and the U.S.<sup>22</sup> In addition to this, the Kurds also attempted to lobby the U.S. government to support the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq by establishing Kurdish representation in Washington. Initial attempts can be dated back to the early 1960s, when there were limited Kurdish contacts with US administrations.

The first Kurdish representative in the U.S. was Ismet Cheriff Vanly, who was not recognised as such by either the U.S. or other governments. Working as Vanly’s assistant, Shafiq Qazzaz, who was the president of the Kurdish Students’ Organization in the U.S. at that time, also played a role in those early endeavours.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Dr Mahmoud Othman, then a KDP politburo member, used to visit the U.S. and, together with Vanly and Qazzaz, he sought U.S. support for the Kurdish struggle in Iraq. During the same period, Dr Kamaran Badirkhan, an eminent Kurdish personality, paid visits to the U.S. to publicise the Kurdish question.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Amin (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Shafiq Qazzaz, interview with author, Erbil- Iraq, 10 August 2008.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

This paved the way for the establishment of an official relationship with the U.S. government. Initially, Kurdish representatives in the U.S. had limited responsibilities, mainly consisting of meeting with journalists, members of U.S. Congress, humanitarian organisations and church groups. According to a memo of the U.S. State Department from June, 1962, the aim of the Kurdish representation offices in the U.S. was to “arouse general international interest in their claims for local autonomy and hope for UN hearing”. Moreover, they wanted to obtain the U.S.’s “moral support” on humanitarian grounds for the Kurdish peoples’ suffering caused by Iraqi attacks. Also, the Kurdish representatives requested that the U.S. refrained from being “hostile” if the Kurdish case was broached in a UN debate.<sup>25</sup>

Despite continuous Kurdish attempts to develop contacts with the U.S. in this period, the American view was that the Kurds of Iraq must, through their own endeavours, “reach agreement with the Iraqi government and that for the U.S. to indicate sympathy or interest, let alone support, would merely accentuate their problems with the Iraqi government”.<sup>26</sup> Such an approach was, indeed, rooted in the U.S. belief that “a high degree of autonomy or independence for the Iraqi Kurds

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<sup>25</sup> Robert C. Strong, “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Iraq”, U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, 22 June 1962. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v17/d305> [accessed 16 February 2011]

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

would be disruptive of regional stability and inimical to U.S. interests in the long run". However, the central conclusion from the U.S. standpoint then was that "Kurdish ability to establish an autonomous or separatist regime seems unlikely".<sup>27</sup>

These early attempts by the Kurds of Iraq were thus unsuccessful in finding any tangible support for their cause. Even with America's disinterest in the Iraqi Kurdish case, as an air gram from the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, to the U.S. Secretary of State dated 16 July 1971 reveals, Kurdish leaders never stopped trying to "establish secret relations with the U.S., from which they wanted to obtain advice about how to proceed in their revolutionary action against the Iraqi regime". However, like their previous attempts, their request was rejected as the U.S. made it clear that "the U.S. is following a policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of foreign countries".<sup>28</sup>

No official documentation of U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds was noted until 1972.<sup>29</sup> However, some events provide clues to the shift in U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds during this period onwards. Jonathan C. Randal argues that the core factor was the March

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<sup>27</sup> "Airgram from the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State: Analysis of the Kurdish Problem", 30 October 1965. U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, 16 July 1971. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v21/d177> [accessed 16 February 2011]

<sup>28</sup> "Airgram from the Embassy in Lebanon to the Department of State", U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, 16 July 1971. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve04/d292#fn1> [accessed 17 February 2011]

<sup>29</sup> Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 138.

Agreement of 1970 between the Iraqi central government and the Kurds, which for the first time granted the Kurds an autonomous zone and ended the sporadic fighting between the Kurds and the Iraqi central governments.<sup>30</sup> In fact, any improvements in the Kurdish-Iraqi Baath regime relationship would harm U.S. interests and those of its allies, especially Iran, which had long armed and financed the Iraqi Kurdish rebels to weaken Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

Under the Baath regime, Iraq signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1972, in which both countries vowed to help each other counter mutual threats.<sup>32</sup> In addition to that, the Iraqi Petroleum Company, in which American companies had a significant interest, was nationalised in that same year. As noted by Edmund Ghareeb, the increased oil revenue allowed the Baath regime to develop advanced weapons and enlarge its army, to the dismay of the U.S. and its regional allies.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, and as an attempt to counter the Soviet influence in the region, the U.S., with great uncertainty, engaged the Kurds, mainly via proxies, with Israel and Iran as the primary conduits for support.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Randal argues, the nationalisation of Iraqi oil was the main reason for Iran, the U.S.

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan C. Randal, *Kurdistan: After such Knowledge what Forgiveness*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), p. 157.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Oles Smolansky and Bettie Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq: The Soviet Quest for Influence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Ghareeb (1981), *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>34</sup> Lambert (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 1.

and Iraqi Kurds justifying their deal, as each had reason to fear the repercussions of the growing Soviet penetration of major oil-producing nations in the Middle East.<sup>35</sup>

#### **4.3. Iraqi Kurds as a Card to Play: 1972–1975**

The period between 1972 and 1975 marks a significant turning point in U.S. policy towards the Kurds of Iraq. Utilising the Kurds to advance its interests, the U.S. noticeably supported Kurdish nationalism during this period. It did this by maintaining Iran's leading role in the Middle East by containing the Soviet influence in the region and weakening the Iraqi Baath regime. The Kurdish issue in this period was thus intertwined with global issues relating to the wider Cold War.<sup>36</sup> As a response to the increasing Soviet influence in the region and to avoid Soviet intervention in Iran, a key regional ally, the U.S., became involved in the Shah–Iraq conflict and, as a consequence, its policy towards the Iraqi Kurds shifted.

Serious conflict between Iran and Iraq can be dated back to the early 1960s, when the Baath regime took power in Iraq in 1963. As Peter Lambert notes, the conflict between the two countries was not only rooted in the monarchical Iran's enmity towards the Baathist

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<sup>35</sup> Randal (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Rear, *Intervention, Ethnic Conflict and State-building in Iraq: A Paradigm for the Post-colonial State*, (London: Routledge, 2008), p.169.

regime and its Arab nationalist government, but could also be found in territorial disputes dating back to World War I.<sup>37</sup>

Seeking to destabilise Iraq, the Shah of Iran requested that the United States support the Kurds against the Iraqi Baath regime. This played into the hands of both Iran and the U.S. The U.S. needed a proxy regime to represent and serve U.S. interests in the Middle East, and with U.S. support the Shah sought to increase his power within the region even further.<sup>38</sup> Within this context, and also seeking to promote Iranian interests, the Shah wanted to revise the border between Iraq and Iran. To achieve this goal, the Iraqi Kurds were used by the Shah and the U.S., who provided assistance to them in their struggle against the Iraqi regime in order to gain leverage over the Iraqi regime.<sup>39</sup>

Subsequently, as revealed in the Pike Report,<sup>40</sup> the U.S. channelled secret aid to the Iraqi Kurds in their rebellion against the government of Iraq during the 1970s. Evidence collected by the Pike Committee suggests that the project was initiated primarily as a favour

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<sup>37</sup> Lambert (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>38</sup> A March 1972 Memo shows that the Shah's initial request to support "the Kurdish Rebellion" in Iraq came from SAVAK (Iranian National Intelligence and Security Organisation). See Harold Saunders, "Memorandum from Harold H. Saunders from National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (General Haig), Washington, March 27, 1972., U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, declassified on 21 June 2006. Available at: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve04/media/pdf/d301.pdf> [accessed 20 January 2011]

<sup>39</sup> Rear (2008), *op. cit.*, p.169.

<sup>40</sup> The Pike Report was a document leaked from the House Select Committee for Intelligence; whose chairman was Representative Otis Pike. The report which was completed on 19 January 1976, investigated a number of covert actions, including U.S. aid to the Iraqi Kurds

to the Shah of Iran, who had cooperated with U.S. intelligence agencies.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the U.S. pursued its supportive policy towards the Kurds of Iraq through the Shah, maintaining an indirect engagement with Iraqi Kurds. In a secret meeting with U.S. officials in Washington, which was mediated by the Shah, the Iraqi Kurdish representatives were told that “the U.S. offered support to Iraqi Kurds at the request of the Shah of Iran, and that they received the support through the Shah.”<sup>42</sup>

The use of this strategy by the Shah, i.e. supporting the Kurdish rebels against Iraq, was successful in achieving the desired goals. Confronted with the prospect of total economic and military collapse, Iraq was compelled to accept the revisions to the border demanded by the Shah in return for an Iranian pledge to terminate aid (both from Iran and the U.S.) to the Kurds in Iraq.<sup>43</sup> Despite direct pleas from the Kurds and the CIA station chief in the area to the U.S. President and Henry Kissinger, the U.S. refused to extend humanitarian assistance to the thousands of Kurdish refugees created by the abrupt termination of

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<sup>41</sup> Otis Pike, *CIA: The Pike Report*, (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> Mahmoud Othman; interview with author, Baghdad, 16 July 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division*, (New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 56.

military aid.<sup>44</sup> This, however, produced a lot of support for the Kurds in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

The increasing deterioration of the Iraqi Kurds' position reflected the fact that none of the nations that were aiding them seriously desired to see a Kurdish independent state. A CIA memo dated 22 March 1974 clearly states the positions of the U.S. and the Shah:

We [the U.S.] would think that the [Shah of Iran] would not look with favour on the establishment of a formalised autonomous government. The [Shah of Iran], like ourselves, has seen benefit in a stalemate situation ... in which [Iraq] is intrinsically weakened by the [Kurds'] refusal to relinquish its semi-autonomy. Neither the [Shah of Iran] nor ourselves wish to see the matter resolved one way or the other.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, CIA memos and cables characterise the Shah's views of the Kurds as "a card to play" in the disputes with his neighbour. For example, a CIA memo, also dated 22 March 1974 characterises the Kurds as "a uniquely useful tool for weakening Iraq's potential for international adventurism".<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, keeping Iran as a regional power was the key factor behind the U.S. changing its policies towards Iraqi Kurds. The growing significance of Iran was primarily centred on controlling Iranian oil and

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<sup>44</sup> Pike (1977), *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Perle, interview with author, Maryland, USA, 11 June 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Pike (1977), *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*



maintaining a strategic alliance with Iran against the Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> After the elected government of Mohammed Mossadeq nationalised the oil industry in Iran, the U.S. – with British help – overthrew Mossadeq and reinstated Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in power. From then until 1979, Iran under the Shah was an important U.S. ally in the Middle East and indeed its “policeman” in the region,<sup>49</sup> and had a great impact on shaping U.S. policy towards the Kurds of Iraq. In addition to the politico-economic interests, other factors made the U.S. view the Shah of Iran as a loyal ally. In particular, it was important for the U.S. that the Shah had similar views on major issues, such as opposition to the radical Arab regimes, support for Israel, opposition to the Soviet Union and alliances with conservative Gulf monarchies because this gave the U.S. a foothold in the region.<sup>50</sup>

Because of the strategically close relationship between the U.S. and the Shah, who no longer needed the Kurds to advance his interests, the consequence of the U.S. ceasing aid to Iraqi Kurds in this period was the collapse of the Kurdish revolt in Iraq and a humanitarian crisis in the Kurdish region of Iraq. This was followed by the Algiers meeting on 6 March 1975. Due to the termination of the Shah’s aid and assistance to Iraqi Kurds, which their other allies did

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>49</sup> Parama Sinha Palit, “US-Iran: The Changing Dynamics and the Likelihood of a Conflict”, *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 28, no.1, Jan-Mar 2004, p. 103.

<sup>50</sup> Kostiner (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 144.

not object to, the Kurdish movement was suddenly deprived of its only major source of help.

As Shafiq Qazzaz, then Barzani's aide, explained to me, the movement collapsed mainly because the Kurds were double-crossed by their outside supporters. According to Qazzaz, "the Kurds, Barzani in particular, hoped that the Americans would object to this arbitrary decision by the Shah of Iran. However, in spite of continued correspondence with the Americans at that time, it never materialised. So, in some ways, the Kurds were faced with a *fait accompli* and the Kurdish leadership had to make a fateful decision knowing that the movement had been abandoned by its major outside supporters."<sup>51</sup>

Given the dire impact of these events on the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq, one can question how the Kurdish leadership should or could have reacted to those developments in 1975. Barzani, having seen this negative stand from the Americans and realising that he could not effectively (due to both age and personal health reasons) lead a renewed resistance, decided to end the call for any further resistance. As Qazzaz reveals, there does not seem to have been a consensus of opinion on this issue. Thus, the question arises whether Barzani alone had effectively ended the resistance or whether the outcome would have been different if others within the leadership (both military and political) had argued effectively and challenged Barzani's decision, even

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<sup>51</sup> Shafiq Qazzaz, interview with author, Erbil- Iraq, 10 August 2008.

if that meant they had to carry on without him. Believing that there was room for pursuing and investigating such developments and arguments in Iraqi Kurdistan during the last two weeks following the Algiers Agreement on 6 March 1975, Qazzaz contends that there were shortcomings within the Kurdish movement, which to some degree contributed to the collapse. However, as he argues, a drastic change in policy and consequently a “betrayal” by both the Iranians and the Americans were paramount factors.<sup>52</sup>

Apart from the cynical policies of the U.S. that paid no attention to moral considerations in dealing with the Kurds, other factors also led to the U.S. abandonment of the Kurds. Although the Kurdish leadership did not have the potential to change or influence U.S. policy towards the Kurds during the 1970s, Mahmoud Othman, a prominent Kurdish politician and a key player in the political events of that time, argues that “the Kurdish leadership was not sophisticated enough then to understand the complexity of international politics.”<sup>53</sup> Barzani was asked by Muhammed Hassanein Heikal, a leading Egyptian journalist, “why he did not do anything to avoid the defeat of the Kurdish rebellion in 1975”. His reply was: “It was God’s will.”<sup>54</sup> One can argue that such an answer may prove the validity of Othman’s argument about the

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Mahmoud Othman, interview with author, Baghdad, 16 July 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Amin (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 40.

immaturity of the Kurdish leadership as a factor in the collapse of the Kurdish revolt in Iraq in 1975.

There are also other scholars who argue that the political immaturity of the Kurdish leadership has played a role in the Kurdish failure in their revolts and in their efforts to gain independence. Omar Sheikmous explains that “the Kurdish leaderships have been weak, inexperienced and lacked sufficient knowledge in the intricacies of international diplomacy and politics”.<sup>55</sup> Aiming to assess the role and performance of the Kurdish leaders during the events of the 1970s, Mehrdad R. Izady argues that neither wisdom nor diplomacy were fundamental requirements to be a leader in Kurdistan at that time. Instead, as asserted by Izady, the Kurdish leaders secured the loyalty of their people because they “maintained the fundamental virtues associated with such leaders: courage, loyalty, dignity, and magnanimity”.<sup>56</sup> It is within this context that, Izady contends, Kurdish leaders, despite making serious political “mistakes”, continued to be followed and were still revered by most Kurds. For Izady, the Kurdish leaders’ call that Kurdistan should be the 51<sup>st</sup> state of the U.S., followed by their acceptance of financial help from the CIA in an era

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<sup>55</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1992), p. 206.

when the U.S. had a bad image in the region were the main mistakes that would have cast doubt on their political competence.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, and as indicated above, the U.S. interest-orientated policies, which were mainly driven by the desire for the maintenance of a regional balance of power and the containment of the Soviet influence, continued to be implemented throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

#### **4.4. U.S. Realpolitik and Kurdish Genocide in Iraq: 1975–1990**

The American–Iraqi Baath relationship improved rapidly in the 1980s, despite having been severed since 1967 when Iraq accused the U.S. of supporting Israel in the Six Day War.<sup>58</sup> The revival of U.S. relations with Iraq was largely due to the Iranian Revolution of 1979,<sup>59</sup> which had the potential to endanger U.S. interests in the Middle East,<sup>60</sup> and “make the U.S. vulnerable in the entire region”.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Six Days War was fought between Israel and the nearby Arab states of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria in June 1967.

<sup>59</sup> “The Iranian Revolution” refers to the events took place in 1979, wherein Iran’s monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was eliminated.

<sup>60</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 5.

The revolution, which subsequently became an Islamic one,<sup>62</sup> required the U.S. to reluctantly seek friendship with Saddam Hussein and consider Iraq a new ally that could replace the Shah of Iran, on whom the U.S. had relied heavily to sustain American influence in the region. To achieve this objective, the U.S. had to sell more arms to Saudi Arabia and reduce the Soviet influence in Iraq, aiming to change it from a leftist state to a pro-American moderate state.<sup>63</sup>

As the U.S. had relations with a number of undemocratic regimes and “tyrants” during the 1980s, such a partnership with Saddam Hussein would also be possible, but it was a problematic issue given that Hussein was close to the Soviets. Nevertheless, given that the Islamic revolution in Iran was perceived as a threat to the entire Middle East and a multitude of U.S. interests, the Reagan administration chose to pursue a policy of strategic engagement with Saddam Hussein. The revolution in Iran was a serious concern for the U.S. because the Middle East not only has vast energy interests but strategic and political significance as well. Richard Burt, then head of the State Department’s Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, stated in 1981 that the Reagan administration viewed the Middle East, including

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<sup>62</sup> It should be noted here that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 started as an anti-Shah revolution, spearheaded by the Shah's secular and semi-secular political opponents. In fact, it was Ayatollah Khomeini who turned it into an Islamic revolution after the Shah had gone. This was an unexpected outcome for the U.S. For a detailed account of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, see Amin Saikal, *The Rise and Fall of the Shah: Iran from Autocracy to Religious Rule*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009).

<sup>63</sup> Lester Brune, *America and the Iraqi Crisis, 1990-1992: Origins and Aftermath*, (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1993), p. 45.

the Persian Gulf, as part of a larger politico-strategic theatre: the region bounded by Turkey, Pakistan and the Horn of Africa.<sup>64</sup>

As a consequence, the policy adopted by the Reagan administration and the first Bush administration consisted of direct and indirect U.S. support for the Iraqi Baath regime which included, apart from removing Iraq from the U.S. list of terrorist-sponsored nations, backing Saddam Hussein in the Iran–Iraq War both economically and militarily.<sup>65</sup> A National Security Directive (NSD) issued in November 1983 stated that the U.S. would do “whatever was necessary and legal” to prevent Iraq from losing its war with Iran.<sup>66</sup> Reagan made a serious effort to avoid the Iranian triumph in the war as Iran’s control of Iraq could have endangered the supply of oil, may well have threatened the pro-American regimes in the Middle East, and would also have upset the Arab–Israeli balance.<sup>67</sup>

Throughout most of the period of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency helped Iraq by providing detailed information on Iranian deployments, tactical planning for battles, plans for air strikes and bomb damage assessments.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, trade between the U.S. and Iraq improved considerably. Starting in 1983, the

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<sup>64</sup> John Dumbrell, *American Foreign Policy: Carter to Clinton*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 81.

<sup>65</sup> Freedman and Karsh (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Dumbrell (1997), *loc. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Brune (1993), *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>68</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, “Officers Say U.S. Aided Iraq in War Despite Use of Gas,” *New York Times*, 29 August 2002. Available at: <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines02/0818-02.htm> [accessed 13 August 2010]

U.S. began to provide economic help to Iraq: \$400 million in 1983 and \$513 million in 1984; this climbed to \$652 million in 1987.<sup>69</sup> This cooperation continued to grow to the point that U.S. trade with Iraq, including high technology transfers, rose to a value of over \$3.5 billion by 1989.<sup>70</sup>

U.S. politico-economic interests were far more important for Reagan than idealist concepts such as moral values and human rights. The Reagan administration did not have the same desire for human rights as the Carter administration had had.<sup>71</sup> During his presidency, Carter proclaimed human rights to be “the soul of the U.S. foreign policy”.<sup>72</sup> In contrast, Reagan’s policies were dictated by “realpolitik” concerns, not by humanitarianism in the face of genocide and violations of human rights. According to a memorandum issued in November 1983 from the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs to the then Secretary of State George Shultz, the U.S. knew that Saddam was using chemical weapons on an “almost daily basis”.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, well

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<sup>69</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: the Conflict Between Iran and America*, (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 207.

