

An Independent Kurdish State: Achievable or Merely a Kurdish Dream?

Aram Rifaat*

University of South Australia

Despite the claim that Kurds intend to remain part of Iraq, it is highly unlikely that they will remain within the country's borders. For the past 80 years or more, Iraq's centralized system of control has failed to accommodate the Kurds, and it is apparent that federalism, too, is a form of government that will fail to satisfy them. The Kurdish goal of independence is apparent in the system they have developed within their state, and this could challenge any future plan for further integration back into Iraq. This goal is also evidenced in popular demands for independence in Kurdistan and in Kurdish politicians' warnings that they will separate if violence, intolerance, or tyranny continue in Iraq. The nature of Iraq's divided society constantly produces civil war and intolerance, and the reality is that it is a nation dominated by ethnic-nationalism and clashing ideologies and interests, but lacking a unifying national identity. Therefore, it is not Kurdish secession that causes continuing communal violence; it is the forced unification of people with different interests and ideologies.

Key Words: Kurds; Kurdistan; Kurdish role vis a vis Iraq; Kurdish independence; Iraq and federalism.

This article will scrutinize those factors that make it highly likely that Kurds will secede from Iraq. Initially, attention is given to whether consociational democracy is a viable system in Iraq. Then it highlights the issues of ethnic nationalism and considers whether the Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites are classified as ethnic-nationalist groups. Next, it traces the relationships between the Kurds and other Iraqi groups, and considers to what extent ethnic-nationalism affects the identity and loyalty of the Kurds. It also examines whether there are common interests or exclusive interests for each group on issues such as the role of Islam, foreign policy, parliament, the constitution, and the army. Discussions of these matters are linked to the issue of Kurdish secession from Iraq.

A number of obstacles are analyzed with regard to Kurdish secession from Iraq. They include that secession might result in civil war, whether an independent Kurdistan should be dealt with as part of a bigger package (that is, the partition of Iraq into three states) or whether it should be regarded as a separate case. Other issues are whether the future of mixed cities and the division of oil resources

*Address for correspondence: Aramrifaat07@yahoo.com

should be regarded as problems or solutions. Finally, it will evaluate the geopolitical barriers that could impede the Kurdish independent state, assess the likelihood of Kurdish secession leading to anarchy and instability in the region, and identify those factors that might help Kurds to overcome these obstacles.

In July 2003, the U.S. developed a power-sharing arrangement and it was embodied in the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council, which comprises 13 Arab Shiites, five Kurds, five Sunnis, a Christian and a Turkmen.¹ Later, this arrangement was followed in both selected and elected interim governments. Similarly, on 20 May 2006, representatives of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds agreed to form a 'national unity government'. The cabinet comprises 21 Shiites, eight Sunni Arabs, seven Kurds, and one Christian.² The posts of President, Prime Minister, and Parliamentary Speaker were allocated to representatives of the Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis, respectively. Furthermore, the consociational principles were emphasized in both interim and permanent Iraqi constitutions,³ and the National Unity Program promulgated by Prime Minister al-Maliki.⁴ In addition, Security Council Resolution 1546 endorsed the introduction of a form of ethnic power-sharing government.⁵ Thus, most Iraqi groups together with the occupiers and the international community currently seem to favor a power-sharing arrangement for the future Iraq.

Power-sharing or consociational democracy in heterogeneous societies is often a preferred alternative system for many scholars and commentators. Lijphart, for instance, insists that "in plural societies, the

¹ The Coalition Provisional Authority, "Iraqi Governing Council," The Coalition Provisional Authority, http://iraqcoalition.org/government/governing_council.html (accessed May 5, 2006).

² Kenneth Katzman and Alfred B. Prados, "The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*: <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/44128.pdf> (accessed May 5, 2006).

³ For example, Article 2 of the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional period stipulates that "this government shall be constituted in accordance with a process of extensive deliberations and consultations with cross-sections of the Iraqi people conducted by the Governing Council and the Coalition Provisional Authority and possibly in consultation with the United Nations". Similar principles can be found in articles 9, 12, 49 and 142 of the Iraqi constitution.

⁴ Nouri Maliki, "Principles and Foundations of the Political Program of the Iraqi Government," Office of Prime Minister: http://www.iraqgovernment.org/priemoffice/pressreleases_20-5-2006/pressreleases_004-20-5-2006.htm (accessed June 6, 2006).

⁵ United Nations, "Security Council Resolution 1546," United Nations Security Council, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/381/16/PDF/N0438116.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed June 6, 2006).

majority rule spells majority dictatorship and civil strife rather than democracy".⁶ Therefore, he suggests that:

What these societies need is a democratic regime that emphasizes consensus instead of opposition, that includes rather than excludes, and that tries to maximize the size of the ruling majority instead of being satisfied with a bare majority: consensus democracy.⁷

However, despite the apparent agreements of the main internal and external players in Iraq over power-sharing, there are many factors that make consociational democracy an unviable method in Iraq. Firstly, as Seaver notes, "power sharing devices have not consistently prevented intercommunion conflicts, yielded peace and stable democracy".⁸ For instance, the Cyprus consociational democracy lasted three years (1960-1963), Nigeria lasted only nine years (1967-1966), and Malaysia's coalition broke down during the 1969 riots.⁹ Further, the Lebanese consociational system broke down and threw the nation into 20 years of civil war.¹⁰