<sup>70</sup> Dumbrell (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>71</sup> Pollack (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 208.

<sup>72</sup> Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon, “Jimmy Carter and Human Rights”, *FAIR*, 1994. Available at: <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=2263> [accessed 25 August 2010]

<sup>73</sup> “Ronnie & Saddam”, *Sunday Herald*, 2004. Available at: <http://www.sundayherald.com/42648> [accessed 25 August 2010]



aware of Saddam Hussein's genocidal campaign (known as *Anfal*)<sup>74</sup> against the Kurds in Iraq, Reagan chose not to act for fear of alienating Saddam Hussein and placing the continued supply of Middle East oil in jeopardy.<sup>75</sup>

Suffering from internal oppression caused by the Anfal Campaigns and Halabja attacks and given the gravity of these attacks and the type of weapons used, the Kurdish leadership endeavoured to strengthen ties with the U.S., seeking American help and protection. Mahmoud Othman was appointed the Kurdish representative and visited the U.S. in December 1988 to inform U.S. officials about the oppression facing Iraqi Kurds. As Othman explains, the U.S. government refused to receive any Kurdish delegation at that time and turned a blind eye to the Kurdish tragedy in Iraq. Moreover, to avoid jeopardising its good relations with Baghdad, the U.S. government claimed that "the Halabja chemical attacks were perpetrated by Iran not Iraq".<sup>76</sup>

Although fears of the Islamic wave at this time were not as threatening as when it began, President George H. W. Bush made

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<sup>74</sup> The "Anfal Campaign", which takes its name from "Surat al-Anfal in the Qur'an", refers to a series of military operations by the Iraqi Baath regime against the mainly Kurdish population of northern Iraq. Waged from 29 March 1987 to 23 April 1989, the campaign resulted in the death of more than 180,000 people and destruction of 2,000 Kurdish villages. For a detailed account of the Anfal Campaign, see Kanan Makiya, *The Anfal: Uncovering an Iraqi Campaign to Exterminate the Kurds*, Harper's Magazine (May 1992), pp. 53-61; *The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993).

<sup>75</sup> Samuel Totten and Paul R. Bartrop, *Dictionary of Genocide: Volume 1: A-L*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), p. 252.

<sup>76</sup> Mahmoud Othman, interview with author, Baghdad-Iraq, 16 July 2008.

serious efforts to maintain a close relationship with Saddam Hussein's Baathist Iraq. Under Bush, the U.S. would have been prepared to continue to turn a blind eye to the internal repression of the Kurds if Saddam chose to play a more responsible role in regional affairs.<sup>77</sup> With the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1990, however, the Bush administration felt compelled to change its policy of engagement with Iraq. As noted by John Dumbrell (1997), the U.S. feared losing its energy resources in the Middle East if the region fell under the control of an Islamic Iran. Furthermore, considerations relating to Cold War politics shaped U.S. policy towards Iraq and the Kurds during this period.<sup>78</sup>

#### **4.5. From Abandonment to Supporting Autonomy: 1990–2003**

The increasing importance of the Kurdish issue began with Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, which had the potential to revive Kurdish demands for self-rule. After a U.S.-led coalition expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the U.S. consequently called on the Iraqi people – including the Kurds – to rise up against Saddam Hussein. When the call for uprisings materialised in the Shiite south and Kurdish north, however, the spectre of a popular revolution in Iraq caused grave worry in the U.S. State Department. Allowing Iraqi army units and helicopter gunships to crush the uprisings unhindered, the White House

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<sup>77</sup> Freedman and Karsh (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>78</sup> Dumbrell (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 81.

subsequently issued a paper and stated that “in no way should we associate ourselves with the 60-year-old rebellion in Iraq or oppose Iraq’s legitimate attempts to suppress them.”<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, for a number of reasons, the U.S. chose not to extend its war against Saddam Hussein or intervene in internal Iraqi strife. Above all, the sole objective of the U.S. was the liberation of Kuwait, and therefore domestic or international support for continuing the war was believed to be eroding. Moreover, as Henry Kissinger (2001) contends, fear of the disintegration of Iraq was another justification for ending the war quickly. In particular, it was feared that supporting the Kurds against Saddam’s regime might have led to an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq. This would disturb Turkey and undermine its commitment to supporting U.S. policy in the region.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, it was an outcome that would require an unwanted, perpetual U.S. commitment.<sup>81</sup> In this respect, Dick Cheney, then U.S. Secretary of Defense explains:

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<sup>79</sup> Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission*, (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), p. 41.

<sup>80</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 190.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Gunter, “After the War: President Bush and the Kurdish Uprising”, In Meena Bose and Rosanna Perotti (Eds.), *From Cold War to New World Order: The Foreign Policy of George Bush*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), p. 513.

... if we [the U.S.] had gone to Baghdad we would have been all alone. There wouldn't have been anybody else with us. There would have been a [U.S.] occupation of Iraq. None of the Arab forces that were willing to fight with us in Kuwait were willing to invade Iraq. Once you got to Iraq and took it over ... you could very easily end up seeing pieces of Iraq fly off: part of it, the Syrians would like to have to the west, part of eastern Iraq - the Iranians would like to claim, they fought over it for eight years. In the north you've got the Kurds, and if the Kurds spin loose and join with the Kurds in Turkey, then you threaten the territorial integrity of Turkey .... It's a quagmire if you go that far and try to take over Iraq.<sup>82</sup>

Given these factors, there was no attempt by the Bush administration to work for regime change in Iraq or show support for Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for an independent state.<sup>83</sup> Michael Gunter argues that the U.S., by opposing Kurdish statehood in Iraq, implicitly returned to its pre-Gulf War policy of viewing Saddam as a source of stability in the Middle East that “would serve U.S. long-term interests and promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East”.<sup>84</sup>

However, U.S. policy towards the Kurds changed dramatically when a refugee crisis ensued. The Kurds were fleeing to areas bordering both Turkey and Iran, and the U.S. only responded to the humanitarian crisis on Turkey's request. Turkey, however, had its own

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<sup>82</sup> Dick Cheney, “Interview with the American Enterprise Institute”, 15 April. 1994. [Online Video]. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BEsZMvrq-I> [accessed 14 September 2009]

<sup>83</sup> Freedman and Karsh (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>84</sup> Gunter (2002), *loc. cit.*

agenda and sought to create a safe haven in order to prevent an influx of refugees into Turkey.<sup>85</sup> These incidents would later result in both “Operation Provide Comfort”, an emergency relief effort, and the implementation of no-fly zones to help and protect the Iraqi Kurds. Gunter argues that pressure from Turkey was the major reason behind initiating Operation Provide Comfort and U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds during this period. As Gunter notes, Turkey was concerned that the Kurdish crisis in Iraq would negatively affect its own Kurdish issue because of the increasing influence and insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey at that time. Given these factors, Turkey called for an urgent solution to the Kurdish refugee crisis on the Turkish borders and threatened to forcibly intervene in Iraq.<sup>86</sup>

It is apparent that the U.S. initially had no plans to intervene in the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. However, in addition to Turkey's fear of the refugee crisis in the form of a mass exodus into their jurisdiction, the pressure from American public opinion and the mass media also contributed to the U.S. decision to protect Iraqi Kurds. The facts on the ground and the policy objectives of the U.S. in Iraq support this argument. As put by one of George H. W. Bush's aides, “the only

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<sup>85</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Gunter, *The Kurds and the Future of Turkey*, (London: Palgrave, 1997), p. 117.

pressure on the Bush administration to intervene in the Kurdish crisis is coming from columnists.”<sup>87</sup>

The Clinton administration introduced “dual containment” as the U.S. policy towards both Iraq and Iran.<sup>88</sup> By pursuing a “dual containment” policy, the U.S. would apply its superior military position, plus the political force of the coalition of allies, to restrain both Iraq and Iran economically, politically and militarily.<sup>89</sup> The Clinton administration vowed to undertake this policy through the enforcement of UN sanctions as well as by aiding the Iraqi opposition forces, including the Kurds, to take action on their own, given that a direct U.S. attempt to change the regime would have involved the U.S. in a major confrontation with not only Iraq but also public sentiment in much of the Arab world.<sup>90</sup> Clinton's “containment” policy had five essential elements: sanctions to keep Saddam Hussein's regime weak, intrusive inspections of Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programmes, diplomatic isolation, limits to Iraq's deployment of forces, and a large Western military presence in the Gulf. These elements

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<sup>87</sup> William Safire, “Bush's Bay of Pigs”, *New York Times*, 04 April 1991.

<sup>88</sup> Dumbrell (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>89</sup> Harvey Sicherman, “What Saddam Hussein Learned from Bill Clinton?”, *Commentary*, vol. 102, no. 6, 1996, p. 51.

<sup>90</sup> Kaplan and Kristol (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 50.

worked together to reassure Western allies and to prevent Hussein's regime from threatening its neighbours.<sup>91</sup>

What Clinton was proposing for Iraq was directed by a brand of wishful liberalism. This approach claimed that the world community and its institutions would be the ultimate sources to realise international legitimacy and to rid the world of a rogue state. Moreover, the Clinton approach was profoundly uncomfortable with the unilateral assertion of American power, and tended to favour policies that relied far more heavily on "the carrot" than on "the stick".<sup>92</sup> Clinton's wishful liberalism was a tradition that called for negotiations and the avoidance of war at all costs, regardless of the trustworthiness or willingness to negotiate of the enemies of the U.S. As Kaplan and Kristol assert, the Clinton administration "avoided confronting the moral and strategic challenge presented by Saddam Hussein, hoping instead that an increasingly weak policy of containment, punctuated by the occasional fusillade of cruise missiles, would suffice to keep Saddam in his box."<sup>93</sup>

Although Saddam Hussein was seen as a major threat to U.S. interests in the region, U.S. policy under Clinton was aimed at weakening Saddam Hussein but not necessarily removing him from power because that, in the opinion of the U.S., entailed risks which it

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<sup>91</sup> Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *Confronting Iraq: U.S. Policy and the Use of Force since the Gulf War*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), p. 26.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>93</sup> Kaplan and Kristol (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 62.

was not prepared to take.<sup>94</sup> However, the containment policy failed to “keep Saddam Hussein in his box”, that is, to make him comply with the UN resolutions concerning disarming Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction. Following continued failure to comply with UN Security Council resolutions, the major Iraqi challenges were to come in 1998 when Hussein ended Iraqi cooperation with the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), which required the UN inspection teams to leave the country. This finally marked the failure of Clinton’s containment effort.<sup>95</sup>

Regime change in Iraq thus became a stated goal of U.S. foreign policy. In addition to the ineffectiveness of the containment policy, there were other factors influencing U.S. policy towards Iraq under Clinton. Among them was a policy paper entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm”, which was written by Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and four other Jewish Americans in 1996. The most ambitious proposal of the paper was to compel the U.S. government to force a confrontation with Iraq that would end with an invasion and the removal of Saddam Hussein.<sup>96</sup> This proposal was taken further when the Project for the New American Century, an

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<sup>94</sup> Daniel Papp *et al.*, *American Foreign Policy*, (New York: Pearson Education, 2005), p. 204.

<sup>95</sup> Robert O. Freedman, “U.S. Policy toward the Middle East in Clinton’s Second Term”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, volume, 3. no. 1, 1999. Available at: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1999/issue1/jv3n1a5.html> [accessed 12 February 2010]

<sup>96</sup> “The Origins of the Iraq War: The “Neoconservative” Agenda for Middle East Conflict”, *Goals for Americans*, 2004. Available at: <http://www.goalsforamericans.org/2004/07/07/the-origins-of-the-iraq-war-the-neoconservative-agenda-for-middle-east-conflict/> [accessed 20 February 2010]



American neoconservative think tank founded in 1997, supported “a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity”,<sup>97</sup> an objective which strongly influenced the Clinton administration to go beyond containment and promote a change of regime.

Endorsing a regime-change policy, the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 allowed the Clinton administration to provide financial and training support for the Kurdish political parties as part of the Iraqi opposition groups.<sup>98</sup> As Clinton himself remarked, the U.S. objective of regime change in Iraq was to “make Iraq rejoin the family of nations as a freedom-loving and law-abiding member. This is in the U.S. interest and that of our allies within the region.”<sup>99</sup>

Although the Clinton administration believed that regime change in Iraq through “coup strategy” could produce a more favourable regime without risking the fragmentation of Iraq, the U.S. almost lost hope in Iraqi opposition groups. Since 1994, the two major Kurdish political parties (PUK and KDP) had been engaged in a bitter civil war over territories, revenues and control of the Kurdish regional government. Intra-Kurdish fighting reached its peak in 1996 when Masoud Barzani, KDP leader, invited Iraqi government troops to help

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<sup>97</sup> “Statement of Principles”, *The Project for the New American Century*, 1997. Available at: <http://www.newamericancentury.org/> [accessed 23 February 2010]

<sup>98</sup> Kenneth Katzman, “Iraq: US Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance”, *CRS Reports for Congress*, 2004. Available at: <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/28648.pdf> [accessed 25 February 2010]

<sup>99</sup> “Statement by the President”, *The Iraq Liberation Act*, October 31, 1998. Available at: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/libera.htm> [accessed 26 February 2010]

him capture KDP-controlled territories from the PUK, while Jalal Talabani, the PUK leader, sought logistical help from Iran.<sup>100</sup> Given that Iraqi Kurdistan was under U.S. protection at that time, one could ask about the U.S. role in this.

David Pollock, former U.S. State Department official, explained to me that despite the fact that there were concerns in the U.S. government about PUK–Iranian connections over the years, this did not mean that the U.S. favoured the KDP and gave Iraqi troops a “green light” to enter the Kurdish region. On the contrary, Pollock recalls, “what happened in 1996 was a surprise to the U.S.”<sup>101</sup> Having concerns about the Kurds and their reliability, Pollock also reveals:

... the event made us [the U.S.] think whether we should maintain the project of supporting Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq given the existence of this internal division among the Kurds themselves. However, the only trump card the Kurds had was the overriding American priority of keeping Saddam Hussein at bay. This, despite everything, was something that clearly overrode the difficulties we had in continuing our support for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq.<sup>102</sup>

Fearing it to be an Iraqi invasion of Kurdistan, Saddam’s engagement in the crisis prompted a major American reaction – warnings to withdraw his forces in Kurdistan were quickly followed by

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<sup>100</sup> “Profile of Massoud Barzani”, *BBC World*, 26 November, 2002. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/2480149.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/2480149.stm) [accessed 21 February 2010]

<sup>101</sup> David Pollock, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 11 June 2009.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

two cruise missile strikes against Baghdad.<sup>103</sup> As fighting between the Kurdish factions continued after 1996, the Clinton administration became involved in the PUK-KDP dispute and brokered a peace agreement between them in September 1998. The agreement, known as the Washington Accord, provided an end to hostilities and inter-factional fighting, new elections, a unified regional administration and the sharing of local revenues.<sup>104</sup>

Indeed, there were concerns among observers and within elements of the U.S. government that the Kurds would seek independence or full autonomy from Iraq once Saddam Hussein was removed.<sup>105</sup> However, as explained by David Mack, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, the purpose behind brokering a peace agreement between the Kurdish leaders was linked to U.S. support for all Iraqi opposition groups, based on the fundamental desire to isolate and weaken the government of Saddam Hussein and prevent him from being a threat to regional security and stability. As Mack stresses, the

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<sup>103</sup> William Hyland, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), p. 173.

<sup>104</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq-History: The Middle East and North Africa, Volume 50*, (London: Europa Publications, 2004), p. 461.

<sup>105</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq's Opposition Movements", In Leon M. Jeffries (Ed.), *Iraq: Issues, Historical Background, Bibliography*, (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), p. 5.

agreement was not brokered by the U.S. because it favoured Kurdish independence.<sup>106</sup>

The increasing influence of the regional powers in Iraq due to the intra-Kurdish conflict in the north was another contributing factor in U.S. engagement with Iraqi Kurds at that time. In fact, apart from halting the regional powers' influence in Iraq, the U.S. also attempted to prevent Saddam Hussein from reaching a peace agreement with the Kurds. As David Pollock explained to me, "helping the Kurds to patch up their own differences internally made the U.S. policy much more workable. Also, it meant that Saddam's regime or neighbouring countries could not play off different Kurdish factions against each other, as they did before." Being involved in the events of that time, Pollock asserts that intra-Kurdish divisions greatly complicated U.S. policy and U.S. efforts to sustain Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq. Thus, in Pollock's words, "Kurdish unity was crucial for the success of U.S. policy in Iraq."<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> David Mack quoted in Mohammed J. M. Shareef, *President George W. Bush's Policy Towards Iraq: Change or Continuity?* Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, 2010.

<sup>107</sup> David Pollock, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 11 June 2009.

#### **4.6. A New Era in U.S.–Kurdish Relations: 2003 Onwards**

Prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraqi Kurds had become part of a neoconservative project to topple Saddam Hussein under George W. Bush's administration, and Kurdish interests had benefited accordingly. The reason behind neoconservative support for the Iraqi Kurds was not only to obtain Kurdish support to remove Saddam Hussein, but also to maintain stability in a post-Saddam Iraq.<sup>108</sup>

Since then, the U.S.–Iraqi Kurdish relationship has become stronger and more institutionalised, based on mutual interests. The principal U.S. policy objectives in Iraq since the 2003 Iraq War have been keeping the unity of Iraq and establishing the best possible relationship with the Iraqi central government. To meet these objectives, the U.S. has favoured seeing the Kurdish issue as being within its broad policy towards Iraq. Therefore, supporting the emergence of a Kurdish state out of Iraq has not been envisaged as an acceptable outcome in the minds of U.S. policymakers.<sup>109</sup> As Paul R. Pillar, former CIA National Intelligence Officer for the Near East explains, the U.S. believe that “a fracturing of Iraq that would be entailed with Kurdish independence, would be a major blow to what the U.S. supposedly has been trying to achieve for several years, which

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<sup>108</sup> Anthony Billingsley, “The U.S. and the Middle East: More Frustration Ahead”, *Kurdistani Nwe* , 23 September 2008, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> Anderson and Stansfield (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 178.

is a viable and stable Iraq.”<sup>110</sup> However, the U.S. has worked closely with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to operate as an officially recognised body on various political and military issues.

The Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), within the Department of Defense, was established by the U.S. in January 2003 in preparation for the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in April to run Iraq until the creation of a democratically elected government. However, as part of the internal bureaucratic battle for control over Iraq policy within the Bush administration, ORHA was soon replaced by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May 2003; this would ultimately assume responsibility for post-war planning.<sup>111</sup>

U.S. concerns about fragmentation and instability in Iraq that had existed in prior years were still present in post-war Iraq, so the Kurds have been important in order to maintain the unity of Iraq and assure stability within it. By the time of the invasion in 2003, the Kurds had already established a system of governance in territories protected by the northern no-fly zone. This enabled them to maintain stability and reduce violence in areas with Kurd majorities while the rest of Iraq descended into chaos. Thus far, as Brian Katulis notes, “the Iraqi Kurdish leadership has done well in securing its own interests in

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<sup>110</sup> Paul R. Pillar, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 February 2011.

<sup>111</sup> Farrah Hassen, *New State Department Releases on the “Future of Iraq” Project*, The National Security Archive: The George Washington University, 2006. Available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/index.htm> [accessed 17 February 2011]

an autonomous Kurdish region and refraining from precipitating a break-up of Iraq.”<sup>112</sup> However, how the status of disputed territories in Iraq is resolved will certainly have an effect on the U.S.–Kurdish relationship.

Indeed, the issue of Arab–Kurdish tensions, which are mainly over disputed territories and oil, is seen by the U.S. as the main risk to stability in Iraq.<sup>113</sup> In this context, the issue of the city and region of Kirkuk, with its immense oil reserves and a diverse population of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens, has been the scene of ongoing displacement and rising ethnic tensions in Iraq, which have both internal and regional implications.<sup>114</sup> Apart from being an Iraqi issue, what connects the U.S. to the Kirkuk issue is Turkey's worries about a future Kurdish drive for independence if the Kurds take control of Kirkuk and its oil resources.<sup>115</sup> Agreeing with this argument, Cengiz Candar adds that if Kirkuk is incorporated into Kurdistan, which is then recognised by the Iraqi constitution, then it would be a formidable source of support for an independent Kurdistan. This is mainly due to

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<sup>112</sup> Brian Katulis, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 February 2008.

<sup>113</sup> “Transcript of The Times interview with General Ray Odierno”, *Times Online*, April 9, 2009. Available at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article6068078.ece> [accessed 08 February 2011]

<sup>114</sup> Anderson and Stansfield (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>115</sup> Simon Tisdall, “Poll Success fuels Turkish Fears over Kurdish Independence”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2005. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/feb/15/iraq.turkey> [accessed at 12 February 2011]

the economic element of Kirkuk, which would provide the necessary economic infrastructure for Kurdistan to become sustainable.<sup>116</sup>

Following the Iraq War in 2003, the major Kurdish parties initially seized control of Kirkuk. Under pressure from the Turkish threat of invading northern Iraq, however, they were soon forced to hand over control of the region to the U.S. authorities. Despite that, the Kurdish forces remain in control of the city and have been supported by the Kurdish community in Kirkuk. Constitutional guarantees obtained by the Kurdish leadership – through Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) and the subsequent Article 140 of the permanent Iraqi constitution – have been derailed by the federal government’s delaying tactics at every stage, and have proved to be too bureaucratically complex to deliver Kurdish demands.

There are many obstacles to implementation of the Iraqi constitution, especially those articles related to the territorial disputes. A major part of the problem lies in the fact that many segments of Iraqi society have not bought into it as a national compact. Supporting this argument, Jason Gluck, Director of Constitution-Making, Peace-building and National Reconciliation Programme at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), contends that the fact that the Sunni Arabs, as a key segment of Iraqi society, did not adequately participate in the

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<sup>116</sup> Cengiz Candar, “Turkey, Iraq and the Future of Kirkuk”, Lecture presented at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 2007. Available at: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/turkey-iraq-and-the-future-kirkuk> [accessed at 14 February 2011]



constitution-making process means that the constitution fails to reflect national needs. Moreover, Gluck argues that as the Iraqi constitution was written under the extreme time and political pressures of the post-war period, a situation was created where critical decisions had to be made without sufficient time for deliberation.<sup>117</sup>

Given the painful memories of both Shiites and Kurds of the pre-2003 Sunni-dominated Iraq, the new Iraqi constitution takes comfort in a political structure that affords a number of protections against abuse by a federal government in Baghdad. While these same protections are also extended to Sunni Arabs, this formerly dominant minority refused to accept what could be interpreted as a “magnanimous offer” from communities who had suffered for decades under Sunni rule, mainly due to the perceived legitimacy of a state that is no longer controlled by them.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, as put by Vaughn Shannon, the Sunni Arabs fear Shia reprisals and Kurdish-Shia supremacy in post-war Iraq, especially in the areas where they became comfortable being dominant (including Kirkuk).<sup>119</sup>

The issue of disputed territories in post-war Iraq is of great significance to the U.S. and is pivotal to Iraq’s stability. Kirkuk, in particular, is a priority. Apart from taking Turkey’s concerns over an

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<sup>117</sup> Jason Gluck, interview with author, email correspondence, 16 November 2008.

<sup>118</sup> Tristan James Mabry, interview with author, email correspondence, 30 November 2008.

<sup>119</sup> Vaughn Shannon, interview with author, email correspondence, 18 January 2009.

emerging Kurdish state into account, Kirkuk is Iraq in miniature: the same problems of self-rule compounded by historical grievances and competing demands for resources exist there now just as they did across Iraq previously. In addition to that, as Tristan James Mabry notes, there is also a risk of Kirkuk imploding into armed conflict that could not only reignite civil war, but also bring the battle north towards the KRG's frontier.<sup>120</sup>

In these worrying circumstances, the official U.S. position on Kirkuk is that it is for the Iraqis to decide, while Turkey remains opposed to the KRG's acquisition of Kirkuk, and the KRG has shown no tendency to give up on its Kirkuk claim. Although there is a perception in Iraq that the U.S. stands solidly behind the Kurds by supporting a constitution-based process as the answer to the Kirkuk question,<sup>121</sup> the U.S., though more sympathetic to the problem than other international actors, has deliberately delayed the implementation of Article 140. In doing so, as Jonathan Morrow, legal advisor to the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Kurdistan Regional Government explained, the U.S. aims to use Article 140 – like the threat of Turkish military incursions – as a lever to pressure the Kurdish government into accepting a centralised system of oil management and revenue sharing.<sup>122</sup> The U.S.

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<sup>120</sup> Tristan James Mabry, interview with author, Washington, D.C. 10 June 2009.

<sup>121</sup> "Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis", Middle East Report No. 64, *International Crisis Group*, 19 April 2007, p. 15.

<sup>122</sup> Jonathan Morrow, interview with author, email correspondence, 23 November 2008.

policy objective in the post-war Iraq period has been to rebuild a stable and unified Iraq: a policy which has required the U.S. to seek to assure protection of all minority group rights, including those of the Kurds.<sup>123</sup>

Within this context, a Kurdish caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives was formally created, aiming to strengthen American-Kurdistan Regional Government ties. The caucus is a bipartisan organisation whose goal is to “promote American-Kurdish friendship and cooperation on issues of mutual interests in the Executive Branch, the U.S. Congress, and the general public”.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, as Congressman Lincoln Davis, co-founder of the caucus explained to me, “the reason behind the formation of this caucus is to make our Congress and our leaders aware that Iraqi Kurdistan, where civil security is well in place, is the safest area in Iraq.” Besides, according to Davis, “also there was a need in the U.S. Congress for an information forum to be sure that the Kurds are not to be left off the table as the U.S. is engaged in diplomatic and foreign policy.”<sup>125</sup> This continued cooperation between the U.S. and the Kurdistan region of Iraq in the post-2003 period has strengthened the status of Iraqi Kurdistan both economically and politically. However, as examined earlier, it is related more to the broader regional policy of the U.S. to

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<sup>123</sup> Denise Natali, interview with author, email correspondence, 27 April 2008.

<sup>124</sup> “The Kurdish-American Congressional Caucus”, Know Kurdistan: the Official Website of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the U.S. Available at: <http://knowkurdistan.com/u-s-krq-relations/the-kurdish-american-congressional-caucus/> [accessed 21 May 2011]

<sup>125</sup> Congressman Lincoln Davis, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 09 June 2009.

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aim to maintain the unity of Iraq and to address Turkey's worries about the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, than to supporting Iraqi Kurdish nationalist aspirations.

## Chapter 5:

# THE UNITED STATES AND THE REGIONAL DIMENSIONS OF KURDISH INDEPENDENCE

Though the countries in the Middle East may be a great distance from our shores, we know that our own future is bound to this region by the forces of economics and security, by history and by faith.

*Barack Obama, 19 May 2011<sup>1</sup>*

### 5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the regional dimensions of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq from an American foreign policy perspective will be explored. The chapter will look at the key “regional players” whose roles influence U.S. attitudes to Kurdish statehood in Iraq. It will look, in particular, at U.S. relations with Turkey, Israel, Iran and the Arab world, as well as at other key issues.

The initial American involvement in the Middle East was not strategic or diplomatic. It focused instead on missionary efforts in various parts of the region during the first few decades of the

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama on the Middle East and North Africa”, The White House. 19 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa> [accessed 27 May 2011]

nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The American missionaries intended to spread the gospel and the political aims of the New World that may have been labelled “subversive”. Indeed, by the 1890s two institutions of higher learning established by American missionaries three decades earlier – Robert College, just outside Constantinople, and the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut – had become notorious anti-Turkish hotbeds, where Arabs, Kurds and Armenians began to dream of and scheme for national independence.<sup>3</sup>

Although the United States’ role in the Middle East grew in importance throughout the nineteenth century, its position as the pre-eminent Western power there did not arise until after the influence of the former colonial powers, Britain and France, had declined. That happened during the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the U.S. has been deeply involved in attempting to influence events and regimes in the Middle East to reflect U.S. national interests.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the U.S. considers that regional stability has a bearing on its security and, therefore, this a major reason for maintaining a powerful position in the region. Jonathan Paquin asserts that minimising stability gaps, that is,

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Reich, “United States Interests in the Middle East”, In Haim Shaked and Itamar Rabinovitch (Eds.) *The Middle East and the United States: Perceptions and Policies* (London: Transaction Books, 1980), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen C. Pelletiere, *Managing Strains in the Coalition: What to Do about Saddam?* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 128.

reducing or eliminating relative gains – whether politico-strategic, politico-economic or politico-social ones – defines U.S. interests.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the U.S. has a wide range of reasons for maintaining stability in the Middle East. In the following sections, I will look at the regional focus of the U.S. Middle East policy in relation to its approach to Kurdish independence.

## **5.2. Turkey: A Strategic Partner**

The U.S. ability to persuade its close allies around the world to support U.S. policy goals has, at times, defined the success of American foreign policy in achieving its objectives. Within this context, Turkey, as a NATO ally and a participant in the so-called war on terror, has played an important role in advancing U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>7</sup> This strong strategic alliance between Turkey and the U.S., coupled with Turkey's opposition to the Kurdish identity (or political manifestations of Kurdish identity), has arguably been one of the main reasons for the inability of the Kurds to create any type of an independent state.<sup>8</sup> Also, as a former country director for Iraq and Iran

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Paquin, "Managing Controversy: U.S. Stability Seeking and the Birth of the Macedonian State", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2008, p. 438.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Haass, "Foreword", In Steven Cook and Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, *Generating Momentum for a New Era in U.S.-Turkey Relations*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006), p. v.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Gunter, "Re-Evaluating the Kurdish Question", In J. Craig Jenkins and Esther E. Gottlieb (Eds.), *Identity Conflicts: Can Violence Be Regulated?*, (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2007), p. 118.

in the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense asserts, “the U.S. opposes Kurdish independence from Iraq basically because Turkey does.”<sup>9</sup>

U.S.–Turkey relations evolved in the immediate aftermath of World War II since both countries had mutual concerns about the threat posed by the Soviet Union. During the Cold War period, Turkey, due to its geostrategic importance, became a key U.S. partner in Western defence strategies against the perceived Soviet threat.<sup>10</sup>

When the Cold War ended and the Soviet threat was removed, the central rationale for the strategic partnership between the U.S. and Turkey weakened,<sup>11</sup> and security issues became dominant considerations in the U.S.–Turkey relationship. This stemmed primarily from the eruption of armed conflicts and political violence near Turkey’s borders in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> The outbreak of the Iraq War in 2003, for example, exacerbated U.S.–Turkish relations.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the U.S.–Turkish alliance seems to be a permanent reality – one that has prevented any closer U.S.–Kurdish relationship.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Sabri Sayari, “Turkey and the United States: Changing Dynamics of an Enduring Alliance”, In Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydin (Eds.), *Turkey’s Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Cook and Sherwood-Randall (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Haass (2006), *op. cit.*, p. v.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Gunter, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistan Nwe*, issue 4836, 05 April 2009, p. 11.



This only changed in 2003 when Ankara's unease with the possible consequences of the U.S. military action in Iraq led to Turkey's decision to prevent the U.S. from launching a ground attack into Iraq from Turkish soil.<sup>15</sup> Seizing this opportunity, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership occupied the vacuum, providing the U.S. with an effective northern front that led to Iraqi Kurdistan becoming "the most loyal supporter of the U.S. in the region".<sup>16</sup> This, perhaps more than anything, solidified the relationship between the U.S. and the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>17</sup>

Since then, Kurdish leaders have come to believe that Iraqi Kurdistan's alliance with the U.S. has created new and permanent realities either as part of a democratic and decentralised Iraq, or, failing this, as an independent Kurdish state.<sup>18</sup> Turkey's fear is that the U.S. has not taken sufficient care to address its security concerns about the emergence of an independent Kurdistan in Iraq. This could stoke nationalist sentiment among Turkey's Kurdish minority. Many among Turkey's military elite question whether it has been the U.S. strategy since the start of the Iraq War to establish a Kurdish state in Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bill Park, "Iraq's Kurds and Turkey: Challenges for US Policy," *Parameters*, US Army War College, vol. 34, issue 3, Autumn 2004, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Gunter (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffery S. Snell, *The U.S., Turkey, Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan: A Framework for Success in Northern Iraq*, (Montgomery: Air War College, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Gunter (2009), *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "Where Goes the U.S.-Turkish Relationship?," *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4, Fall 2004, p. 47.

These fears have consequently resulted in Turkey drawing closer to both Syria and Iran, which also have sizeable Kurdish populations. This has been manifest in the form of bilateral declarations in support of Iraq's territorial integrity and against the Kurdish preference for an ethnic-based Iraqi federation.<sup>20</sup>

Despite a desire to maintain Iraq's stability, Turkey is also concerned about the issue of territorial disputes in Iraq and the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the Kurdish region of Iraq. As Gareth Stansfield argues, any situation that involves the PKK is inherently complex as there are so many claims, counter-claims and misrepresentations regarding the origin and identity of the PKK.<sup>21</sup> The PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S. and a number of states and organisations.<sup>22</sup> Turkey's failure to effectively develop a constructive relationship between the central government and the Kurdish population in Turkey, however, fuels radicalisation in the PKK.<sup>23</sup>

Turkey accuses the Iraqi Kurdish government of "not doing enough to crack down on rebels from the PKK", who operate out of

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<sup>20</sup> Park (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Stansfield, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4413, 04 November 2007, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> "Chapter 6- Terrorist Groups", Country Reports on Terrorism, United States Department of State, 30 April 2007. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2006/82738.htm> [accessed 25 September 2009]

<sup>23</sup> Franke Wilmer, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4413, 04 November 2007, p. 11.

northern Iraq to launch attacks on Turkey.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, since the arrest in 1999 of Abdullah Öcalan, founder and leader of the PKK, Turkey has pressed Iraqi Kurds to eliminate the PKK threat. This request has been refused by Kurdish authorities in Iraq, however, for some reason. Any armed confrontation with the PKK could threaten peace and the increasing prosperity in northern Iraq and deter foreign investment in the region. As a Kurd-on-Kurd confrontation, it would also undermine the desire of the Iraqi Kurds for greater unity among all Kurdish groups – fighting between Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* forces and the PKK in the 1990s resulted in hundreds of deaths.<sup>25</sup>

Compared to the strength of the PKK in the 1990s, before Öcalan's capture, the PKK is a shadow of its former self. It is not the threat it once was and it is mainly located within Turkey's borders. Turkey, however, still wants Iraqi Kurdish cooperation to fight the PKK. As noted by Stansfield, there are several reasons behind this. The reasons range from the symbolic threat the PKK poses to Turkish dominance and nationhood to distinctly interest-based considerations which, as Stansfield points out, are required to bolster one of the main

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<sup>24</sup> "Turkey's Gul Presses Kurdish PM on PKK Rebels", Reuters, 24 March 2009. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE52M38O20090324> [accessed 05 February 2011]

<sup>25</sup> A Cable from Acting Counsellor for Political-Military Affairs Philip Kosnett, United States Embassy- Iraq, "Turkey's Interests and Influence in Iraq", 04 April 2009. *Wikileaks*. Available at: <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/04/09BAGHDAD921.html#> [accessed 20 October 2011]

pillars of the Turkish “deep state”,<sup>26</sup> namely, the Turkish military.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the sizeable Turkish military budget is constructed largely around the supposed threat posed by the PKK.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the military not only needs to prove itself by fighting the PKK, but it also needs to show that it is defending “Kemalist Turkey” against all threats. As in the early twentieth century, Kurdish (or non-Turkish) threats are being merged with Islamist fears by the military to suggest a threat to the Turkish state that can only be combated by a secular, deeply nationalistic, military core.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Wayne S. Cox contends that the real source of Turkey’s continued tough treatment of its Kurds has been driven by the military and the vast security apparatus (especially in the east) that, in the absence of a Cold War and the lessening of tension with Greece as a result of EU pressures, sees the Kurdish question as its source of justification.<sup>30</sup>

Consistent with the above argument, it is believed that Turkish military commanders have encouraged the PKK to “step up its fight against Turkish soldiers”. According to a recently published book on

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<sup>26</sup> The Turkish “deep state” refers to an unofficial partnership of high-ranking members of the military, the security and intelligence services, and the judiciary. It is dedicated to the protection of the secular system established by Kemal Atatürk.

<sup>27</sup> Stansfield (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> According to Hurriyet Daily News (17 August 2010), Turkey’s defence budget for 2010 was nearly \$16 billion. A large part of this amount went to weapons procurement. It was devoted to systems mainly designed for asymmetric warfare, that is, for the threat posed by the PKK. See <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkeys-defense-seesaw-to-buy-or-to-forgo-2010-08-17> [accessed 06 February 2011]

<sup>29</sup> Stansfield (2007), *loc. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Wayne S. Cox, interview with author, email correspondence, 15 June 2008.

Abdullah Öcalan's life in Imrali Prison, a few military commanders paid a visit to Öcalan in his cell in 2000 and allegedly told him that “no one would take him seriously if the PKK continued its fight in small conflicts”.<sup>31</sup> As Cox notes, this attempt by the Turkish military to emphasise the use of violence by Kurdish groups inside Turkey and elsewhere against the Turkish state only fuelled the Turkish military’s argument that Turkey had a “Kurdish problem”.<sup>32</sup>

There is a popular misconception in Europe and elsewhere in the West that the only motivation for Turkey to relax its policies vis-à-vis the Kurds is its desire to become a full EU member. In practice, however, the realisation that violence will not solve the conflict is the major motivation of those in Turkey who argue that some policies should be altered to allow for the recognition of Kurdish identity. If Turkey continues to deny that it has a Kurdish problem, some Kurdish actors will continue to challenge the dominant order in Turkey – either the PKK or some other group.<sup>33</sup> This explains the change in Turkey’s policy towards its Kurdish population as well as towards the Kurds of Iraq. It is within this context that the Turkish government announced in August 2009 that it would undertake a major initiative towards Turkey’s Kurdish minority. This was known as the “democratic

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<sup>31</sup> “Book Claims Turkish State Elements asked PKK to kill ex-Turkish PM Tansu Ciller”, *eKurd*, 26 January 2011. Available at: <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/1/turkey3121.htm> [accessed 25 February 2011].