Secondly, there is considerable evidence that an Iraqi consociational democracy has been accepted reluctantly by Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, because of the demands of the U.S.-led occupiers. The U.S. seeks success in Iraq, and this objective requires the co-operation and participation of all groups in reconstructing the government and the state. It is important to note that, in the post-invasion years, Iraq's remaining (nominally) as a united country has not been because of the Iraqis' willingness, but because more than 140,000 U.S.-led coalition troops have enforced this goal. The U.S. troops have acted to provide checks and balances and to provide a safety valve to prevent further sectarian conflict. The U.S. has also worked as an arbitrator between Iraqi sects, imposed its vision on different groups, and pushed the Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis to compromise and negotiate with each other.

Moreover, there is an absence of consensus among Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis about most issues, including principles of power-sharing and

⁶ Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Pattern of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-one Countries*, (London, Yale University Press, 1984), 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸ Brenda M. Seave, "The Regional Sources of Power-sharing Failure: The Case of Lebanon," *Political Science Quarterly* 115 (Summer 2000), no. 2: 254.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁰ Michael Hudson, "Rebuilding Iraq: prospects for democracy," *Policy Forum, Cato Policy Report* 25 (2003), no. 5: 17, http://www.cato.org/pubs/policy_report/v25n5/cpr-25n5.pdf (accessed April 9, 2006).

what Iraq is and ought to be. Because they constitute a majority in Iraq, the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) has focused on simple majority rule against consociational power-sharing. As evidence of Sunni rejection of the power-sharing arrangement, the Sunnis boycotted the first national election, and voted overwhelmingly against the constitution.¹¹ Also they worked to remove those features of the constitution that had been developed in accordance with the consensus principles. The articles to which they objected were federalism, Iraq's identity, the allocation of oil income, and the question of Kirkuk. Further evidence can be seen in the demand of both Sunnis and Shiites for the U.S. to withdraw from Iraq. This demand is particularly emphasized by sections of both sects, which blame the Americans for their plight. The Shiites (such as the al-Sadrists) believe that the U.S. has prevented them from ruling Iraq, and the Sunnis believe that the U.S. caused them to lose power. So both sides believe that the withdrawal of U.S. troops would enable them to gain the upper hand and to unilaterally govern the country. If withdrawal were to occur, it would spell the end of power-sharing.

The Kurds, too, have shown distrust of the power-sharing arrangement.¹² As evidence of this, the Kurds insist that the issue of Kirkuk be resolved by the time the U.S. eventually withdraws. Nichervan Barzani¹³ explains that "Our fear is that Baghdad is weak today and ready to make a solution, but tomorrow it might become stronger and refuse to solve it".¹⁴ Their distrust is also apparent in that they refuse the presence of Iraqi Government institutions (including the Iraqi army) in Kurdistan. Moreover, there are few reasons for the Kurds to remain involved in the political process if the Kirkuk issue is resolved, whether Kirkuk is incorporated into Kurdistan or not.

All these factors prove that the formal power-sharing arrangement has been imposed by the U.S.. Power-sharing is strongly related to the presence of the occupiers and will probably not be sustained following a

¹¹ In the October 2005 national referendum, more than 96 percent of the voters in the predominantly Sunni governorate of Anbar rejected the constitution.

¹² Faleh A. Jabar, "Postconflict Iraq: a Race for Stability, Reconstruction, and Legitimacy," *United States Institution of Peace Special Report* (2004), no. 120: 3, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr120.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2006).

¹³ Nichervan Barzani is a Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

¹⁴ Gareth Smyth, "Interview with Nichervan Barzani," Interviewed by Gareth Smyth, *Financial Times*, Jan 28, 2005:

<http://search.ft.com/ftArticle?queryText=barzani&y=4&aje=true&x=12&id=0501280036> 31 (accessed April 3, 2006).

U.S. withdrawal. In other words, the power-sharing arrangement is more in response to the demands of the Americans than the inherent desire of Iraqis for consensus.

Furthermore, “the consensus principle”, as Lijphart explains, “is to let all of the important parties share executive power in a broad coalition”.¹⁵ In other words, consociational democracy is a system of compromise and accommodation, in which the different groups will likely be represented in the highest government positions and the cabinet according to their demographic size.¹⁶ However, on closer scrutiny of the characteristics of Iraqi society, it is clear that it is a heterogeneous community dominated by ethnic-nationalism, a clash of identities, conflicts of interest, and exclusive visions. With the departure of the occupying forces, the consociational regime will break apart, and indeed Iraq is likely to be partitioned. In such a case Kurdish secession would be inevitable and the Shiites would assume control over the rest of the country. Otherwise, civil war is highly probable.

One factor that makes it almost impossible for the Kurds to stay within Iraq is Sunni Arab and Kurdish ethnic nationalism. According to Smith, the distinctive feature of the ethnic nationalism of any group is “the group’s claim to be distinct from others with which it is in alliance or conflict, and that it is distinguished by unique cultural features”.¹⁷ He categorizes several forms of ethnic nationalism, and one group can have more than one form. Based on this definition, both Kurds and Sunnis are ethnic nationalists.