<sup>32</sup> Wayne S. Cox, interview with author, email correspondence, 15 June 2008.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

opening". This initiative was considered a major development in Turkey's relations with its sizeable Kurdish minority, and is also testament to the distance the Turkish government has travelled in its policy towards Iraq in general and towards Iraqi Kurds in particular.<sup>34</sup> Consequently this has resulted in the Turkish government opening an official dialogue with the KRG, which includes signing agreements on the importation of oil and reducing its cooperation with the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF).<sup>35</sup>

Because of the issues surrounding the PKK and the Turkmen population in Iraq, Turkey has often been an irritant in Washington's conduct of its Iraq policy. Turkish-American relations remain strong, despite claims that the PKK enjoys a safe haven in Iraqi Kurdistan – a largely pro-American region. Turkey's approach to the PKK issue has influenced its relationship with both Iraqi Kurdistan and the U.S., but as noted by Noam Chomsky, Iraqi Kurdistan is a relatively stable region that provides "support for the U.S. goal of ensuring that Iraq remains a client state and a base for U.S. forces in the region, and that will privilege U.S. investors".<sup>36</sup> The U.S. will do everything it can, therefore, to maintain the unity of Iraq. To achieve this objective, however, the

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<sup>34</sup> Henri J. Barkey, *Turkey's New Engagement in Iraq: Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan*, (Washington, D.C.: USIP Publication, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Noam Chomsky, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4498, 17 February 2008. Available at: <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20080217.htm> [accessed 15 March 2009]

U.S. has to avoid the collapse of the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq.<sup>37</sup>

This said, Turkey has been concerned about the growing relationship between the U.S. and Iraqi Kurds in post-war Iraq. The “04 July 2003 incident” in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, caused what a top Turkish general termed the “worst crisis of confidence” in U.S.–Turkish relations since the creation of the NATO alliance.<sup>38</sup> This refers to an incident in which U.S. forces arrested Turkish special operation troops in Sulaimani, a major city in northern Iraq, on charges that they were conspiring to assassinate elected officials in Iraqi Kurdistan. Many in Turkey saw the incident as a deliberate provocation and a clear sign that Washington favoured Iraqi Kurds over Turkey.<sup>39</sup>

Despite serious strains, the relationship with Turkey remains important to the U.S., and the Turkish–U.S. alliance has even strengthened in the post-Iraq war era. Michael Rubin argues that the increasing animosity between Turkey and the U.S. on a number of issues gives the Iraqi Kurds new opportunities to make their case to the U.S. Congress. As Rubin explained to me, however, the tendency of the Iraqi Kurds to “privately” cut deals with Iran raises questions among

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Michael Gunter, “The Kurds in Iraq”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2004, p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Cagaptay (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 47.

many American strategists about how trustworthy they are as American partners.<sup>40</sup>

Turkey's role in shaping U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurds and their aspirations for independence is considered vital by many U.S. officials and scholars. Brian Diffell, Legislative Director in the U.S. Congress, believes that Turkey is one of the most significant determinants of U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan. He explains that the main reason the U.S. has not supported an independent Kurdistan is because of its relationship with Turkey, as "Turkey is an incredibly valuable country".<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Lawrence Korb, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense, explains that Turkey is the key to any U.S. policy to oppose – or even to support – Iraqi Kurds, as "the U.S. does not want to see anything destabilise Turkey".<sup>42</sup>

The ongoing "war on terror", together with the growing split between the U.S. and the Muslim world, have intensified the strategic importance of the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey, a secular Muslim country.<sup>43</sup> However, it is argued that the rise of Islamism in Turkey, with increasing "Islamisation" of Turkish policy, signals the

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Diffell, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 04 June 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Lawrence Korb, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 February 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Cook and Sherwood-Randall (2006), *op. cit.*, p. 3.



demise of the secular nature of Turkey.<sup>44</sup> Despite its secular outlook, Turkey, as a NATO ally, is still expected to provide access to airspace and bases and to share its intelligence.<sup>45</sup> For U.S. Congressman Lincoln Davis, the importance of Turkey with respect to U.S. interests is more related to its geopolitical significance.<sup>46</sup> Being close to Russia and China, Turkey is situated where Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the former Soviet Republics in the Caucasus converge. Contending that Turkey is a lynchpin in NATO's ability to keep strategic military bases and personnel in place to help protect Western Europe, Davis thus argues that Turkey "would have to be a major consideration in any discussions about Iraq or Kurdistan".<sup>47</sup>

Given its secular identity, some in the U.S. see Turkey as a model to be emulated in the Muslim world. They think that it can attract many Muslims away from militant Islam.<sup>48</sup> Graham Fuller argues that Turkey is becoming a model because Turkish "democracy" is beating back more rigid state ideologies and slowly and reluctantly permitting the emergence of Islamist movements and parties that reflect not only tradition (which represents a large segment of public opinion) but also

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Rubin, "Turkey from Ally to Enemy: The Disastrous Transformation of the Only Successful Muslim Country in the Middle East," *Commentary*, vol. 130, issue 1, 2010, p. 82.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "Turkey's Place in the War against Militant Islam", *Middle East Forum*, 2001. Available at: <http://www.meforum.org/95/turkeys-place-in-the-war-against-militant-islam> [accessed 22 February 2010]

<sup>46</sup> Congressman Lincoln Davis, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 09 June 2009.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Kinzer (2001), *loc. cit.*

a country's "developing democratic spirit".<sup>49</sup> Turkey plays a crucial role in mediating between Muslim countries and the West, aided by its location at the strategic crossroads of Europe, Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East.<sup>50</sup>

Turkey considers the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq to be a direct threat to its territorial integrity. The Turkish fear is that any attempt by Iraqi Kurds to proclaim their independence from Iraq "could lead to irredentist claims on the Kurdish-populated sectors of Turkey, or otherwise encourage Turkey's Kurds to become more insistent in their demands for independence".<sup>51</sup> Over the last few years, however, Turkey seems to have become more relaxed concerning the direction of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. As Paul R. Pillar, former CIA National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, has said, some in Turkey may come to see an independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq as a net plus, serving as a buffer between Turkey and the continued turmoil in Arab Iraq.<sup>52</sup> As Richard Perle also argues, an independent Kurdistan could be a magnet for some Turks of Kurdish origin, whose identity as Kurds is a very powerful factor in their lives.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as Ingmar Karlsson argues, solving the Kurdish problem in Turkey – by granting

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<sup>49</sup> Graham Fuller, "The Future of Political Islam", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, issue 2, Mar/Apr2002, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Kinzer (2001), *loc. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Kemal Kirisci, "Between Europe and the Middle East: The Transformation of Turkish Policy", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2004. Available at: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1998/issue4/jv2n4a3.html> [accessed 12 March 2010]

<sup>52</sup> Paul R. Pillar, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 February 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Perle, interview with author, Maryland, USA, 11 June 2009.

the Kurds full political and cultural rights – could eventually diminish the attraction of a de facto independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. In addition, Turkey's accession to the European Union could guarantee Turkey's territorial integrity since, as a consequence, the influence of the military over the decision-making process would dramatically decrease.<sup>54</sup> To achieve and maintain stability, it seems, Turkey needs Iraqi Kurds as allies in its efforts to develop and stabilise the Kurdish areas of Turkey.<sup>55</sup>

It is in Turkey's long-term interest to have peace and stability along its borders with Iraqi Kurdistan, whether as a region inside a unified Iraq or even as an independent state. An autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan could have significant economic and political potential for a Turkey that is tolerant of, and works with, its Kurdish minority.<sup>56</sup> Despite the long-standing tension between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government over the PKK, Turkish–Iraqi Kurdish relations have greatly improved recently, with Turkey now being a major investor in Iraqi Kurdistan. Annual trade volume between Turkey and Iraqi

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<sup>54</sup> Ingmar Karlsson, "The Kurdish Question and Nationalism", Roundtable meeting at Istanbul Kültür University- Global Political Trends Centre, 07 September 2009. Available at: <http://www.gpotcenter.org/conferences/306> [accessed 02 March 2010]

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Wayne S. Cox, interview with author, email correspondence, 15 June 2008.

Kurdistan has so far reached more than \$5 billion, and it is believed that this will increase to \$20 billion in 2011.<sup>57</sup>

A close relationship between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan is crucial to the United States' position and its strategic goals in the Middle East, as both Turkey and Iraq are of central interest to the U.S. Thus, the U.S. supports Kurdish autonomy in Iraq to maintain stability there, whilst at the same time it opposes the emergence of a Kurdish state that is independent from Iraq, to appease Turkey.<sup>58</sup>

### **5.3. Israel: America's Geopolitical Asset**

The close relationship between the U.S. and Israel has been one of the most salient features of America's Middle East policy.<sup>59</sup> U.S.–Israeli relations evolved from an initial policy of U.S. sympathy and support for the creation of a Jewish state in 1948. The U.S. played a key supporting role in that creation. It has evolved into an important partnership whereby the two states cooperate in a balanced way on a broad range of international issues. The interest in Israel thus revolves around factors including but not limited to containing communism/Islamism in the region and securing access to Middle Eastern petroleum resources. Israel depends on the U.S. for its

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<sup>57</sup> "Iraq-Turkey Trade Exchange to reach US\$20 billions (b) by 2011", *AKnews*, 23 December 2009. Available at: <http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/9/96628/> [accessed 02 March 2010]

<sup>58</sup> Gregory Gause, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4616, 06 July 2008, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Zunes, "Why the U.S. Supports Israel", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, May 2002, p. 1.

economic and military strength, while the U.S. tries to balance its competing interests in the region.<sup>60</sup>

Commitment to Israel's security has been a "cornerstone of U.S. policy in the Middle East" since the creation of Israel.<sup>61</sup> U.S.-Israel military ties were restricted until 1962, however. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, some elements within the U.S. government were concerned about providing American arms to Israel as it was believed that it would cause the Arab states to approach the Soviet Union and China, which in turn would stimulate a Middle East arms race.<sup>62</sup> For example, the U.S. State Department was careful not to openly support Israel. The CIA, however, having fewer inhibitions, started establishing covert liaisons with local politicians and security officials. As Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler explain, many of these relations were based on an agreement that Israel would create a peripheral, pro-American alliance with non-Arab countries, such as Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia, in order to contain Arab radicalism. According to the agreement, Israel's Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (the Mossad) would carry out operations which the U.S. would otherwise find difficult to undertake. Consequently, the Mossad quickly got

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<sup>60</sup> Clyde R. Mark, "Israel- United States Relations", In Adam Powers, *United States-Israeli Relations*, (New York: Novinka Books, 2002), p. 33; Mitchell G. Bard and Daniel Pipes, "How Special is the U.S.-Israel Relationship?" *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, June 1997.

<sup>61</sup> "Background Note: Israel", Electronic Information and Publications Office, U.S. Department of State. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3581.htm> [accessed 10 January 2010]

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell G. Bard and Daniel Pipes, "How Special is the U.S.-Israel Relationship" *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 2, June 1997.

involved in numerous proxy activities for the U.S. around the world. Israel provided military assistance to the Kurds in Iraq within this context.<sup>63</sup> Despite the fact that the U.S. defence establishment acknowledged Israel's potential importance to the Western Alliance, there was always a need to balance America's ties with Israel – hence its efforts to create strategic relations with Arab states as well.<sup>64</sup>

America's relationship with Israel was overtly strengthened in 1962, when the Kennedy administration declared that the U.S.–Israel relationship was as special as America's alliance with Britain.<sup>65</sup> This shift in U.S. policy towards Israel occurred due to Kennedy's failure to revive U.S. relations with Egypt for reasons related to the Cold War, including Nasser's alliance with the Soviet bloc when both the U.S. and Israel opposed Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez Canal.<sup>66</sup> Since then, Israel has served as a “vital strategic asset with its highly trained and experienced military forces”.<sup>67</sup>

There are other explanations for America's support for Israel, though. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that strategic and moral arguments cannot account for America's support for Israel.

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<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel*, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 241-242.

<sup>64</sup> Dore Gold, “The Basis of the U.S.-Israel Alliance”, *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, vol. 5, no. 20, 24 March 2006.

<sup>65</sup> During the Cold War the U.S. had a “special relationship” with Britain which was mainly based on patterns of consultation, nuclear sharing, and defence and intelligence cooperation. For further information, see John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and after* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> John Dumbrell (2000), *loc. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> Murray N. Rothbard, “The Two Faces of Ronald Reagan”, *Inquiry*, vol. 3, no. 13, 1980, pp. 16-20.

Instead, according to them, it is rather that, “the U.S. lobby - Israel’s American advocates and lobbyists - is the principal reason for that support.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, they argue that this uncritical and unconditional relationship between the U.S. and Israel is not in America’s interest and that its impact has been “unintentionally harmful” to Israel as well.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, what makes the U.S.–Israel relationship challenging is the fact that satisfying much of America’s oil dependency relies on imports from anti-Israeli Arab states.<sup>70</sup> Pulled by the strategic need for access to oil and the domestic pro-Israel lobby (as well as non-Jewish supporters of Israel such as the evangelical Christians), the U.S. has attempted to balance pro-Israel sympathies with other regional commitments and interests.<sup>71</sup>

The Arab–Israeli conflict is one of the world’s most difficult conflicts.<sup>72</sup> However, from an Arab point of view, it has gradually shifted from being a large scale regional Arab–Israeli conflict to an Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It nonetheless constitutes a major aspect of the U.S.–Iraqi relationship since it is directly linked to the stability of the Middle East and U.S. interests there. Among the Arab states, Iraq

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<sup>68</sup> John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>70</sup> Tristan James Mabry, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 10 June 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Vaughn Shannon, *Balancing Act: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*, (California: University of California Press, 2005), p. 1.

has technically been in a continuous state of hostilities with Israel since 1948.<sup>73</sup>

The fact that the successive governments of Iraq have generally been hostile towards Israel has led to the furthering of an Israeli-Kurdish relationship.<sup>74</sup> In turn, this has been perceived by Iraqi governments as a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Iraqi state.<sup>75</sup> There are also historical reasons behind Israel's engagement with the Iraqi Kurds. Both the presence of a Jewish population in Iraqi Kurdistan and the use of Kurdistan to smuggle out Iranian Jews have partly contributed to the development of close relations between Israel and Iraqi Kurds. The Iraqi Kurds' willingness to ally with Israel, something which is rather unusual in the "Muslim world", is primarily rooted in the Iraqi Kurds' attempts to attract U.S. attention and secure U.S. support for their cause.<sup>76</sup>

The creation of Israel altered the status of Jews living in Arab and Muslim countries. The Jewish community of Iraq, including that of the Kurdish Jews, found itself in a deteriorating situation. Its members

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<sup>73</sup> "Iraq May Execute MP for Visiting Israel", The Jerusalem Post, 23/09/2008. Available at: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1222017356383> [accessed 20 March 2010]

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *The Israeli Connection: Who Israel Arms and Why*, (London: I.B.Tauris, 1988), p. 19.

<sup>75</sup> Ofra Bengio, "Crossing the Rubicon: Iraq and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 1998, pp. 33-34.

<sup>76</sup> Nawshirwan Mustafa Amin, *Penjekan Yektiri Deşkênin* (The Fingers that Crush Each Other), (Sulaimani: Khak Press, 1997), p. 68. (In Kurdish)



began to flee the country.<sup>77</sup> Numbering over 150,000,<sup>78</sup> the Kurdish Jews in Israel have always played an important role in Israel's policy towards the Kurds.<sup>79</sup> Although Israeli-Kurdish ties can be traced back to the late 1950s,<sup>80</sup> Israel's major military and financial support for the Kurds, in their struggle against the Iraqi government, began in 1964.<sup>81</sup> Aiming to weaken the Iraqi government, Mossad played a major role. It provided both tactical advice and strategic planning to Kurdish leaders.<sup>82</sup> Jack Anderson further illuminates the Israeli-Kurdish connection by highlighting Israel's regular financial support for the Kurds at that time. This was believed to be \$50,000 every month. Quoting a CIA report, Anderson also says that the Kurds, in return, were asked to gather men and equipment to prepare for future hostilities with the Iraqi army and to provide assistance to Iraqi Jews leaving for Israel.<sup>83</sup>

Various arms supplies for the Iraqi Kurds continued being given between 1965 and 1975.<sup>84</sup> Throughout this period, Israeli support for

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<sup>77</sup> Sachar H.M., *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 398-399.

<sup>78</sup> "Kurdish Jewish Community in Israel", The Jerusalem Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations. Available at: [http://www.jcjr.org/kyn\\_article\\_view.php?aid=20](http://www.jcjr.org/kyn_article_view.php?aid=20) [accessed 17 January 2009]

<sup>79</sup> Sergey Minasian, "The Israeli- Kurdish Relations", *21-st Century*, no. 1, April 2007, p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (1988), *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> John K. Cooley, *An Alliance against Babylon: the U.S., Israel and Iraq*, (London: Pluto Press, 2005), p. 82.

<sup>82</sup> Zeev Maoz, "Israeli Intervention in Intra-Arab Affairs," In Abraham Ben-Zvi and Aharon Klieman, *Studies in Israeli Diplomacy, Zionism, and International Relations*, (London: Frank Cass, 2001) p. 146.

<sup>83</sup> Cooley (2005), *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>84</sup> Minasian (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 22.

the Iraqi Kurds took various forms. Zeev Maoz argues that Israeli-Iranian relations defined the relationship between Israel and Iraqi Kurds. Having an interest in Kurdish-Iraqi government tension, Iran encouraged limited Israeli support for a Kurdish rebellion. This had the potential to reduce the capacity of the Iraqi regime to embark on adventures against Iran.<sup>85</sup> Iran was concerned, however, about Israel's intention to support a degree of Kurdish independence that might go beyond the idea of weakening the Iraqi regime. As explained by Eliezer Tsafir, the head of Mossad's operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, Israel was willing to offer unconditional support for the Kurds "in whatever they [did] ... in war and in peace".<sup>86</sup>

Given that the Iraqi regime was vehemently pro-communist and anti-Western at that time, the Iraqi Kurds attracted the attention of Israel's governmental leaders. The latter wanted to forge alliances with non-Arab people to weaken the pull of Arab unity and the call to Arab nationalism and to diminish support for communism.<sup>87</sup> The Kurds also wanted to advance their relations with Israel. As the quest for outside allies had proven particularly difficult,<sup>88</sup> they wanted to establish direct

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<sup>85</sup> Maoz (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>86</sup> Eliezer Tsafir quoted in Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliances: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 53.

<sup>87</sup> Cooley (2005), *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>88</sup> Maoz (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 145.

relations with the U.S. via Israel, which had support worldwide and particularly in the U.S.<sup>89</sup>

The 1975 Algiers Accord, which settled border disputes between Iraq and Iran (such as those concerning the Shatt al-Arab and Khuzestan), led to the withdrawal of all Iranian and U.S. support for the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq. Due to the Shah's regime having weakened and also because of the Iranian revolution, Israel also lost the opportunity to use Iranian territory to support the Kurds. As a result, the Kurdish rebellion was harshly suppressed. Thus, active Israeli support for the Iraqi Kurds ended after the Iranian Revolution of 1979.<sup>90</sup> Aiming to counter the Islamist wave and maintain its interests in the region, the U.S. government started to move in the opposite direction, i.e. towards Iraq and against Iran. Although it was argued that Israel should have continued to undermine Arab states by supporting ethnic and religious minorities, Israeli-Kurdish relations remained fragile until the Gulf War in 1991.<sup>91</sup>

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait marked a turning point in U.S. involvement in Iraq and its engagement with the Kurds. Fearing that Iraq would become a regional hegemon that could inhibit access to the

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<sup>89</sup> Amin (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>90</sup> Minasian (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

region's oil,<sup>92</sup> the U.S. came out in support of Kuwait and attacked Iraq. Having no intention of invading Iraq, the U.S. instigated uprisings against Saddam Hussein's regime. However, since no further American support was forthcoming, these uprisings were harshly suppressed. Millions of Kurds were forced to flee to the areas that border Turkey and Iran. This, in turn, caused a refugee crisis. As it seemed that the U.S. had no plans to intervene in this humanitarian crisis, Jewish organisations started a vigorous propaganda campaign, lobbying on behalf of Iraqi Kurds. They accused the U.S. government of demonstrating a "shameful abdication of political and moral responsibility" by turning its back on the Kurds.<sup>93</sup> Yitzhak Shamir, then Prime Minister of Israel, also met with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker to request that the U.S. government protect the Kurds.<sup>94</sup>

Although Israel was supporting the Iraqi Kurds and their national and individual rights during the Gulf War and its immediate aftermath, the formation of a "broad Knesset coalition", comprised of politicians from all the parties, affected future Israeli support for the Iraqi Kurds. Supporters of the pro-Iraqi coalition argued that if Saddam Hussein's power and the territorial integrity of Iraq were not protected, a Shiite

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<sup>92</sup> Micah Sifry and Christopher Cerf, *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 76.

<sup>93</sup> Andrea Barron, "U.S. and Israeli Jews Express Support for Kurdish Refugees", *Washington Report of Middle East Affairs*, 1991, p. 64.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

empire from Iran to the Occupied Territories would become a potential threat.<sup>95</sup>

In practice, Israel in the post-Cold War era was in favour of maintaining the status quo and hence opposed breaking up Iraq.<sup>96</sup> Despite the historic ties between Israel and the Kurds of Iraq, Israel feared that furthering Kurdish national aspirations in Iraq might risk its strategic alliance with both the U.S. and Turkey, both of which were opposed to Kurdish independence. Thus, the Israeli attitude towards Iraqi Kurdistan was largely dependent at the time upon its relationship with the U.S. and the level of Israeli-Turkish cooperation.<sup>97</sup>

The changes in Israel's policy towards the Kurds show that the U.S. possessed far more influence over Israel than vice versa in regional security issues, including the Kurdish question. As the above brief review of Israeli-Kurdish relations illustrates, Israel's strategic cooperation with the Kurds was affected by America's policy towards the Iraqi Kurds. By looking at the triangular American-Israeli-Iranian abandonment of Iraqi Kurds in 1975, it can be concluded here that Israel supported the Kurds during periods when the U.S. supported Kurdish nationalism. At those times when the U.S. sought to

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<sup>95</sup> Israël Shahak, *Open Secrets: Israeli Nuclear and Foreign Policies: Expansionism and Israeli Foreign Policy* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 76.

<sup>96</sup> Efraim Inbar, conversation with author, email correspondence, 04 January 2010.

<sup>97</sup> Minasian (2007), *op. cit.*, p. 25.

discourage Kurdish nationalism, however, Israel withdrew its support as well.

#### **5.4. U.S.–Arab Relations**

Oil, Islamism and Israel are the major issues that make the Arab world increasingly important to the U.S. in the Middle East. Difficulties between Arab states and America's non-Arab allies in the region have complicated U.S.–Arab relations, however. U.S.–Arab relations have been particularly challenged due to contemporary developments including the invasion of Iraq, the global war on terrorism – about which there are different regional perspectives<sup>98</sup> – and the 2011 revolutions and uprisings in the Arab world.

The U.S upholds strategic and economic interests in maintaining good relations with its Arab allies and protecting their security to maintain a stable oil supply.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, as some scholars have argued, oil plays a crucial role in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>100</sup> In this context, the Arab world, with its rich oil resources, is genuinely significant to American interests. Since World War II, the U.S. government has recognised that the energy resources of this region are “a stupendous source of

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<sup>98</sup> Douglas C. Lovelace, “Foreword”, In Lenore G. Martin, *Assessing the Impact of U.S.-Israeli Relations on the Arab World* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), p. iii.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. v.

<sup>100</sup> See Mamoun Fandy, “U.S. Oil Policy in the Middle East”, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1997, p. 1; Bulent Gokay, “The Most Dangerous Game in the World: Oil, War, and U.S. Global Hegemony”, *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, vol.1, no.2, Summer 2002, p. 52; Michael Klare, “Blood For Oil: the Bush–Cheney Energy Strategy”, in *Socialist Register 2004*, (London: Merlin Press, 2003), p. 180.

strategic power” and “one of the greatest material prizes in world history”.<sup>101</sup> U.S. policies in the Arab world have been pursued to ensure the flow of oil from this region<sup>102</sup> and to prevent the expansion of pro-Soviet and, later, Islamist elements. In fact, the primary goal for the U.S. is not merely access to but rather control over the Middle East’s oil.<sup>103</sup> This, in the words of George Kennan, provides the U.S. with “veto power” over its industrial rivals.<sup>104</sup>

According to international relations realists, the survival and security of the U.S. hinge on its economic prosperity and its military prowess.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, as Bulent Gokay has noted, control of oil at every stage, i.e. from discovery, pumping and refining to transporting and marketing is essential to America’s superpower status.<sup>106</sup> Consistent with this argument, U.S. policies in the Middle East and towards the Arab world include not only the securing of oil supplies but also the seeking of stable and preferably low petroleum prices. These are

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<sup>101</sup> Mark Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power: British Foreign Policy Since 1945*, (London, Zed Books, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>102</sup> Paul D’Amato, “U.S. Intervention in the Middle East: Blood for Oil”, *International Socialist Review*, issue 15, December 2000-January 2001.

<sup>103</sup> Noam Chomsky, “*Iraq and US Foreign Policy: Noam Chomsky interviewed by Peshawa Muhammed*”, Kurdistan Nwe Newspaper, December 25, 2006. Available at: <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20061225.htm> [accessed 25 July 2008]

<sup>104</sup> George Kennan quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, “Bringing Capital Accumulation Back in: the Weapondollar-Petrodollar Coalitionmilitary Contractors, Oil Companies and Middle East ‘Energy Conflicts’”, *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 2, no. 3, Summer 1995, p. 448.

<sup>106</sup> Gokay (2002), *op. cit.*, p. 53.

directly dependent on regional stability<sup>107</sup> and alliances with the oil-producers. Thus, the regional stability of the Middle East has become one of America's major objectives, since it tries to provide ample oil supplies at moderate prices.<sup>108</sup> Although the U.S. is moving towards self-sufficiency, it is still the world's largest consumer of oil, and depends on foreign producers to supply its demand. In addition, as discussed above, because energy security is inextricably intertwined with economic prosperity and national security, oil is one of the primary factors that shapes U.S. foreign policy.

American engagement in the Middle East can be related to the economic position of the U.S. in the light of "peak oil". The "peak oil" theory was first advanced by M. King Hubbert, who argued that global oil supplies would eventually peak and then decline. This, he said, will consequently cause rising prices and political instability.<sup>109</sup> The impact of a peak oil pattern in the wake of the war on terrorism, coupled with the rise of China and India and other growing voices within the oil industry, have the potential, along with a recession, high unemployment and other economic problems, to put the U.S. economy

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<sup>107</sup> Shimshon Bichler and Jonathan Nitzan, "Putting the State in its Place: U.S. Foreign Policy and Differential Capital Accumulation in Middle East 'Energy Conflicts'", *Review of international Political Economy*, vol. 3, no. 4, Winter 1996, p. 618.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 651

<sup>109</sup> Cited in Justin Ervin & Zachary Alden Smith, *Globalization: A Reference Handbook*, (California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), p. 100.



at risk.<sup>110</sup> In fact, recent studies show that only parts of the Middle East and the Caspian Sea region now have spare capacity; everywhere else has reached a peak – including the United Kingdom, Norway, China, Mexico, Venezuela, Indonesia, Russia, Syria, Libya, Nigeria and Qatar.<sup>111</sup>

Since it owns vast energy and natural resources, Iraqi Kurdistan is a new potential source of oil in the Middle East. Therefore, Iraqi Kurdistan becomes directly important to U.S. interests in this regard. According to the Kurdistan region's Minister of Natural Resources, the Kurdistan region has the equivalent of at least 45 billion barrels of oil.<sup>112</sup> This makes it the world's sixth richest oil region, and, in a term coined by Chris Kutschera, this makes it an "Oil Emirate".<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Iraqi Kurdistan's oil industry is now at the point where it can export 100,000 barrels of oil per day (hereafter bopd). It will be able to export upwards of 150,000 bopd by the end of 2011 and at least 1 million bopd by 2014–2015.<sup>114</sup> Apart from oil, there have also been major gas

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<sup>110</sup> Gal Luft, "America's Oil Dependence and its Implications for U.S. Middle East Policy", Report presented before Senate Foreign Relations Sub-committee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, 20 October 2005. Available at: [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2005\\_hr/051020-luft.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2005_hr/051020-luft.pdf) [accessed 16 September 2010]

<sup>111</sup> Bulent Gokay, cited in Dean Carroll, "Peak oil – Are We Sleepwalking into Disaster?", *Global Faultlines*, 22 July 2011. Available at: <http://www.globalfaultlines.com/2011/07/peak-oil-are-we-sleepwalking-into-disaster-by-dean-carroll/> [accessed 10 August 2011]

<sup>112</sup> Ashti Hawrami, "Tough but Fair: interview with Dr. Ashti Hawrami; Minister of Natural Resources-KRG", In *The Oil and Gas Year: Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2011*, (Istanbul: Wildcat Publishing Inc., 2011), p. 24.

<sup>113</sup> Chris Kutschera, "Kurdistan Iraq: An Oil Emirate", *The Middle East Magazine*, May 2008. Available at: [http://www.chris-kutschera.com/A/Kurdish\\_oil.htm](http://www.chris-kutschera.com/A/Kurdish_oil.htm) [accessed 10 August 2011]

<sup>114</sup> Hawrami (2011), *op. cit.*, p. 24.

discoveries in the Kurdish region of Iraq. According to Kurdish official sources, it is estimated that Iraqi Kurdistan has gas supplies of approximately 106 trillion cubic feet (hereafter tcf) to 212 tcf.<sup>115</sup> If this is added to the Nabucco pipeline, which takes gas from the Caspian and the Middle East up to Europe (and has a 1.09 tcf capacity), Iraqi Kurdistan will be able to supply gas for 100 years.<sup>116</sup>

What makes the oil resources of Iraqi Kurdistan even more important is the fact that most of them, until quite recently, had been unexplored. This is no longer the case, however. Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government began to open itself up to foreign investment. The KRG has so far signed 37 contracts with 40 companies, leading to \$10 billion worth of investment in oil exploration and production.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, both U.S. and Canadian firms now have a strong presence in Iraq's Kurdish region. U.S. companies established there include Aspect Energy, the Marathon Oil Corporation, Hillwood International Energy, Hunt Oil, Prime and Murphy Oil.<sup>118</sup>

Iraqi Kurdistan's plentiful, cheap oil provides it with a significant economic power base. It provides one of the major incentives for the

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<sup>115</sup> Trillion Cubic Feet is a volume measurement of natural gas. It is approximately equivalent to one Quad.

<sup>116</sup> Hawrami (2011), *loc. cit.*

<sup>117</sup> Ashti Hawrami, the KRG's Minister for Natural Resources, Presentation delivered at the Trade and Industry Conference 2010, London, 15-16 June 2010. Available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HayrJMJI8A> [accessed 20 August 2011]

<sup>118</sup> "FACTBOX- Oil Companies Active in Iraqi Kurdistan", *Reuters*, 05 January 2011. Available at:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/05/iraq-oil-kurdistan-idUSLDE70403M20110105> [20 August 2011]

U.S. to become further engaged with the Iraqi Kurds. Texas-based Hunt Oil was the first company to sign a production-sharing contract for petroleum exploration with the Kurdistan Regional Government after the Kurds passed their own oil and gas law in August 2007.<sup>119</sup> According to a congressional committee, the “Bush administration officials were aware that [the] Hunt Oil Company, with close ties to President George W. Bush, was planning to sign an oil deal with the KRG, despite the fact that it ran counter to American policy and undercut the Iraqi central government.”<sup>120</sup>

It can be argued that the U.S. interest in Iraq’s Kurdistan oil is motivated by the “peak oil” issue and the increasing threat of Islamism in the region. This combination of factors has resulted in the U.S. realising the need to replace its undemocratic, oil-producing allies with more democratic, friendly, alternative sources of supply.<sup>121</sup> According to confidential cables from the U.S. embassy in Riyadh, the U.S. fears that Saudi Arabia, the world's largest crude oil exporter, may not have enough reserves to prevent oil prices escalating. The cables, released by WikiLeaks, urge Washington “to take seriously a warning from a senior Saudi government oil executive that the kingdom's crude oil reserves

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<sup>119</sup> “KRG Signs Oil and Gas Contract with US-based Hunt Oil”, KRG, 08 September, 2007. Available at: <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?smap=02010100&lngnr=12&asnr=&anr=20067&rn=223> [accessed 24 July 2009]

<sup>120</sup> “Letter to Secretary Rice Regarding Hunt Oil Contract in Iraq”, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform: Congress of the United States, 02 July 2008. Available at: <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20080702135553.pdf> [accessed 24 July 2009]

<sup>121</sup> Dore Gold, “Wartime Witch Hunt: Blaming Israel for the Iraq War”, 2204. *Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs*. Available at: <http://www.jcpa.org/brief/brief3-25.htm> [accessed 12 July 2011]

may have been overstated by as much as 300bn barrels – nearly 40%”.<sup>122</sup> Apart from U.S. concern about a peak in Saudi Arabia’s oil production – a peak which would have a significant impact on the oil market – it is also believed that Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth has increased the spread of Islamism<sup>123</sup> around the world through its control of most of the Arabic language media as well as through moves towards gaining more control over Western media.<sup>124</sup>

In addition to an interest in access to oil and gas resources, the U.S has an obvious interest in countering Islamism in the region, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Religion has played a major role in this regard in shaping U.S. policy towards the Arab world. As well as the issue of Islamism, the rise of religion includes the growing presence of pro-Israel figures in the U.S. government and Congress (such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC))<sup>125</sup> and the rise of “Christian Zionists”, that is, Christian fundamentalist groups that support Israel (such as Christians United for Israel

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<sup>122</sup> “WikiLeaks Cables: Saudi Arabia Cannot Pump Enough Oil to Keep a Lid on Prices”, The Guardian, 08 February 2011. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/feb/08/saudi-oil-reserves-overstated-wikileaks> [accessed 12 July 2011]

<sup>123</sup> Islamism refers to a wide variety of often competing political movements that treat Islam as the central tenet of a political project.

<sup>124</sup> Gal Luft, “America’s Oil Dependence and its Implications for U.S. Middle East Policy”, Report presented before Senate Foreign Relations Sub-committee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, 20 October 2005. Available at: [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2005\\_hr/051020-luft.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2005_hr/051020-luft.pdf) [accessed 12 July 2011]

<sup>125</sup> The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is a lobbying group that is committed to advocate pro-Israel policies to the Congress and Executive Branch of the U.S.

(CUFI).<sup>126</sup> The AIPAC and CUFI are two of the most powerful lobby groups in the U.S. They have a stranglehold over the U.S. government and Congress. This makes it very difficult for a U.S. president to do anything that is perceived as “anti-Israeli”.<sup>127</sup>

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which subsequently became an Islamic revolution, Israel became more important to the U.S. and its national interests. In fact, from Ronald Reagan's era on, a so-called green threat from radical Islam was seen as emanating from the Middle East. It was anticipated that this would replace, in due course, the “red threat” of international communism.<sup>128</sup> Countering Islamism has gained particular importance today. Since the 9/11 attacks, for which al-Qaeda, a global militant Islamist group, formally claimed responsibility, it has become one of the main American objectives in the Middle East. The 9/11 attacks created an opportunity to provide evidence that “maintaining the unhindered flow of oil” and encouraging democratisation should not be the only U.S. interests in the Middle East – claims which have been made for more than half a century. Fighting Islamist terrorism and the state sponsors of terrorism has

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<sup>126</sup> Christians United for Israel (CUFI) is an American pro-Israel Christian organization that defines itself as “a national grassroots movement focused on the support of Israel.”

<sup>127</sup> Liam Anderson, interview with author, email correspondence, 05 July 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Sherifa Zuhur, interview with author, email correspondence, 21 June 2011.

become one of the major objectives that underpin America's national security, however.<sup>129</sup>

It is within this context that Iraqi Kurdistan has obtained greater strategic importance. The U.S. was involved in fighting Islamist terrorism in the Kurdish region of Iraq in early 2003 due to the rise of political Islam there and the increasing fear of Islamism. Despite having a favourable geographic position, Iraqi Kurdistan is naturally an attractive target for Islamist militants because of its relatively secular and democratic administration.<sup>130</sup> With the Bush administration's claim that Ansar al-Islam<sup>131</sup> was beholden to both al-Qaeda and the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Kurdistan became one of Washington's focal points. This was not only because Ansar al-Islam was a "terrorist" group to be defeated in the U.S. "war on terror", but also because it bolstered the case for war against Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>132</sup> In February 2003, the then U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, told the United Nations Security Council: "Baghdad has an agent in the most senior levels of the radical organisation, Ansar al-Islam, that controls this corner of Iraq. In 2000, this agent offered al-

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<sup>129</sup> Joseph McMillan, "U.S. Interests and Objectives", In Richard D. Sokolsky (Ed.), *The United States and the Persian Gulf: Reshaping Security Strategy for the Post-Containment Era*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> Michael Rubin, "The Islamist Threat in Iraqi Kurdistan", *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin*, 2001. Available at: [http://www.meib.org/articles/0112\\_ir1.htm](http://www.meib.org/articles/0112_ir1.htm) [accessed 24 April 2009]

<sup>131</sup> Ansar al-Islam is a Kurdish Sunni Islamist group, formed in December 2001 in the Kurdistan region of Iraq near the Iranian border.

<sup>132</sup> "Middle East Briefing," (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2003). Available at: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/report\\_archive/A400885\\_07022003.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/report_archive/A400885_07022003.pdf) [accessed 24 April 2009]

Qaeda safe haven in the region. After we swept al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, some of its members accepted this safe haven.”<sup>133</sup>

As a result of its close relationship with the U.S., Iraqi Kurdistan has been the greatest beneficiary of post-war Iraq. It is said that Iraqi Kurds enjoy the country’s “highest living standard, level of foreign investment, and security”.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, with the deepening ethnic and religious divisions in the post-war period, the perceived bias towards the Kurds in America’s policy on Iraq can only serve as a major source of concern to Iran, Turkey and the Arab world in general.<sup>135</sup> Many Arabs consider the Kurds as collaborators for having supported the U.S. in the 2003 war and accuse them of being “American mercenaries trying to subdue the Arab people”. Having suffered greatly under Arab rule, many Kurds, in Iraq in particular, see Arabs as chauvinistic nationalists who oppose Kurdish rights.<sup>136</sup>

The issue of Arab–Kurdish relations has thus become one of the most serious security threats facing the Iraqi state. The risk, as Michael Knights, the Lafer International Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy says, is that Iraq will not successfully

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<sup>133</sup> “U.S. Secretary of State Addresses the U.N. Security Council”, The White House, 05 February 2003. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030205-1.html> [accessed 15 November 2008]

<sup>134</sup> Michael Rubin, “Is Iraqi Kurdistan a Good Ally?”, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2008). Available at: <http://www.aei.org/outlook/27327> [accessed 15 November 2008]

<sup>135</sup> Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Continuing Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2005, p. 122.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

integrate its fifteen federal provinces and the KRG, leaving the country effectively divided in two by a new “green line”. Even though serious military clashes between the two sides are unlikely, as Knights notes, a constant state of ethnic tension is very damaging to the national spirit of the new Iraq and makes the future of Iraq, as a unified country, even more uncertain.<sup>137</sup>

Apart from the Arab–Kurdish tension within Iraq, there are other issues affecting the U.S. policy on Iraq. These come from the pattern of relationships in the region. One part of this pattern is the potential challenge to the Kurds’ status in Iraq from across Iraq’s eastern border. Iranian Kurds have been very dissatisfied with their government, and they are incited to some degree by what goes on in Iraqi Kurdistan. Also, for some years, small-scale, cross-border raids have been conducted from Iraqi Kurdistan into northern Iran. Often the raids have been conducted with U.S. collaboration and have been of sufficient impact to provoke an Iranian response. This has taken the form of artillery bombardments across the Iran–Iraq border and increased Iranian support for anti-American insurgents in Iraq.