One form of Sunni ethnic nationalism is Pan-(Arab)-Nationalism. Smith explains “pan-Nationalists claim that their defined entity is far larger than the existing political unit” and “their ultimate goal is to establish a state or expand it in such a way that state and ethnic boundaries coincide”.¹⁸ According to Article two of the *Iraqi Interim Constitution-1958*¹⁹, Article one of the *Iraqi Interim Constitution-1964*²⁰,

¹⁵ Lijphart, *Democracies*, 23.

¹⁶ Andreas Wimmer, “Democracy and ethno-religious conflict in Iraq,” The Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, Stanford University (2002), <http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/20214/wimmer.pdf> (August 3, 2006).

¹⁷ Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, 2nd ed, (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁹ Iraqi National Congress, “Iraqi Interim Constitution-1958,” Iraqi National Congress (Arabic), <http://inciraq.com/Arabic/Classifieds/Iraqi%20Temp%20Constitution%201958.htm> (accessed March 24, 2006).

²⁰ Iraqi National Congress, “Iraqi Interim Constitution-1964,” Iraqi National Congress (Arabic), <http://inciraq.com/Arabic/Classifieds/Iraqi%20Temp%20Constitution%201964.htm>

Article one of the *Iraqi Interim Constitution-1968*²¹, and article five of the *Interim Constitution of Iraq-1990*²², Iraq is a part of a greater Arab nation.²³ The relevant Articles in the constitutions of 1964 and 1968 stipulate that the full unification of the Arab countries is the goal, and it is the Iraqi government's responsibility to work for that unification.

From these four Articles of successive constitutions, three interconnected issues can be identified. First, while the Sunnis governed Iraq (until 2003), the respective constitutions reflected the Sunni point of view. Second, Sunni Pan-Arab-nationalism was stipulated in the Iraqi constitutions, and this means that Pan-Arabism was formally recognized as national policy. Third, the successive Iraqi governments had an obligation to implement that policy. In other words, Sunni pan-Arab-nationalism was the Iraqi official state ideology, and in turn the Iraqi state and its institutions became instruments for implementing Pan-Arab-Nationalist projects.

Consequently, in past decades there were several attempts to entrench Iraq into the broader Arab world, though none was successful. In the early 1950s and in 1958 attempts were made to unite Iraq and Jordan.²⁴ This was followed by another attempt in 1963, this time entailing the unification of Iraq, Syria and Egypt, the proposed unified country to be called the United Arab Republic.²⁵ Finally, the most recent was the forced attempt at unification when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

In the post-Saddam era, the Sunnis have tried to re-impose their narrative on the whole of Iraq.²⁶ They have shown an uncompromising stand towards the Arab identity of Iraq, and that identity was one of the

(accessed March 2, 2006).

²¹ Iraqi National Congress, "Iraqi Interim Constitution-1968," Iraqi National Congress (Arabic), <http://inciraq.com/Arabic/Classifieds/Iraqi%20Temp%20Constitution%201968.htm> (accessed March 14, 2006).

²² International Constitutional Law, "Interim Constitution of Iraq-1990," International Constitutional Law, http://www.servat.unibe.ch/law/icl/iz01000_01.html#A001_ (accessed March 24, 2006).

²³ These various constitutions were officially titled as 'Interim' or 'Provisional' which implied that they were of a temporary nature. But in fact each continued for several years as the formal constitution of the country until it was replaced by another 'provisional' constitution. For example, the Constitution of 1958 remained in force until the regime was overthrown in 1963 and another constitution was promulgated in 1964 - and this sequence of changes continued after the Baathist coup in 1968.

²⁴ Reeve S. Simon, "The Hashemite 'Conspiracy': Hashemite Unity Attempts, 1921-1958," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (1974), no. 3: 320-327.

²⁵ Elie Podeh, "To Unite or not to Unite- that is not the Question: The 1963 Tripartite Unity Talks Reassessed", *Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2003), no. 1: 150.

²⁶ Jabar, "Post Conflict Iraq" : 3.

main Sunni goals in their involvement in the political process in 2005.²⁷ Based on this belief, many Sunnis rejected Kurds representing Iraq in foreign affairs and in the presidential post. They insisted that these posts be held by the Sunni Arabs because they are the most appropriate people for these positions.²⁸ However, they failed in their claim. They then proposed the formation of a ministry dedicated to Arab affairs, and they requested that the foreign ministry should be managed by Arabs.²⁹

Similarly, Kurdish claims for their distinctive culture are compatible with Smith's definition of ethnic nationalism. Kurdish ethnic nationalism can be categorized as a form of secessionism and irredentism. According to Smith, Secessionism stems from two elements. One element is cultural homogeneity. As Bengio notes, "as far as language, race, and common history are concerned the Kurds differ from the Iraqi Arabs".³⁰ The other element is the existence of that homogeneous group within a larger political unit.³¹ However, in addition of their being part of Iraq as a 'larger entity', the Kurds have striven for independence. In other words, as Bengio explains, the Kurds have been challenging the territorial framework of Iraq, and have sought to exclude themselves from Iraq ever since the framework took shape in 1926.³²

Another distinctive feature of Kurdish ethnic nationalism is irredentism. Kurdish irredentism desires to bring together Kurdish populations that have historically become separated. "This group", Smith notes, "is both incorporated and divided up between different oppressive units".³³ In this regard, Chatham House explains:

Iraqi Kurdistan is geographically located at the heart of greater Kurdistan and shares contiguous boundaries with Kurds in other countries, Turkey, Syria and Iran. The links between Kurds of those

²⁷ Iraqi Accordant Front, "Our Political Programme and Election Programme 2005," Iraqi Accordant Front (Arabic):

<http://www.altawafuk.com/ar/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=7>
(accessed 5 May 5, 2006).