Among the more active of the groups conducting raids into Iran is the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PEJAK), an off-shoot of the PKK that first became prominent in 2004. Despite its links to the PKK, the PEJAK is reportedly supported by the U.S. and by important elements

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<sup>137</sup> Michael Knights, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 August 2009.



in the Kurdish Regional Government against Iran. As Anthony Billingsley argues, however, American support for the PEJAK's attacks in Iran can be seen more as part of the U.S. policy of confronting and destabilising Iran than as a genuine attempt to support Kurds living on the Iranian side of the border.<sup>138</sup>

Indeed, considering its politico-economic interests in the region, preventing Iran from dominating the Middle East as a regional hegemon has been a vital U.S. pursuit. James Bill argues that in the absence of a clear and powerful rival, Iran under Islamic rule has consistently resisted the pressure of the U.S. and in the process has become a regional threat. Because of its large population, geostrategic location, vast deposits of hydrocarbons, ideological zeal and fierce independence, an Islamic Iran hostile to America holds particular significance for the U.S.<sup>139</sup>

Recent upheavals in the Middle East are yet another factor affecting America's relations with the Arab world, with Iran and with other regional powers. Representing a mixture of fear and hope, the Arab revolutions and uprisings have significant implications for U.S. policy in Iraq, where ethnic and sectarian conflicts are escalating. As Martin Indyk argues, unrest in the Arab world is "highly problematic"

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<sup>138</sup> Anthony Billingsley, "Caught in the Middle: The Challenge for Iraq's Kurds", *Kurdistan Nwe*, issue 4596, 12 June 2008, p. 6.

<sup>139</sup> James A. Bill, "The Politics of Hegemony: The United States and Iran", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2001, p. 91.

for U.S. policy given the impact of the uprisings on “major sectarian strife” in the region. This could quickly, according to Indyk, escalate into conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, causing Saudi Shiites to revolt. As a consequence, this could “dramatically increase the price of oil” and Iranian influence in the region.<sup>140</sup> Given that any uprising in an oil-rich Arab country would disrupt the oil market, the U.S. has felt compelled to pursue controversial policies to maintain its politico-economic interests, calling for the rights of demonstrators, but not strongly supporting demonstrators in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia or Yemen. It is within this context that the U.S. could be said to have been “caught off guard” by the Arab uprisings of 2011.<sup>141</sup> While the U.S. has sought good relations with the new leadership in Tunisia and Egypt, it does not want to see dramatic political changes in Bahrain due to its significance as a U.S. naval site, and Saudi Arabia, where stability concerns and oil interests are seen to be more important than democratic values.<sup>142</sup>

As discussed earlier, there has been a broader regional opposition to extensive Iraqi Kurdish autonomy. This opposition has stemmed from the fear that allowing a powerful Kurdish autonomy in Iraq could

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<sup>140</sup> Martin Indyk, “Tensions in the Persian Gulf after the Arab Uprisings: Implications for U.S. Policy,” Lecture delivered at Project on Middle East Democracy, Washington, D.C., June 29, 2011. Available at: [http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Tensions\\_in\\_the\\_Persian\\_Gulf\\_June\\_29\\_2011.pdf](http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Tensions_in_the_Persian_Gulf_June_29_2011.pdf) [accessed 28 July 2011]

<sup>141</sup> Mark N. Katz, interview with author, email correspondence, 28 July 2011.

<sup>142</sup> Indyk (2011), *loc. cit.*

easily be transformed into independence and, as a consequence, could cause regional instability.<sup>143</sup> In fact, as previously discussed, regional considerations have played a major role in determining U.S. attitudes to Iraqi Kurdish aspirations for independence. However, the recent upheavals in the Arab world have the potential to alter the pattern of relationships in the region, especially with respect to U.S. relations with Iran, Turkey and Israel. This indicates that U.S. perspectives on Kurdish dependence from Iraq could also be subject to change.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Park (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>144</sup> Marianna Charountaki, "America's Close Relationship with Iraq's Kurds was a Necessity", *Rudaw*, 13 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/3677.html> [accessed 29 July 2011]

## Chapter 6:

# UNITED STATES POLICY OPTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF (IRAQI) KURDISTAN

The future of Iraq depends on Iraqi nationalism and the Iraq character- the character of Iraq and Iraqi people emerging.

*George W. Bush, 26 January 2005<sup>1</sup>*

### 6.1. Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapters, Kurdish attempts in Iraq – and indeed in the greater Middle East – to augment their autonomy or even achieve independence represent one of the sources of conflict and instability in the region.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the Kurds are the largest nation in the world without their own independent state could alone be said to have kept these aspirations alive.<sup>3</sup> As I argue in this thesis, Arab-Kurdish tensions in post-2003 Iraq and the uncertainties surrounding the future of Iraq as a unified state have also made the prospects for Kurdish independence brighter. Rising expectations with regard to the likelihood of a Kurdish state and the complex role the U.S. continues to

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush. "Interview of the President by Al Arabiya Television", The White House, 26 January 2005. Available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/01/print/20050126-7.html> [accessed 20 September 2011]

<sup>2</sup> David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gunter, "*Kurdish Affairs with Expert Michael Gunter*", The University of Central Florida, 2009. [Online Video]. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHZqVN9T2ys> [Accessed: 11 June 2010]

play remain crucial to the stability of the Middle East, where America manifests various interests.

In this chapter, the policy options of the U.S. vis-à-vis the future of Iraqi Kurdistan will be discussed. The first section will look at the current federal arrangement in Iraq. It will examine its origins, its durability and its viability as far as America's interests are concerned. The second section will be devoted to a discussion of a centralised unitary Iraq and its impact on regional stability, and will consider both Kurdish aspirations for self-rule and America's desire to maintain the status quo in Iraq. The final section will look at the possibility of an independent Kurdish state arising from Iraq, in light of the recent events in Iraq and the Arab world and the changing nature of America's alliances in the region.

## **6.2. Kurdistan in a Federal Iraq**

Federalism is a political system of shared sovereignty and divided autonomy. There is a central government and territorially defined constituent regions. This is often proposed as the institutional basis for countries emerging from violent intra-state ethnic conflicts.<sup>4</sup> In Iraq, where there are intense sectarian and ethnic rivalries, federalism

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<sup>4</sup> Ariel Zellman, "Ethnic Violence, International Norms, and Federalism: Domestic Problems and International Solutions," Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, 28 March 2008, p. 2.

divides power between two levels of government, both of which control their own politico-strategic, politico-economic and politico-social affairs.

Some scholars argue that federalism provides the only chance to prevent ethnic conflict and secessionism as well as to establish a stable democracy in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Criticising the conventional wisdom, which holds that Iraq's ethnic and sectarian diversity is an impediment to building a stable democracy there, Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha argue that this antagonism could in fact serve a constructive purpose: having factions zealously check each other's power could actually promote democracy at the expense of rigid communal particularism. For that reason, they contend, "democratic Iraq must have a federal system of government".<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to popular opinion, however, democracy does not automatically produce inter-ethnic harmony. As Andreas Wimmer notes, it is the nature of democratic legitimacy to provide incentives for the formulation of ethnic and nationalist claims,<sup>7</sup> which subsequently offer opportunities for ethnic nationalists to mobilise their resources along ethnic lines.<sup>8</sup> Although there are many multinational polities in

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<sup>5</sup> See Dawn Brancati, "Can Federalism Stabilize Iraq?", *The Washington Quarterly*, 2004, vol., 27, no., 2, p. 7; Adeed I. Dawisha and Karen Dawisha, "How to Build a Democratic Iraq", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 3., May/June 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Dawisha and Dawisha (2003), *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Wimmer, "Democracy and Ethno-Religious Conflict in Iraq", Paper presented at the Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University, May 5, 2003, pp. 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1999, p. 19.

the world, few of them are democracies. Those multinational democracies that do exist are all federal or con-federal ones (e.g. Switzerland, Canada, Belgium, Spain and India).<sup>9</sup> While multinational federations are certainly workable, as Brendan O'Leary contends, they have had "a terrible track record". O'Leary cites the example of the communist and post-communist worlds, where multinational and multi-ethnic federations have broken down or have failed to remain democratic (e.g. Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the U.S.S.R.; Ethiopia also "lost" Eritrea). Many multi-ethnic federations have likewise broken down in much of the postcolonial world: in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean.<sup>10</sup>

Juan Linz, Alfred Stepan and Yogendra Yadav define a country as having a "robustly politically multi-national" dimension to its polity if it has "more than one territorially concentrated linguistic cultural majority, and if some politically significant groups in at least one of these cultural areas spend much of their energies attempting to achieve greater political autonomy, or even independence, for what they argue

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

<sup>10</sup> Brendan O'Leary, "Multi-national Federalism, Federacy, Power-Sharing & the Kurds of Iraq", Paper presented at the Cafritz Foundation Conference Centre, George Washington University, 12 September, 2003. Available at: <http://www.polisci.upenn.edu/faculty/bios/Pubs/federalism-iraqi-kurds.pdf> [accessed 05 August 2011]

is their “nation”.<sup>11</sup> Following this definition, Iraq (because of Kurdistan) is “robustly politically multi-national”.

The most widely quoted theorist who raises doubts about the possibility of establishing democracy in a multinational, multi-linguistic state is John Stuart Mill. Mill argues that “free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feelings, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion necessary to the working of representative institutions cannot exist”.<sup>12</sup> In multinational states, several competing claims to nationhood by various ethnic or religious communities may appear, each vying to become the state’s people.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as Dawn Brancati argues, to establish a democratic government in Iraq risks empowering identity-based parties that represent only one ethnic, linguistic or religious group and suppressing other groups there.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, federal arrangements create a situation where political support and votes are secured along ethnic or other

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<sup>11</sup> Juan Linz *et al.*, “Nation State’ or ‘State Nation’ - India in Comparative Perspective”, In Shankar K. Bajpai (Ed.), *Democracy and Diversity: India and the American Experience*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> John Stuart Mill, “Considerations on Representative Government (1861)”, In Geraint Williams (Ed.), *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Every Man, 1993), p.396.

<sup>13</sup> Wimmer (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Brancati (2004), *op. cit.*, p. 8.



communally solidarist lines. Ethnicity thus comes to play a political role “homologous to that of modern nationalism”.<sup>15</sup>

Iraq’s population in its year of independence (1932) was made up of 21% Sunni Arabs, 14% Kurds, 53% Shii Arabs, 5% non-Muslim Arabs and 6% other religious-linguistic groups such as the Sunni Turkmen of northern Iraq or the various Christian sects speaking Assyrian.<sup>16</sup> As Andreas Wimmer notes, the fact that modern civic organisations in Iraq have limited trans-ethnic reach is yet another reason to see Iraq as fulfilling all the conditions for a pervasive politicisation of ethnicity.<sup>17</sup>

Ethnically-based federalism as a desired political system in Iraq and as a solution to the Kurdish problem in Iraq dates back to at least the Kurdish Regional Government’s establishment in 1992. Subsequently, other Iraqi opposition groups adopted the principle of federalism as a solution to the Kurdish problem.<sup>18</sup> Support for a federal system of government in Iraq was first shown in 2002 at the London conference of Iraqi opposition groups. This event included Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites, who all agreed that “no future state of Iraq” could

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<sup>15</sup> Wimmer (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> Wimmer (2003), *loc. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Michael Gunter, “Kurdish Future in a Post-Saddam Iraq”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 1, April 2003, p. 10.

be democratic if “it were not federal at the same time in structure”.<sup>19</sup> Opposition groups also claimed that federalism was a necessary form of democracy as it protected the will of the minority against the will of the majority.<sup>20</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapters, Kurdish autonomy has been a recurring and ongoing issue between Iraqi Kurds and successive central governments in Baghdad. This has been so since the founding of the Iraqi state. Although Iraqi governments have sometimes felt pressured by armed insurrections to grant some degree of autonomy to the Kurds, they have remained suspicious of Kurdish nationalist goals and fear that autonomy will lead to Kurdish independence. Moreover, Kurdish assertions of national self-determination have always contradicted the claims of different Iraqi governments that Iraqi Kurdistan is an integral part of Iraq and of the Arab world.<sup>21</sup>

Failing to achieve statehood, Iraqi Kurds have worked to achieve their long-standing goals of “democracy for Iraq and autonomy, later federalism, for Kurdistan”. Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the idea of federalism in Iraq had never been taken seriously. American policy had little interest in encouraging any sort of federalism in Iraq

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<sup>19</sup> “Final Report on the Transition to Democracy in Iraq-Conference of the Iraqi Opposition”, November 2002. Available at: [www.wadinet.de/news/dokus/transition\\_to\\_democracy.pdf](http://www.wadinet.de/news/dokus/transition_to_democracy.pdf) [accessed 26 September 2011]

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

<sup>21</sup> Tozun Bahcheli and Sid Noel, “Imposed and Proposed Federations: Issues of Self-determination and Constitutional Design in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, Sri Lanka and Iraq”, *The Cyprus Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2005, pp. 13-36.

out of deference to Turkish sensibilities.<sup>22</sup> As the status of the Kurds changed in the post-9/11 period, however, given the survival of a *de facto* Kurdish state that was partially dependent on the survival of Saddam Hussein,<sup>23</sup> the Kurds' role in a post-Saddam Iraq and Kurdish aspirations were considered more seriously.<sup>24</sup>

The issue of federalism has gained more attention in the aftermath of the Iraq War as a direct consequence of Kurdish demands for self-rule. Iraq's first post-war constitution, known as the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), called for the establishment of a federal system of government for Iraq and recognition of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as the official government in the Kurdish region of Iraq. Iraq's permanent constitution likewise envisaged a similar system for the formation of federal sub-units in Iraq.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the Iraqi constitution enshrines a more federal, power-sharing structure, however, with recognition of Arab/Kurdish bi-nationalism, resulted from Iraqi pressures, not U.S. ones.<sup>26</sup>

Due to its close relationship with Turkey, and for other reasons indicated in the previous chapters, the U.S. had little interest in

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<sup>22</sup> Ewan W. Anderson and Liam D. Anderson, *An Atlas of Middle Eastern Affairs*, (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 249.

<sup>23</sup> Liam D. Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division*, (New York: Palgrave, 2004), p. 178.

<sup>24</sup> Peter W. Galbraith, "Kurdistan in a Federal Iraq", In Brendan O'leary, John McGarry, and Khaled Salih (Eds.), *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 270.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson and Anderson (2010), *op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>26</sup> Jeff Weintraub, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

encouraging any sort of federalism in Iraq prior to the invasion of Iraq. To show American support for a united Iraq and to appease Turkey, the Kurds were not brought into the U.S.-led coalition until three weeks before the attack.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, when the then Senator Joe Biden and Sam Brownback introduced a plan in September 2007, calling for a decentralised Iraqi government “based upon the principles of federalism”, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad was reluctant to support it. According to the Biden–Brownback plan, ethnic tensions threatened Iraq’s long-term stability. As Biden argued, achieving stability and maintaining a unified Iraq required establishing three (or more) semi-autonomous ethnic regions linked by a power-sharing agreement in Baghdad.<sup>28</sup>

Securing Iraqi Kurds’ support for a U.S.-instituted regime change in Iraq, which seemed to be conditional on introducing federalism to Iraq,<sup>29</sup> resulted in the U.S supporting federalism there. In addition to this, the perceived impact of federalism on democracy in Iraq, and on the country’s stability was another reason behind American support for federalism. This allowed the Kurds to have their own autonomous region in the new Iraq while the U.S. continued to oppose Kurdish

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<sup>27</sup> Aram Rifaat, “U.S.-Kurdish Relations in Post-Invasion Iraq”, *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 4, December 2007, p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Joe Biden quoted in Greg Bruno, “Plans for Iraq’s Future: Federalism, Separatism, and Partition”, *The Council of Foreign Relations*, 22 October 2007. Available at: <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/plans-iraqs-future-federalism-separatism-partition/p14547> [accessed 02 October 2011]

<sup>29</sup> Maggy Zanger, “The US and the Kurds of Iraq: A Bitter History”, *MERIP Press Information*, 2002. Available at: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero080902.htm> [accessed 20 August 2010]

independence from Iraq.<sup>30</sup> In other words, to quote Michael Rubin: “U.S. policy ... supported federalism inside Iraq as the only reasonable solution.”<sup>31</sup>

The federal solution to the Kurdish issue in Iraq remains problematic, however, given that America’s strategic goal there is “a unified, democratic” country that can “govern, defend and sustain itself”.<sup>32</sup> Given the civic politics of identity, as these exist in Iraq, it is arguably the case that federalism cannot take any other form than ethnic and sectarian federalism.<sup>33</sup> The problem is that federalism in Iraq works to the benefit of “authoritarian” parties and personalities, whether nationalist or sectarian.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the key American concern about the current federal arrangements in Iraq is to ensure that violence does not erupt around Kirkuk and along other disputed stretches of the Kurdish region/Iraq border. Due to the lack of agreed regional borders, there is always a danger that the backlash from central Iraq could create a *fait accompli*, especially if the Kurds take control of the disputed areas of Mosul and Diyala. In this case, as Michael Rubin argues, American influence would likely decline, leading to a repeat of 1975 and the abandonment that took place then, albeit

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<sup>30</sup> Brancati (2004), *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>32</sup> “Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq”, U.S. Department of Defense Report to Congress, September 2007. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Signed-Version-070912.pdf> [accessed 20 August 2011]

<sup>33</sup> David Ghanim, *Iraq's Dysfunctional Democracy*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011), p. 164.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

on a smaller scale.<sup>35</sup> Within this context, the issue of Kirkuk needs to be addressed by a “measured approach to negotiation ... [though] not by a referendum which has the potential to provoke conflict”.<sup>36</sup> Granted that disputed territories like Kirkuk have a special status, this is perhaps the only realistic way out of the current impasse that is consistent with America’s view.<sup>37</sup> To maintain long-term stability, however, such a special status needs to be similar to what is currently foreseen with regard to the status and competence of other regions.<sup>38</sup>

Given American concerns regarding regional stability and the future of Iraq as a unified country, the U.S. supports the federal arrangement and considers it the best possible outcome provided the two parts of Iraq (the Kurdish and the Arab) learn to resolve their disputes peacefully. However, the current situation, as Henri J. Barkey contends, is still unstable since an accident or a deliberate provocation could unleash untold consequences that could put Iraq’s unity in jeopardy.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 January 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Herring, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 September 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Ambassador Christopher R. Hill, United States Embassy- Iraq, “*Ambassador Meets Kurdish Opposition Leader Nawshirwan Mustafa*”, 31 January 2010. Available at: <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2010/01/10BAGHDAD254.html> [accessed 15 September 2011]

<sup>38</sup> Stefan Wolff, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 September 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Henri J. Barkey, interview with author, email correspondence, 21 September 2011.

### 6.3. Recentralisation of Iraq

As mentioned previously, Iraq is an artificial and forced political creation. It was constructed out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The population of Iraq at birth was riven by ethnic, religious and tribal differences. This, as Daniel Pipes argues, made the future of Iraq as a unified state uncertain.<sup>40</sup> With growing internal conflicts in Iraq after the war in 2003, this view has become progressively more popular, even though, as Reidar Visser says, more political problems in Iraq can now be explained as having been “manufactured” by outsiders.<sup>41</sup> Iraq is seen as a country which lacks the “historical depth” required to sustain a viable modern polity.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Peter W. Galbraith contends that by looking at Iraq’s history since Britain “cobbled it together from three Ottoman provinces ... it is the effort to hold Iraq together that has been destabilising”.<sup>43</sup> Michael Gunter argues that this alone makes Iraq less legitimate as a political entity than Turkey, say, or Iran, two states that have existed in one form or another for many centuries. This in turn, as Gunter

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<sup>40</sup> Daniel Pipes, interview with author, email correspondence, 19 September 2011.