²⁸ Ma'ad Fayad, "Kurdish PM Nechirvan Barzani Discusses Security, Economic Issues," Asharq Alwasat, June 13, 2006, English Edition:

<http://www.asharqalwasat.com/english/news.asp?section=3&id=5291> (accessed July 19 2006).

²⁹ "Kurds Will not Let Go of Foreign Ministry," *The Globe*, May 2, 2006, no. 55, 5.

³⁰ Ofra Bengio, "Nation Building in Multiethnic Societies: the Case of Iraq", in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, ed. Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor, (Columbia International Affairs Online, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 1999), pp. 149-169, <http://www.ciaonet.org/book/bengio/index.html>.

³¹ Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, 223.

³² Bengio, "Nation Building in Multiethnic Societies".

³³ Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, 218.

regions predate the formation of the four nation states. They are united by a common language and experiences of discrimination, and currently there is a resurgence of pan-Kurdish feeling across the four countries.³⁴

Moreover, Masud Barzani insists that the Kurds in these countries are one nation, and “it is the legitimate right of the Kurdish nation to be united and to build its independent state”.³⁵

In this regard, flags constitute important symbols of Kurdish secessionism and irredentism. In post-Saddam Iraq, Kurds reject the Iraqi flag’s flying in Kurdistan. Their rejection stems from the flag’s three stars. The stars originally signaled the proposed union of Iraq with the two Arab nations of Egypt and Syria in the 1960s.³⁶ Instead, the Kurdish flag, which the Kurds of Syria, Turkey and Iran see as their flag, is flying everywhere on official places in Kurdistan. The Kurds also have their own ‘National Anthem’ which is different from the Iraqi National Anthem, and most of the political organisations across ‘Greater Kurdistan’ use the same Kurdish Anthem.

Another symptom of Kurdish irredentism is trans-nationalism. According to Natali, “since the state-formation period, trans-border networks have increased the significance of Kurdish nationalist mobilizations”.³⁷ Natali further explains the trans-nationalist nature of the Iraqi Kurds, stating:

Qazi Mohammed’s Kurdistan Democratic party in Iran (KDPI) and Said Elci’s KDP in Turkey benefited, ... from Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his traditional supporters in the KDP Iraq. ...And Jalal Talabani maintained important cross-border support networks with their urbanized leftist counterparts in Turkey and Iran.³⁸

The Iraqi Kurds also significantly participated in the formation of the Republic of Mahabad³⁹, which formed in Iranian Kurdistan in the

³⁴ Chatham House, “Iraq in Transition: Vortex or Catalyst?,” Chatham House (2004): 8: <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/pdf/research/mep/BP0904.pdf> (May 23, 2006).

³⁵ Ma’ad Fayad, “Interview with Iraqi Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani,” Asharq Alawsat, June 7, 2006, English Edition, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=5221> (accessed September 9, 2006).

³⁶ Babak Rahimi, “Flagging a new Iraq: Failure of a National Symbol,” *Nebula, a Journal of Multidisciplinary Scholarship* 1, (June 2004) no. 1:39.

³⁷ Denise Natali, “Transnational Networks: New Opportunities and Constraints for Kurdish Statehood,” *Middle East Policy* 6, (2004), no. 1, 111.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁹ Following World War II, the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in north-western Iran was a rump Kurdish state that was proclaimed on 22 January 1946, but collapsed by the end of that year.

1940s.⁴⁰

Yet another symptom of Kurdish ethnic nationalism is a lack of feeling of belonging to Iraq and the absence (or weakness) of a sense of Iraqi national identity among the Kurds. The absence of an Iraqi identity stems from their belief--as confirmed in the Constitution of the Iraqi Kurdistan region-1992⁴¹ and the draft Constitution of the Kurdistan Region⁴²--that Kurdistan is compulsorily annexed to Iraq. Therefore, they have never conceded the primacy of the Iraqi state⁴³, and many Kurds do not consider themselves Iraqis.⁴⁴ In other words, the Kurdish rebellion against Iraq has not been for fair representation within the country, and it has aimed to free Kurds from Iraq. Thus the Kurdish-Iraq difference is the sum of conflicts of contradictory ethnic nationalism, identities and loyalties.