<sup>41</sup> Reidar Visser, “Centralism in Iraq: Anachronism from the British Mandate or a Viable Alternative for the Future?”, *Babylon*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2006

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Peter W. Galbraith, “Iraq’s Salvation Lies in Letting it Break Apart”, *The Sunday Times*, 16 July 2006. Available at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/sto/news/article188078.ece> [accessed 17 October 2011]

contends, makes discontent and rebellion more reasonable and conceivable for the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>44</sup>

The centralised unitary state model in Iraq was first imposed during the British mandate period after 1921. This was the age of large, “viable” states in world affairs; Britain favoured a centralised model of government that would allow for improved financial control, as opposed to alternatives like loose confederations or even small city-states. These alternatives were repeatedly dismissed in British policy-making circles as being expensive and “archaic”.<sup>45</sup> Overlooking the territorial and ethnic distinctions that existed in the region, the British managed to create little more than a failed state that could only be held together by dictatorial rules.<sup>46</sup>

Even after gaining its independence from Britain in 1932, Iraq was a unitary state. Although there were military coups in 1936 and 1941 and a major pro-communist takeover between 1958 and 1963, none of these developments led to any change in the state structure.<sup>47</sup> In pursuit of its own interests, the U.S., at different times, preferred a centralised Iraq (i.e. an Iraq in which the regionalist and democratic aspirations of the Kurds and Shiites were repressed). During the Iran-

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Gunter, “The Kurdish Question in Perspective”, *World Affairs*, vol. 166, no. 4, 2004, p. 201.

<sup>45</sup> Visser (2006), *loc. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Visser (2006), *loc. cit.*



Iraq War (1980–1988), for example, a centralised Iraq was considered necessary to balance a revolutionary Iran, which it was feared would damage American interests in the Middle East. Moreover, the U.S. attitude to a centralised system in Iraq, as Brendan O’Leary argues, was both to appease Turkey, which needed constant reassurance because of its own Kurdish population, and the Sunni Arabs who were America’s allies (for example, Jordan and Saudi Arabia).<sup>48</sup> Being highly hostile to the idea of any non-Arab minority in the Arab world having rights to political self-determination, Sunni Arab states (and their populations) were opposed to the idea of an independent Kurdish state. They also saw a strong, centralised, Arab-dominated Iraq as a counterweight to Iran.<sup>49</sup>

The centralised unitary state remained the dominant political system in Iraq until after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. After that a more loosely federalised structure emerged. This happened despite what the U.S. and its regional “allies” wanted (Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt). It resulted from the negotiations between the main political forces that emerged in post-Saddam Iraq. In this context the U.S. renounced the notion of Sunni dominance over the Kurds and the Shiite Arabs.<sup>50</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Brendan O’Leary, “Iraq’s Future 101: The Failings of the Baker-Hamilton Report”, *Strategic Insights*, vol. 6, no. 2, March 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Jeff Weintraub, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Jeff Weintraub, “Thinking Seriously about “Centralism” and “Federalism” in Iraq”, Jeff Weintraub’s Blogpost, 01 March 2009. Available at: <http://jeffweintraub.blogspot.com/2009/03/thinking-seriously-about-centralism-and.html> [accessed 17 October 2011]

idea of the re-centralisation of Iraq, however, regained serious credence in the U.S. after the publication of the Iraq Study Group report (known as the Baker-Hamilton report) in December 2006. The report, named after former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and former U.S. Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, was to propose recommendations as to how the U.S. should proceed in Iraq. The main intention of the report, however, was to strengthen the central Iraqi government by weakening federalism. It also sought to strengthen the central government's control of Iraq's oil resources.<sup>51</sup> As Jeff Weintraub says, the Baker-Hamilton report merely restated the conventional wisdom of the American establishment on this question, which was in favour of an Arab-dominated, centralised Iraq.<sup>52</sup> The Baker-Hamilton report asserts that:

The costs associated with devolving Iraq into semi-autonomous regions with loose central control would be too high. Because Iraq's population is not neatly separated, regional boundaries cannot be easily drawn.... A rapid devolution could result in mass population movements, collapse of the Iraqi security forces..., destabilisation of neighbouring states, or attempts by neighbouring states to dominate Iraqi regions.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Michael Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2010), p. 49.

<sup>52</sup> Jeff Weintraub, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

<sup>53</sup> James Baker and Lee Hamilton (Co-chairs), *The Iraq Study Group Report*, (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 39.

Among U.S. policy makers, Michael Rubin, the former country director for Iraq and Iran in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, criticised the idea of centralising Iraq. He explained how the attitudes of Iraq's neighbouring states towards Iraqi federalism were reflected in the negative views of other U.S. policymakers, who were very closely connected to those neighbours and thus opposed to federalism in Iraq. Rubin gave the example of the Baker–Hamilton report, which was drafted by Edward Djerejian, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria. According to Rubin “the report mirrored Assad's position on federalism in Iraq due to Djerejian’s connection to [the] Syrian government ... [which] sought to encourage U.S. business to invest in Syria.”<sup>54</sup>

There are reasons to see the political re-centralisation of Iraq as a potential source of conflict and unrest.<sup>55</sup> As Stefan Wolff says, the re-centralisation of Iraq could have dire consequences for regional stability and security, especially as it touches upon the status of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Furthermore, restoring a centralised unitary model would require a constitutional change which is not likely to be achieved. As only a few other provinces so far have shown their willingness to become a region or merge with other provinces, recentralisation is a problematic policy option.<sup>56</sup> From the U.S. perspective, however, the re-centralisation of Iraq is an option that

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>55</sup> Weintraub (2009), *loc. cit.*

<sup>56</sup> Stefan Wolff, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 September 2011.

serves U.S. oil interests as it strengthens the Arab Sunni regime, its cooperation with the U.S. and its ability to continue to extract oil and gas resources from this region.<sup>57</sup>

#### **6.4. Creation of a Kurdish State in Iraq**

Although recent developments – especially rising Arab–Kurdish tensions in post-2003 Iraq and fears about the nature of a unified Iraq – have given rise to Kurdish expectations of independence, the U.S. opposes an independent Kurdish state. Indeed, the likelihood of a successful Kurdish state is limited by politico-social factors such as the way the Kurdish population is spread over four different countries. These factors, coupled with America’s regional interests, such as their close relationship with Turkey, have created a conventional wisdom in regard to Kurdish self-determination. According to Richard Perle, the conventional wisdom is that the U.S. is sympathetic to the plight of the Kurds while remaining opposed to them having extensive autonomy and sovereign independence.<sup>58</sup>

U.S. attitudes towards the Kurds are shaped by a combination of American values and interests. The values are related to the sympathy the U.S. shows the Kurdish people in the light of their history. As Vence Serchuk, foreign policy advisor to American Senator Joseph Lieberman,

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Olson, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Perle, interview with author, Maryland, USA, 11 June 2009.

says, however, it is in America's interests to have a stable, well-governed democratic Iraq that is at peace with its neighbours, capable of defending its own territorial integrity and opposed to the forces of extremism in the region.<sup>59</sup> Hence America is concerned that an independent Kurdish state would antagonise regional allies, namely Turkey, and would face fierce opposition from the rest of Arab Iraq, thereby leading to instability and regional conflict. Within this context, Paul Bremer, former U.S. Administrator to Iraq, contends that the Kurds in Iraq "would make an extremely serious mistake if they wanted to leave Iraq and establish an independent state". Bremer argues that "an independent Kurdish state ... would provoke a regional war in which the U.S. does not want to be involved".<sup>60</sup> Having a strong interest in an Iraq which is unified, peaceful and safe, the U.S. has thus preferred to work in favour of the status quo.<sup>61</sup>

The likelihood of any U.S. government supporting an independent Kurdish nation-state in northern Iraq is also limited by geopolitical factors. The region is land locked. The Kurds are divided among four Middle Eastern states and there is regional opposition to the idea of Kurdish self-determination. This is especially the case for Turkey and Iran, as discussed in previous chapters. They have significant Kurdish

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<sup>59</sup> Vence Serchuk, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 15 June 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Bremer; former U.S. administrator to Iraq, interview with VOANews/ Kurdish, 17 October 2011. Available at: [http://www.voanews.com/kurdish/news/bs\\_interview\\_17oct11-132004898.html](http://www.voanews.com/kurdish/news/bs_interview_17oct11-132004898.html) [accessed 10 October 2011]

<sup>61</sup> Vence Serchuk, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 15 June 2009.

minorities of their own and are concerned that an independent Iraqi Kurdistan might encourage Kurdish nationalism among their own Kurdish populations. Indeed, Turkey has often threatened (both explicitly and implicitly) to invade if Iraqi Kurds declare their independence. Any political settlement in Iraq that encourages Kurdish nationalism is one Turkey would oppose.<sup>62</sup>

This said, the Kurds in Iraq suffer from tribal, linguistic, geographical, politico-cultural and ideological divisions which stunt their sense of nationalism in relation to the surrounding and more powerful peoples. As former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recently said: the Iraqi Kurds must deal with “forbidding geography, ambivalent motives on the part of neighbouring countries, and incompatible motivations within the Kurdish community itself”.<sup>63</sup> According to Richard Perle, the combination of these factors has created the sense in the U.S. that America should be sympathetic to the plight of the Kurds, but not to the point of promoting an independent state. As Perle says, supporting the unity of Iraq has so far

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<sup>62</sup> For example, see “Turkish PM Warns Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk”, *Reuters*, 09 January 2007. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/01/09/us-turkey-iraq-kurds-idUSL0981800920070109>; and “Turkey Remains Deeply Concerned by Ongoing Developments in Iraqi Kurdistan”, *The Kurdish Globe*, 15 December 2007. Available at: <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=D1C62F9AC12EF1C050CC250D3FFD2738>

<sup>63</sup> Henry Kissinger, quoted in Michael Gunter, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4836, 05 April 2009.

been the standard view of the diplomatic American establishment and of successive U.S. administrations.<sup>64</sup>

As Michael Lind argues, however, U.S. insistence on the status quo to maintain Iraq's territorial integrity is potentially misguided. According to this argument, it could be difficult to hold together and democratise a multinational state like Iraq – one where a common national identity does not exist.<sup>65</sup> Daniel Pipes also argues that the emergence of an independent Kurdish state is always a possibility, for reasons related to the history of Iraq. According to Pipes, the fact that Iraq was an artificial creation at birth, and remains so almost a century later, makes the idea of keeping Iraq unified a questionable one.<sup>66</sup> As noted earlier, Carole O'Leary says the majority of Iraqi people view their own communal identity in primordial or essentialist terms.<sup>67</sup> Paralleling this view, there is an emerging Kurdish identity based on the concept of a Kurdistan and one not rooted in a feeling of belonging to Iraq. This, in Gareth Stansfield's words, "has made the Kurds a real threat to Iraq's territorial integrity" and poses a challenge to the notion

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<sup>64</sup> Richard Perle, interview with author, Maryland, USA, 11 June 2009.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Lind, "In Defence of Liberal Nationalism", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 3, May/June 1994, p. 88.

<sup>66</sup> Daniel Pipes, interview with author, email correspondence, 19 September 2011.

<sup>67</sup> Carole A. O'Leary, "The Kurds of Iraq: Recent History, Future Prospects", *Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2000. Available at: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue4/jv6n4a5.html> [accessed 20 January 2009]

of Iraq's dominant Arabness.<sup>68</sup> Iraq has already, therefore, ceased to be a unified state.<sup>69</sup>

Given that the future of Iraq as a unified state is uncertain, some scholars argue that a Kurdish state would be in the best interests of the U.S. and its regional allies. With the exception of the Kurdish region, Iraq has been in turmoil since the U.S. invasion in 2003. Philip S. Hadji argues that by assisting the Kurds to achieve an independent state, which would be a secular, self-supporting democracy and consistent with the values of the U.S., the U.S. would be able to exit Iraq on a positive note.<sup>70</sup> Support for Kurdish statehood, however, is not the dominant stance in America. According to Richard Perle, U.S. political figures and officials do not realise the politico-strategic, politico-economic and politico-civic importance of an independent (Iraqi) Kurdistan, partly because "they depend heavily on the professional foreign services establishment who have been pan-Arab for half a century".<sup>71</sup> Jeff Weintraub agrees with this assessment, contending that the U.S. foreign policy establishment has always been overwhelmingly Arabist in its orientation. As Weintraub notes, it is generally sympathetic to the outlook of U.S. "allies" in the region (i.e.

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<sup>68</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics*, (London: Polity Press, 2007), p. 103.

<sup>69</sup> Ted Galen Carpenter, "Middle East Vortex: An Unstable Iraq and Its Implications for the Region", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2009, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup> Philip S. Hadji, "The Case for Kurdish Statehood In Iraq", *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, vol. 41, no. 2&3, 2009, p. 538.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Perle, interview with author, Maryland, USA, 11 June 2009.



the pro-Western Sunni governments – especially the Saudi monarchy and, until recently, the Mubarak regime in Egypt). It is totally unsympathetic to the viewpoints of non-Arab minorities in the Arab world. On the whole, it also tends to incline towards the interests and outlook of the Sunni elites, which includes empathising with Sunni anxiety about Shiite political power.<sup>72</sup> These concerns have meant that the U.S. foreign policy establishment has tended to oppose an independent Kurdish state arising from Iraq.

In addition, Michael Rubin contends that weaknesses in the Kurds' presentation of their own particular claims have also been a contributing factor when it comes to U.S. support for an independent Kurdish state emerging from Iraq. According to Rubin, the problem is not only that Kurdish leaders remain divided but that they also downplay their desires for independence in private conversations.<sup>73</sup>

In an interview with a Turkish newspaper, Jalal Talabani, the secretary general of the PUK and the president of Iraq also stated that an independent Kurdish state could not survive because “neighbouring countries, Turkey, Iran and Syria would close their borders”. Assuring his “Turkish brothers” of Iraqi Kurds’ willingness to stay within Iraq, Talabani dismissed the Kurdish nationalists’ dream of a Great

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<sup>72</sup> Jeff Weintraub, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

Kurdistan as “a dream in poems”.<sup>74</sup> Contradictory to Talabani’s views on Kurdish independence, Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan region, had said before that “Turkey and the world should just get used to an independent Kurdistan.” In private meetings with U.S. and Turkish officials, however, Barzani has made comments similar to Talabani’s, stressing the KRG’s commitment to remaining a part of Iraq.<sup>75</sup>

In practice, the leaders of the Iraqi Kurds have always been highly sensitive to security threats from neighbouring countries. These sensitivities will become even more credible with the departure of U.S. troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. Even though the majority of Iraqi Kurds would clearly prefer an independent state, there is no significant movement from within Iraqi Kurdish politics to actually propose this at the moment as a concrete programme.

It is argued, nonetheless, that there are factors that have the potential to give rise to Iraqi Kurdish expectations of independence and, as a result, to cause a shift in U.S. attitudes. As discussed earlier, it is unlikely that Iraq can build a federal democratic state, which is the only type of state Iraqi Kurds are likely to accept if they are to stay within Iraq. It is “difficult”, therefore, “to see the Iraqi Kurds remaining

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<sup>74</sup> “Kurdish independence just a Dream, Talabani Tells Turkey”, *Reuters*, 16 March 2009. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/03/16/idUSL519166> [accessed 30 January 2011]

<sup>75</sup> A Cable from Acting Counsellor for Political-Military Affairs Philip Kosnett, United States Embassy- Iraq, “Turkey’s Interests and Influence in Iraq”, 04 April 2009. *Wikileaks*, Available at: <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/04/09BAGHDAD921.html#> [accessed 20 October 2011]

part of Iraq in the long run, except by force”.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, scholars and U.S. officials from various bureaucratic departments contend that if Iraq fails as a state and descends into a multi-front civil war, the possibility that the U.S. will endorse an independent (Iraqi) Kurdistan cannot be ruled out.<sup>77</sup> As Gunter argues, if Iraq does become a failed state, that is, one that cannot sustain a federal democracy, the United States and Turkey may actually come to see greater stability in allowing Iraq to be partitioned into its constituent parts rather than forcing it to remain unified.<sup>78</sup>

Turkey’s consent remains a crucial factor, however, in determining U.S. attitudes towards (Iraqi) Kurdish independence.<sup>79</sup> Though losing the U.S.–Turkish alliance would devastate the U.S. and jeopardise its strategic goals in the Middle East,<sup>80</sup> the U.S. does continue to support Kurdish autonomy in Iraq through the Kurdistan Regional Government, even though the Kurdish leadership does not attempt to gain independence and continues to participate in the Iraqi

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Gunter, “The Kurds in Iraq”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2004, p. 109.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Diffell, interview with author, email correspondence, 04 June 2009; Richard Perle, interview with author, email correspondence, 11 June 2009; Michael Gunter, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4836, 05 April 2009; Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Gunter (2004), *loc. cit.*

<sup>79</sup> Richard Perle, interview with author, email correspondence, 11 June 2009; David Pollock, interview with author, email correspondence, 11 June 2009; Patrick Garvey, interview with author, email correspondence, 11 June 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Lewis, *Prospects for an Independent Kurdistan*, (Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), p. 64.

central government.<sup>81</sup> However, with any deterioration in its ties with America's two major regional allies, Turkey and Israel, the U.S. approach to Iraqi Kurdistan could change. The latter could be seen as an alternative ally. Indeed, any change in the Israeli-Turkish relationship would have significant implications for the U.S., especially if it is driven by an increasing "Islamisation" of Turkish policy and a less sympathetic stance towards Israel.<sup>82</sup> The main factors underlying a shift in Turkish policy would have to do with political changes within Turkey associated with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the diminishing political influence of the army,<sup>83</sup> which has been that element of the Turkish "deep state"<sup>84</sup> most committed to cooperation with Israel. In aiming to re-orientate its foreign policy so that it can play a greater diplomatic role in the region as a whole, Turkey would be attempting to "whittle down" Israel's "geopolitical power" in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.<sup>85</sup> This, as Gregory Gause argues, would require Turkey to play to Arab public opinion. It would require it to garner the support of some of the Arab countries in order to extend its strategic and trade presence in the

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<sup>81</sup> Gregory Gause, interview with Peshawa Muhammed, *Kurdistani Nwe*, issue 4616, 06 July 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory Gause, interview with author, email correspondence, 23 September 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Jeff Weintraub, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

<sup>84</sup> The Turkish "deep state" refers to an unofficial partnership of high-ranking members of the army, the security and intelligence services, and the judiciary. It is dedicated to the protection of the secular system established by Kemal Ataturk.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Olson, interview with author, email correspondence, 22 October 2011.

Middle East.<sup>86</sup> Specific incidents have deepened the rift between the two countries. These include the humiliation of the Turkish ambassador by Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon and the so-called Flotilla Incident. This was a military operation by Israel against six ships carrying aid to the Gaza Strip on 31 May, 2010 in which nine Turks were killed. It was something that, in Noam Chomsky's words, "is never done in international relations".<sup>87</sup>

Although the U.S. encouraged both Turkey and Israel to resolve their differences, the rupture in their relationship created a complicated situation with no clear outcome. Noam Chomsky agrees, arguing that "Israel is seemingly involved in efforts to undermine Iraq and Turkey, and in this context, it might be supporting Kurds, but quite cynically."<sup>88</sup> Paul R. Pillar argues that given that the Israelis have had relationships with Iraqi Kurds, and insofar as the main tendency of the Americans is to support the Israelis, this might imply a degree of U.S sympathy for the idea of independence for this non-Arab entity. Moreover, he says that since the prospect of Kurdish independence has been a source of concern to Turkey, a sharp deterioration in the Israeli-

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<sup>86</sup> Gregory Gause, interview with author, email correspondence, 23 September 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Noam Chomsky, interview with author, email correspondence, 24 October 2011.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

Turkish relationship “might give the Israelis fresh reason to think about pushing the idea of Kurdish independence”.<sup>89</sup>

In the light of the definition of “the state” discussed in chapter 1, the Kurdish region of Iraq might satisfy the criteria for statehood because: 1) it satisfies “the permanent population” element (Iraqi Kurdistan has a permanent population of about four million people);<sup>90</sup> 2) it is recognised as a “defined territory” (by the Iraqi constitution);<sup>91</sup> and 3) it has a government (the Kurdistan Regional Government, which exercises overarching authority in the region and has the capacity to enter into relations with other states through KRG’s Department of Foreign Relations). The KRG has offices in many countries, including Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK (the EU), Iran and the USA; it maintains ties with the “governments, parliaments, public and Kurdish communities” in these respective countries. Moreover, numerous countries have consulate offices in the Kurdistan region's capital of Erbil. Of these, four, the U.S. included, are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Many international organisations also have permanent offices there, including the United Nations, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

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<sup>89</sup> Paul R. Pillar, interview with author, email correspondence, 20 February 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 33.

<sup>91</sup> “Iraq Constitution, Article 117 (Section 1)”, *United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)*, 2005. Available at: [http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi\\_constitution.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi_constitution.pdf) [accessed 03 November 2010]

Organization (UNESCO) and the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol).<sup>92</sup>

The views expressed above are also in agreement with the “stability-seeking argument”. According to this argument, the U.S. might support a secessionist movement (Iraqi Kurds in this case) as a credible alternative to growing regional instability or the collapse of the host state (Iraq).<sup>93</sup> The notion of regional stability, as defined by the stability-seeking argument, remains problematic, however. There are both internal and external dimensions, for example, to the American approach to Kurdish self-determination with regard to Iraq. The domestic definition of sovereignty, i.e. “the organisation of public authority within a state and ... effective control ... by those holding authority” constitutes the internal dimension of stability. The external definition of sovereignty would require Iraqi Kurds accepting what were formerly internal boundaries as international borders.<sup>94</sup> What is problematic in this regard is that the Kurdistan Regional Government is still in a fierce dispute with the Iraqi central government over areas such as Kirkuk that the Kurds claim to be part of the KRG. Meanwhile, neighbouring states, most notably Turkey, do not necessarily respect

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<sup>92</sup> “The Department of Foreign Relations – Kurdistan Regional Government”, Official Website of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Available at: <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?smap=04080000&lngnr=12&asnr=&anr=19906&rnr=267> [accessed 03 November 2010]

<sup>93</sup> For more information on “stability- seeking argument”, see Jonathan Paquin, *A Stability-Seeking Power: U.S. Foreign Policy and Secessionist Conflicts*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

<sup>94</sup> See Jonathan Paquin, “Managing Controversy: U.S. Stability Seeking and the Birth of the Macedonian State”, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2008, pp. 439-440.

the territorial integrity of the KRG, and remain opposed to any attempts that might lead to an independent Kurdish state.



## Chapter 7:

# CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1. Overview

The main aim of the above study was to identify and analyse the impact of regional stability as a defining factor determining U.S. attitudes towards Kurdish statehood in Iraq. To achieve this aim, I attempted to examine various competing and/or complementary considerations that influence U.S. policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan. These include regional players/ factors such as the policies of Turkey and Israel, U.S.-Arab relations and a number of other key American concerns (e.g. oil, democratisation and Islamism). This chapter provides a summary of the main objectives the thesis sought to meet and how it sought to meet them. It ends by highlighting the contribution to knowledge that this thesis can be said to have made.

The overall conclusion drawn from this thesis is that the questions that influence U.S. perspectives on the concept of a Kurdish state separate from Iraq are not only strategic. They are also economic (i.e. oil and the role of the oil corporations) and civic (such as intra-Kurdish tensions). As regards specific conclusions, these are shown below with reference to the specific objectives of this study:

**7.2. Research Objective 1:** *“To provide a historical analysis of various U.S. administrations’ foreign policy approaches to the Kurdish question in Iraq.”*

The thesis concludes by maintaining that various U.S. administrations have pursued a strategic policy of dealing with the nationalist aspirations of the Kurds as part of their broader approach towards Iraq. America’s foreign policy architects have tended to see the Kurdish question in Iraq as an internal issue that needs to be resolved by Iraqi governments in a peaceful and negotiated fashion. Such a policy has been dependent on the nature of U.S. relationships with successive Iraqi governments, however, and with other regional states. During times of tension with the Iraqi central government, the U.S. has supported the Iraqi Kurds and the prospect of greater Kurdish autonomy. The United States has always been opposed to the idea of an independent Kurdish state, however.

This view is reflected in various U.S. administrations’ foreign policy approaches to Kurdish ambitions for independence. America’s policy towards the Kurds of Iraq from 1972 until 1990 was shaped by broader strategic and economic considerations than had been taken into account previously. The U.S. during this period was paying more attention to regional and global issues in which “states” were the major players. The role of non-state actors like the Kurds was sidelined unless it was needed to further the interests of the U.S. – or its allies –

as was the case with Iraqi oil and with the border dispute between Iraq and Iran. In this context, U.S. engagement with the Kurds of Iraq was part of the attempts of the U.S. to maintain its interests as these related to Cold War rivalries, namely, the containment of Soviet influence in the region. The triumvirate relationship between the Kurds, the U.S. and Iran was complex, but without a superpower backing the Kurds, Kurdish leaders could not make headway. Rather, with the U.S. wanting to maintain a regional balance of power, every decision had to be made in the light of American interests.

The second stage of America's engagement with the Iraqi Kurds was also driven by the desire of the U.S. to balance the powers in the Middle East in the wake of the significant changes that took place in international politics during 1990 and 1991. These changes included the collapse of the Soviet Union and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The Kurdish issue gained considerable prominence internationally following Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, since this defeat had the potential to revive Kurdish demands for independence. As this study concludes, however, for reasons related to regional stability and the control of the region's oil resources, the U.S. pursued its pre-Gulf War policy of opposing Kurdish national aspirations and refraining from the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime, fearing its destabilising consequences in the region.

After Clinton came to power, America's regional relations began to deteriorate and its policies started to shift. The U.S. proceeded to support the Kurds, though once more for an ulterior motive, namely, to keep Saddam Hussein at bay. The U.S. brokered peace agreements between warring factions within the Kurdish nationalist movement; it never supported Kurdish secession from Iraq or self-determination, however. This was particularly pertinent during the period from 1990 to 2003 when support for the Kurdish north was necessary to maintain the unity of Iraq and regional stability. The green light was never given to Kurds to fulfil their aspirations for an independent nation-state.

U.S. policy with regard to Iraqi Kurdistan from 2003 onwards has been supportive, mainly to promote the unity of Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan is a landlocked region with potentially dangerous and unfriendly neighbours. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has managed to strengthen its diplomatic ties with the U.S., however. The KRG has succeeded to obtain international recognition through constitutional guarantees and legitimacy for the concept of Kurdish autonomy in Baghdad, and it has also taken an active role in the workings of the Iraqi state. There are various issues that remain unresolved, however, including the governance of disputed oil-rich territories such as Kirkuk. This is likely to lead to another U.S. policy objective being drafted – one that would endeavour to maintain “stability” in the future. In short, successive U.S. administrations have never fully supported the Kurds

or their cause. America's reluctance to endorse the Kurds of Iraq has always been based not on questions of Kurdish self-determination but on issues of regional circumstance and its own ulterior motives of self-interest.

**7.3. Research Objective 2:** *“To assess the nature of Kurdish national ambitions in Iraq and the effectiveness of the Kurdish promotion of these ambitions.”*

This study concludes that the fractured nature of the Kurdish population – fractures that are present along many lines (including linguistic and sectarian ones) and that are particularly evident in the case of the Kurds of Iraq – is reflected in the weakness of Kurdish claims for independence. Moreover, these schisms have perhaps been one of the major contributory factors behind the lack of American support for the Iraqi Kurds.

The study also concludes that Kurdish leadership has not only been “weak” with regard to claiming Kurdish independence but that it has also lacked “sufficient knowledge in the intricacies of international diplomacy and politics”.<sup>1</sup> One key fact that has contributed to the “immaturity of ... Kurdish leadership” is the way in which superior

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<sup>1</sup> Omar Sheikmous, interview with author, email correspondence, 03 May 2011.

Kurdish leaders are not seen as wise or diplomatic but as courageous, loyal and dignified instead.<sup>2</sup>

The most longstanding and costly Kurdish conflict is the intra-Kurdish feud amongst Kurdish political groups and tribes. This underpins Kurdish political culture and its competing parties and civic movements. It obtains in Iraqi Kurdistan as it does elsewhere and its effect is to compromise democracy and pluralism. The impact of this on American policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan could be said to have been critical since it has made any long-term U.S.–Kurdish alliance highly problematic.

**7.4. Research Objective 3:** *“To identify U.S. Middle East policy in relation to its attitudes towards Kurdish independence from Iraq.”*

This study concludes that, while regional stability plays a major role in determining U.S. approaches to independence movements, the overall U.S. position in this regard is based less on a consistent application of a principle (in this instance, the principle of self-determination) than on case-specific considerations about what is at stake in the particular countries concerned.

The question of Kurdish independence has never been actively pursued by the U.S. Instead, the U.S. has used the problem the Kurds

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<sup>2</sup> Mehrdad R. Izady, *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, (Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1992), p. 206.

represent for Iran, Iraq and Turkey to influence the behaviour of these nations. In Iraq in particular, the U.S. has not actively supported an independent Kurdistan partly because of the potential ramifications of this on its relations with Turkey, the Arab states and regional politics more generally. While the United States appears to support the Iraqi Kurds, its support of Kurdish aspirations is much more complex. Although the U.S. is seeking stability within the Middle East as a whole, it seems that it is preoccupied with access to hydrocarbons and building stable relationships at the expense of carefully constructed policies.

In an Israeli-U.S. context, there are U.S. domestic pressures which colour the issue, but also a long history whereby the Iraqi Kurds cannot secure support from Israel unless the U.S. is concurrently supporting them. As this study has demonstrated, however, apart from the U.S. influence on Israel, there have been other reasons for Israel's support for the Kurds of Iraq. The major reason originates from the existence of Jews in Iraqi Kurdistan: Jews that Israel wants to help. As the Kurdish Jews have immigrated to Israel, however, Israel's support for Iraq's Kurds has been for politico-strategic reasons. Israel has historically sought to establish links with non-Arabs and, within this context; it has provided help for the Kurds as enemies of the ruling Arab regimes who are hostile to Israel.

What is more, Turkey cannot be seen to support Iraqi Kurds because of fears that it will ignite a separatist movement within its own borders and destabilise its state. Indeed, the main reason for the U.S. having been opposed to Kurdish statehood in Iraq stems from the longstanding American–Turkish alliance. Although the U.S.–Turkish relationship has witnessed many difficulties since 2003, Turkey remains central to U.S. concerns in the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

Arab states have close economic links to the U.S. because they supply it with oil. This is the cornerstone of America’s relationships within the Middle East. Iraqi Kurds, since 2003, have turned to other nations outside the region to explore their vast oil and gas reserves, however. This could be perceived as a factor that has the potential to further Kurdish nationalist aspirations.

In light of the above conclusions, it appears that stability in the Middle Eastern region is the goal of the United States. Consequently, the U.S. does whatever it can to maintain this stability. This means that its policies towards Middle East actors are not necessarily consistent or based on alliances that are loyal. Unfortunately for Iraqi Kurds, this means that although the U.S. is likely to support the Kurds economically, and politically as well if they establish democratic institutions, it is only likely to do so for a limited period of time, that is, only until it remains in its interests not to look elsewhere.



**7.5. Research Objective 4:** *“To investigate U.S. policy options for the future of (Iraqi) Kurdistan by examining the possibility of endorsing the independence of a Kurdish state.”*

This thesis concludes that recent developments, notably rising Arab-Kurdish tensions in post-2003 Iraq and fears about whether the unity of Iraq can be maintained in the future, have given rise to Kurdish expectations of self-determination. This has posed challenges to stability in Iraq and to U.S. policy there since the U.S. supports a federal arrangement and hence the status quo in Iraq – not Kurdish independence.

While there are many features of the Kurdish population that are enjoyed by other independent states, such as a defined population and territory and an overarching government, its prospects for self-determination and fully-fledged statehood are doubtful – at least from the American perspective. Various areas of concern, such as that of Kirkuk, cause tension and hostility between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan regional government, particularly since they involve a dispute over territory. Moreover, as indicated earlier, the United States is seemingly in favour of the status quo. This is because it does not want to antagonise its allies in the region or incite violence between states that also have a Kurdish population, such as Turkey or Iran. In addition, by allowing the northern Kurdish region to become

independent, it would show that the central government is not able to provide good governance for its different ethnic groups.

Hence, federalism (or con-federalism) has been presented as the most likely way to govern a new Iraq or, in Michael Rubin's words, "U.S. policy ... [should support] federalism inside Iraq as the only reasonable solution".<sup>3</sup> Iraq has always been a hotbed of sectarian and inter-ethnic conflict, ever since its inception at the end of British rule. It has been ruled by dictators for almost the whole period of its entire existence, and now, with the help of the United States, Iraq is opting for a federal-style state. A power-sharing model is the one that Iraq is most likely to choose as the way forward but, as this study concludes, this brings to light more questions than it answers. What proportion of the representatives ought to be allowed for each political or tribal group and how often should it be reviewed? How should the natural resource revenues of Kirkuk be divided between different regions or ethnicities? Should the income earned from all the natural resources of Iraq be pooled into a central fund for its subsequent distribution?

As far as Iraq's stability and unity are concerned, however, whatever the outcome of such negotiations, the Kurds must arguably be treated as equals and afforded their basic rights. Their needs should be met; their language should be recognised officially; and their

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Rubin, interview with author, email correspondence, 29 January 2011.

regional government put in charge of their education services, their religious institutions and their criminal justice system. These “small” sacrifices by the central government – regardless of whether Iraq becomes federalist or not – would show the Kurds that their civic identity is valued and that their ethnicity is important, not only to Iraq as a whole but also to the Middle East and to American interests there.

### **7.6. Summary of Contributions**

The main contribution of this thesis to the field of Kurdish studies is its analysis of the strategic, economic and civic factors that explain what drives U.S. policy with regard to the desire of Iraqi Kurds for self-determination. This is done within a theoretical framework that highlights a “defensive positionalist perspective” and concerns about regional stability.

The interplay between the various factors that affect the U.S. approach to Kurdish independence from Iraq makes this research both necessary and original. This study has attempted to fill the gap in the literature about the Iraqi Kurdish struggle for independence with regard to those causal factors that shape American perspectives. As indicated earlier, most of the existing academic literature on this topic is historical in nature and has fallen short in terms of explaining the changes in U.S. policy towards the Iraqi Kurds. The existing academic

literature on this issue is under-theorised and talks in terms of a “betrayal” of the Kurds by the U.S. and other Western powers.<sup>4</sup>

This study analyses data using exclusive interviews with both American and Kurdish decision makers, politicians, think tank scholars and academics. It also uses governmental archives and U.S. diplomatic cables. The focus is on the Kurds of Iraq throughout, however. It remains firmly fixed on the attempt to provide a theoretical explanation of the impact of regional stability on U.S. perspectives on Kurdish independence from Iraq.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Stephen Zunes, “The United States and the Kurds: A Brief History”, *Foreign Policy In Focus*, 25 October 2007. Available at: <http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4670>; Diane E. King, “A 16-Year Cycle of Treachery: Iraqi Kurds and the U.S.”, *The International Herald Tribune*, 11 January, 2007; Liam D. Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) pp. 180-181; Michael J. Kelly, *Ghosts of Halabja: Saddam Hussein's Trial for the Kurdish Massacre*, (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 46.

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Brian Diffell	Legislative Director, Congressman Roy Blunt (Republican-Missouri).	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	04 June 2009
Brian Katulis	Senior Fellow at Centre for American Progress.	Email Correspondence.	03 February 2008
Daniel Pipes	Director of the Middle East Forum and Editor of Middle East Quarterly Journal.	Email Correspondence.	19 September 2011
David Pollock	Former Adviser on Middle East Policy, U.S. State Department.	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	11 June 2009
Denise Natali	The Minerva Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), National Defense University.	Email Correspondence.	27 April 2008
Efraim Inbar	Professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and the Director of Begin-Sadat (BESA) Centre for Strategic Studies.	Email Correspondence.	04 January 2010
Eric Herring	Reader in International Politics, University of Bristol.	Email Correspondence.	20 September 2011

Gregory Gause	Professor and Chair of Political Science Department, University of Vermont.	Email Correspondence.	23 September 2011
Harold Rhode	Former Senior Advisor for Middle Eastern Affairs at the Office of U.S. Secretary of Defense.	Face to Face, Arlington, Virginia, USA.	12 June 2009
Henri J. Barkey	Former U.S. State Department Official and Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University.	Email Correspondence.	21 September 2011
Jason Gluck	Director of Constitution-Making, Peace-building, and National Reconciliation Programme at United States Institute of Peace (USIP).	Email Correspondence.	16 November 2008
Jeff Weintraub	Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania.	Email Correspondence.	22 October 2011
Jonathan Morrow	Legal Adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government's Natural Resources Minister.	Email Correspondence.	23 November 2008
Lawrence Korb	Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense.	Email Correspondence.	22 February 2011
Liam Anderson	Associate Professor of Political Science at Wright State University.	Email Correspondence.	05 July 2011

Lincoln Davis	U.S. Congressman (Democrat-Tennessee).	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	09 June 2009
Mahmoud Othman	Prominent Kurdish Politician and Member of the Iraqi Parliament.	Face to Face, Baghdad, Iraq.	16 July 2008
Mark N. Katz	Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University.	Email Correspondence.	28 July 2008
Martin van Bruinessen	Professor of the Comparative Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies at Utrecht University	Email Correspondence.	28 February 2011
Michael Knights	Consultant to the U.S. Department of Defense, Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.	Email Correspondence.	03 August 2009
Michael Rubin	Former Staff Advisor for Iran and Iraq in the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense.	Email Correspondence.	29 January 2011
Noam Chomsky	Institute Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).	Email Correspondence.	24 October 2011
Omar Sheikmous	Prominent Kurdish Politician and Co- founder of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).	Email Correspondence.	03 May 2011

Patrick Garvey	Professional Staff Member for Middle East Affairs for the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	11 June 2009
Paul R. Pillar	Former National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East at U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC).	Email Correspondence.	20 February 2011
Qubad Talabani	Kurdistan Regional Government Representative to the U.S.	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	03 June 2009
Richard Perle	Former United States Assistant Secretary of Defence.	Face to Face, Maryland, USA.	11 June 2009
Robert Olson	Professor of Middle East and Islamic History at the University of Kentucky.	Email Correspondence.	22 October 2011
Shafiq Qazzaz	Former Kurdish Diplomat, Representative of the Kurdish Revolution in the U.S. during the 1960s.	Face to Face, Erbil, Kurdistan Region- Iraq.	10 August 2008
Sherifa Zuhur	Director of the Institute of Middle Eastern, Islamic, and Strategic Studies.	Email Correspondence.	21 June 2011
Stefan Wolff	Professor of International Security at the University of Birmingham.	Email Correspondence.	20 September 2011

Tristan J. Mabry	Assistant Research Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs, at the Naval Postgraduate School.	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	10 June 2009
Vaughn Shannon	Assistant Professor of Political Science at Wright State University.	Email Correspondence.	18 January 2009
Vence Serchuk	Foreign Policy Advisor to Senator Joseph Lieberman in the U.S. Congress.	Face to Face, Washington, D.C., USA.	15 June 2009
Wayne S. Cox	Associate Professor of Political Studies at Queen's University.	Email Correspondence.	15 June 2008

## ▪ Governmental & Diplomatic Documents

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