What further widens the rift between Kurds and Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis is these communities' similar response to their partner groups outside Iraq. The rise and fall of any movements in the 'greater' Kurdish homeland have a direct reflection on their fellows in Iraq. For example, in 1945 the Iranian Kurdistan Democratic Party was established and soon after, in 1946, the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), was founded. Later, the KDP led the largest, longest and best-organized Kurdish rebellion from 1961 to 1975. Similarly, the Pan-Arab Ba'ath party was established in Syria in the early 1940s and a few years later its branch in Iraq was founded.⁴⁵ Then in 1952 an Egyptian junta (affiliated with Pan-Arab-Nationalism) commenced a coup against the royal regime, and in 1958 an Iraqi junta (pan-Nationalists) did the same.

Iraq's Shiite majority "is concentrated in the southern plain, and they extend into the neighboring overwhelmingly Shiite Republic of Iran".⁴⁶ There is also a shared sense of identity between Iraqi and

⁴⁰ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed., (London: I. B. Taurus, 2004) 241-243.

⁴¹ Kurdistan Regional Government, "Constitution of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region 1992," Kurdistan Regional Government, http://www.krg.org/articles/article_detail.asp?showsecondimage=&RubricNr=107&ArticleNr=3882 (accessed March 21, 2006).

⁴² Draft Constitution of the Kurdistan Region, PUK Media (Arabic), <http://www.pukmedia.com/arabicnews/24-9/dastur.pdf> (accessed September 29, 2006).

⁴³ Gareth Stansfield, "Divide and Heal," *Prospect Magazine*, no. 122, May 2006.

⁴⁴ Henri J. Barkey and Ellen Laipson, "Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq's Future," *Middle East Policy* 12, (2005) no. 4: 70.

⁴⁵ John F. Devlin, "The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphoses," *The American Historical Review* 96 (1991), no. 5: 1399.

⁴⁶ Dilip Hiro, "Saddam the Phoenix," *The Nation* 268 (1999), no. 18: 39.

Iranian Shiites and Iraqi Shiites see Iran's support as their hope to secure their domination in Iraq.⁴⁷ The Iranian revolution of 1979 initially mobilized the Shiite identity. For example, after Shiite clerics founded the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, in 1982 the Iraqi Shiites formed their own political party, The Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) with Iranian help.⁴⁸ Moreover, Shiites "have periodically served Iran as instruments for destabilizing Iraq"⁴⁹, and SCIRI even fought on the Iranian side in the Iran-Iraq war.⁵⁰ Contrary to this reflection by the Iraqi groups of their partners outside Iraq, there is a limited development of national parties in Iraq.⁵¹ It is hard to find mainstream parties among any groups that have been established as a positive reflection of another mainstream party. The Shiite al-Dawa, SCIRI and al-Sadr's parties' policies and goals are totally different from those of Kurdish and Sunni-Arabs mainstream parties.

Thus, each of Iraq's three communities is mirrored more by political and social movements outside rather than within the country, and Baghdad is not the main meeting point or the common capital. Furthermore, the loyalties of Iraqi groups are based primarily on ethnic/sectarian factors and on a belief in a 'Greater Homeland' which extends across the borders of several neighboring countries. The Kurds dream of an independent Kurdistan, the Sunnis of a Greater Arab Nation, and the Shiites of stronger links with Iran. However, notions of a greater Kurdistan (comprising elements of Iran, Syria, Turkey and Iraq) are in conflict with Sunni dreams of a greater Arab Nation and Shiite concepts of links with Iran to create a greater Shiite nation.⁵²

⁴⁷ Peter W. Galbraith, "Last Chance for Iraq," *New York Review of Books* 52 (2005), no. 15: 20-25.

⁴⁸ Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 34.

⁴⁹ Chatham House, "Iraq in Transition".

⁵⁰ Joost R. Hiltermann, "Reviewing the Constitution: From Blueprint for Iraq's Dissolution to Genuine National Compact?," *International Crisis Group*, (March 2006), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4493&l=1>.

⁵¹ Many argue that the Iraqi List of Allawi is a cross-ethnic or sectarian list, and that therefore it is a national party (bloc). However, the election results clearly suggest the weak performance of his bloc. In January's election his bloc gathered only 14 percent of Iraqi votes, and in December's election only nine percent. Moreover, no a single Kurd was on his list, which was mostly exclusive to Arabs. Therefore, on the one hand, the Allawi bloc gained support from less than one in ten Iraqi Arabs (Shiite and Sunnis). On the other hand, his bloc is another that is not representative of all ethnic groups, and it is similar to the Kurdistan List which is a secular nationalist list.

⁵² Although Shiites are a majority in Iraq, Sunnis were the rulers. The narrative of Iraq's identity reflected the Sunni point of view. In all the constitutions, particularly during the republic era, it was emphasized that Iraq was part of the Arab nation. Therefore, the Kurds were not

Shiite and Sunni conflicts are rooted in Islamic history, and for many centuries Iraq has been in the forefront of internal Islamic conflicts around the globe. Many events in recent years testify to the levels of conflict between the two worlds. Among other examples are eight years of the Iraq-Iran war, Iraqi regime's slogan of 'no Shiite after today' following the Shiites' uprising in 1991⁵³, and Shiite and Sunni radicals killing each other on identity in the post-invasion period.⁵⁴ Moreover, some Shiites have struggled to remove the Sunni narrative of the Arabic identity of Iraq in the post-invasion era.⁵⁵ In other words, the internal tensions in Iraq are not merely the sum of the Iraqi differences between these groups; they also represent the clash of several of the main opposing identities in the Middle East.

Moreover, 80 years of conflict between these contradictions has created exclusive interests for each group. There is a unique balance between the former rulers, the Sunnis, and the subjugated Shiites and Kurds. The Sunni's main interest is to recover their grip on power while keeping the country's territorial integrity. Iraqi Kurds, who comprise one-fifth of the population, have felt deprived of their basic right to self-determination and an independent Kurdistan, and so their main interest is to escape from its boundaries. Shiites form about 60 percent of Iraq's population, and their main interest has been to exercise their right as the majority to run the country. Hence, the key interests of Iraq's ethnic/sectarian groups are diametrically opposed and seemingly irreconcilable.

These opposite interests have resulted in the creation of exclusive visions for each group over many things. The role of Islam is one example. Most Shiites and Sunnis insist on an Islamic identity for Iraq, but they inherited the problems of Islam. Al-Marashi notes that the Kurds believe that "an Islamicized state will merely attempt to subsume the Kurdish identity under the banner of Islam"⁵⁶, and that therefore such a state would be incompatible with their ambitions. As evidence of

directly in conflict with Shiites.

⁵³ Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World*, (New York and London: WW Norton & Company, 1993) 97.

⁵⁴ Both Shiite and Sunni fighters in Iraq often are accused of using traffic checks and pulling people off the streets and checking their ID to see if they have Sunni or Shiite names to find and kill members of the opposite sect, solely on the basis of their religious identity.

⁵⁵ Khalid Salih, "Kurdish Reality in an Emerging Iraq," *Middle East policy* 6 (2004), no. 1: 123.

⁵⁶ Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "Iraq's Constitutional Debate," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9 (2005), no. 3: 156.

this, Jalal Talabani insists that “Kurds will never submit to an Islamic order”⁵⁷, and Masud Barzani confirmed that Kurds “won’t accept an Islamic identity being imposed on Iraq”.⁵⁸ Moreover, a survey of the role of Islam which was published in *Awene* shows that only three percent of Kurds want Islam to become a main source of legislation, as stipulated in the Iraqi constitution.⁵⁹ Thus, finding a middle ground, which is essential for holding the country together, is almost impossible.

Foreign policy is another area of disagreement. Though both Shiites and Sunnis express their hostility to Israel, it is often reported that the Kurds ‘hold agreements’ with Israelis.⁶⁰ Moreover, counter-accusations apply by both Shiites and Sunnis in regard to Iraq’s relationships to its neighbors. Shiites view Iran as a “friend, the land of co-religionists, and a model of a powerful Shiite state”, while Sunnis see it as “the ancient enemy that now threatens the Iraqi Arab identity”.⁶¹

Finally, each group has its exclusive interpretation of democracy. Many Shiites believe that democracy entitles them to run Iraq and to impose their version of an Islamic state.⁶² By contrast, as Masud Barzani explains:

The Kurdish issue is not an issue of citizenship to be settled in a democratic atmosphere by representatives of one side or on its behalf. The issue of the Kurds is a political and national issue.⁶³

Furthermore, The Kurdish ambition for an independent state is evidenced in two unofficial referendums that were conducted by the Referendum Movement in Kurdistan (RMK).⁶⁴ In 2004 the RMK collected 1.7 million signatures, and in the second about 98 percent of

⁵⁷ Kurdish Media, “Talabani: Kurds will Never Submit to an Islamic Order,” interviewed by *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, trans. W Lezgin, Kurdish Media, <http://www.kurdmedia.com/inter.asp?id=10117> (accessed September 6, 2006).

⁵⁸ Institute for War and Peace Reporting, “Iraqi Crisis Report: Kurds Hold Out on Key Demands,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), no. 136, http://www.iwpr.net/?apc_state=hkuficr254122&l=en&s=f&o=254123 (accessed September 16, 2006).

⁵⁹ *Awene*, “Most Citizens Demand Human Rights Principles as a Basis for Constitution” (Kurdish), no. 44, November 14, 2006.

⁶⁰ Seymour M Hersh, “Plan B”, *New Yorker* 80 (2004), no. 17: 55; Ivan Eland, “The Way Out of Iraq: Decentralizing the Iraqi Government,” *International Journal on World Peace* 22 (2005), no. 1: 42.

⁶¹ Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005) 173.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶³ Masud Barzani, “Iraqi Kurdish Claim for Federalism,” Kurdistan Regional Government, <http://old.krg.org/docs/mb-federalism-kurdistan-dec03.asp> (accessed May 29, 2006).

⁶⁴ It is a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO).

the two million eligible voters expressed support for independence.⁶⁵ In other words, the Kurds interpret democracy as self-determination, and prefer to exercise their democratic right to form their own state. Many Sunnis, on the other hand, have a strong animosity towards democracy as a means of ‘usurping’ their ‘right’ to be Iraq’s rulers, and as a way to provoke the Kurds to separate from Iraq. Disagreement over each of these affairs is deep enough to become a source of violence and confrontation.

Contradictions over nationalism, identity, loyalty, and interests are so ingrained that no solution (centralism, a consociational democratic system, or federal arrangements) other than secession can satisfy the Kurds and dampen their aspirations for independence. Under a centralized government and pan-Arab-nationalism the Kurds experienced “80 years of nightmare repression and genocide”.⁶⁶ For their part, “the Kurds have been in an almost constant state of revolt”.⁶⁷ A consociational system, too, would fail to satisfy the Kurds because it would not resolve these contradictions. As Elazar notes, this is because “ethnic-nationalism is the most egocentric of all forms of nationalism and the most difficult basis on which to erect a system of constitutionalized power-sharing”.⁶⁸

Also, ethnic-nationalism is a fundamental obstacle to sustainability of a federal system. Elazar explains that ethnic-nationalism “is the strongest force against federalism”.⁶⁹ Furthermore, he comments that “all aspects of society fostering uncompromising positions make federalism more difficult if not impossible”. Consequently, he concludes, “ethnic federations are among the most difficult to sustain because constituent units based on ethnic-nationalisms normally do not want to merge into the kind of tight-knit units necessary for federation”.⁷⁰

Thus, all roads lead to an independent Kurdistan. Because of these contradictions, the constant reproduction of violence, hatred and instability has become an Iraqi reality. To terminate this situation, Kurdish secession and the creation of an independent Kurdish state (under the protection of the international community) is the best long-term solution.

⁶⁵ Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*: 170-1

⁶⁶ Galbraith, “Last chance for Iraq”

⁶⁷ Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq*, 35.

⁶⁸ Daniel J. Elazar, “International and Comparative Federalism,” *Political Science and Politics* 26 (1993), no. 2: 194.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

One counter-argument could be that the Iraqis already have their own parliament, constitution, and national army which are symbols of national unity and harmony and that help them to jointly consider their problems and find solutions through negotiation, consensus and compromise. However, in reality, these three institutions mirror the clash of identities and interests, and conflicts within the nation, and they are additional sources of division. Parliament reflects the divisions and tensions among the rival groups. Shiites vote for Shiite religious parties, the Kurds for Kurdish nationalist parties, and Sunni Arabs for Sunni religious parties or ex-Baathist nationalists.⁷¹ Similarly, while the majority of Shiites and Kurds voted for the constitution, the majority of Sunnis rejected it. Constitutional amendment has become the main task of the Sunnis in the post-December election period, but this is an issue that other groups reject and it has become a source of further division.

The national army is another institution built on an ethnic/sectarian basis, but it has been penetrated by militias that have little national loyalty. According to Galbraith⁷², of the 115 army battalions, 60 are Shiite and are located in southern Iraq, 45 are Sunni Arab and stationed in the Sunni governorates, and nine are Peshmerga stationed in Kurdistan.⁷³ Hence, the country has remained whole more in name than in reality.

Another counter-argument is that fragmentation would likely result in a series of bloody civil wars. In particular, there would be conflict over borders and control of the mixed cities. However, supporters of this argument have declined to identify the Kurdish independent state as a separate case. For example, Cordesman argues that “Iraq does not have a neat set of ethnic dividing lines”. “Recent elections”, he explains, “have made it clear that Iraq’s cities and 18 governorates all have significant minorities”.⁷⁴ Further, he argues, “the country is heavily

⁷¹ The new Iraqi government comprises five main coalitions; the Shiite UIA (with 130 seats), the Kurdistan list KA (with 53 seats), Sunnis Islamists IAF (44), and Iraqi List IL (25). All these blocs are either ethnic or sectarian based.

⁷² Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, 186.

⁷³ It is important to realize that no ethnic or sectarian group in Iraq wants to see other groups’ soldiers in their region. For example, in his interview with Ma’ad Fayad Barzani explains that “the Kurds did not take part in the Al-Fallujah battle, but the Iraqi Army had some Kurds in its formations. They were there just like the Arabs, but there was a hue and cry over this issue. The Kurds were accused of entering Al-Fallujah and killing the Arabs. Kurds within the Iraqi units participated with the other units in attacking a site or mosque in which there were terrorists or weapons. I do not exactly know what was there. Others then said the Kurds attacked a Shiite mosque” (see Endnote no. 31).

⁷⁴ Anthony H. Cordesman, “Dividing Iraq: Think Long and Hard First,” Center for

urbanized, with nearly 40 percent of the population in the divided Baghdad and Mosul areas". It is difficult to split cities, and any effort to divide the country, he suggests, "would require massive relocations, ethnic cleansing, and controversy over the borders".⁷⁵ Thus, the Kurdish secession is not dealt with as a separate case, but assumptions are based on considering the issue of Kurdish independence as part of a bigger package, namely the partition of Iraq into three separate states (Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis).

However, there are many factors suggesting that there is a clear distinction between Kurdish demands and those of the Sunnis and Shiites. First, the Kurdish struggle is focused on devising a way to escape from Iraq. By contrast, in the pre-invasion era, as Dawisha notes, "the Shiites have never demanded autonomy, let alone political independence; they simply wanted a shift in the political and economic balance".⁷⁶ In other words, Arab (Sunni and Shiite) groups are more concerned with asserting their control over the country. Further, Kurds see their case as an ethnic-national one that is quite distinct from those of the other groups and this even can be seen in the Kurdish deal with federalism. For example, Article 2 of the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq*⁷⁷, which is an initial Kurdish proposal for federalism in a future Iraq, suggests a federal system based on two regions, a Kurdish and an Arabic.⁷⁸

Furthermore, Masud Barzani explains, while Kurds maintain their control over the Kurdistan region, they leave it to the Shiites and Sunnis

Strategic and International Studies:

http://www.csis.org/index.php?option=com_csis_pubs&task=view&id=3186 (June 29, 2006).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Adeer Dawisha, "The Prospects for Democracy in Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities," *Third World Quarterly* 26 (2005), no. 4/5: 726.

⁷⁷ Kurdistan Regional Government, "Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq 2002", Kurdistan Regional Government, http://old.krg.org/docs/Federal_Const.asp (accessed September 1, 2006).

⁷⁸ Article Two of the *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Iraq* (2002) stipulates that:

"The Federal Republic of Iraq consists of two regions:

i) The Arabic Region that includes the middle and southern regions of Iraq along with the Province of Ninevah in the north excepting the districts and sub-districts that have a Kurdish majority as mentioned in the item below.

ii) The Kurdish Region that includes the Provinces of Kirkuk, Sulaimaniyah and Erbil within their administrative boundaries before 1970 and the Province of Duhok and the districts of Aqra, Sheikhan, Sinjar and the sub-district of Zimar in the Province of Ninevah and the districts of Khaniqin and Mandali in the Province of Diyala and the district of Badra in the Province of Al-Wasit" (see Endnote no. 65).

to develop their own particular arrangements with the capital.⁷⁹ The Sunni Arabs also deal differently with the Kurdish claims and with Shiites. Many commentators argue that the Sunni Arabs could grudgingly tolerate a federal Kurdistan but not a federated Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni Arab Iraq.⁸⁰

Second, the nature of the Sunni-Shiite conflict over Baghdad is quite different from the Kurdish claims to control Kirkuk and other disputed areas. The current conflict is not about who should control specific cities but who should govern the country. Since Baghdad is the capital and is a symbol of national rule and Iraqi control, the country can be ruled through Baghdad. Therefore it is the centre of confrontation, dislocation and civil war between Shiites and Sunnis who struggle to keep the country united but under their control. In other words, the sectarian/ethnic violence is not between secessionist groups, or between separatists and defenders of national unity. It is between those groups who advocate centralism and Iraq's unity.

Third, the Kurdish approach to control Kirkuk is different from the approach adopted by Sunnis and Shiites to gain control of Baghdad and other mixed cities. Whereas Kurds "are waging their property disputes with law suits rather than guns"⁸¹, and applied to the constitution to gain control of Kirkuk, the other groups have resorted to violence. The nature of the problem in Kirkuk is different from the situation in Baghdad. The demography of Kirkuk is partly artificial, while that of Baghdad is natural. The artificiality of Kirkuk comes from the policy of Arabisation that was recognized by the constitution.⁸² The Kurdish claim has not been violated by ethnic cleansing as has happened in Baghdad. By contrast, a peaceful way has been created to solve the dispute, and

⁷⁹ Xebat, "The President of Kurdistan in a Special Interview with Xebat," (Kurdish), no. 2097, March 29, 2006.

⁸⁰ International Crisis Group, "The Next Iraq War? Sectarian and Civil Conflict," Crisis Group Middle East Report, no. 52, http://www.navend.de/aktuell/pdf/2006-03-06/the_next_iraqi_war_sectarianism_and_civil_conflict.pdf (accessed November 2, 2006); Hania Farhan and Simon Williams, "Outlook for 2006-07: Political Outlook," Economist Intelligence Unit Limited- Country Report: Iraq: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=4&hid=3&sid=f9eef2e4-2d4b-4517-b95a-33a9273c57a2%40sessionmgr104> (accessed April 21, 2006); Ma'ad Fayad, "Iraqi President Jalal Talabani Talks to Asharq Al-Awsat," Asharq Alawsat, English Edition: <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=3&id=4972> (accessed September, 28, 2006).

⁸¹ "Can Kurds and Arabs be Reunited?," *Economist* 368 (2003), no. 8342: 44-45.

⁸² Coalition Provisional Authority, "Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period," Coalition Provisional Authority, <http://www.cpa-iraq.org/government/TAL.html> (accessed March 16, 2006).

this pathway to a peaceful resolution has been constitutionalized so that it is the duty of the new government to implement the relevant articles.

This Constitutional solution has functioned as a form of safety valve. It has calmed the Kurds by formally recognizing the Arabization of Kirkuk as “the injustice caused by the previous regime”.⁸³ Because the article broadly conforms to Kurdish visions for the city, the Kurds were convinced not to act unilaterally and take Kirkuk by force. It has also restrained direct or random action by individuals seeking to reclaim property.⁸⁴ Instead, displaced Kurds were encouraged to use the courts and legal avenues. For example, by May 2005 nearly 37,000 claims had been registered in the offices of the Iraq Property Claims Commission (ICCP) in Kirkuk.⁸⁵ Furthermore, as Rizgar Ali explains⁸⁶, almost 12,000 Arab settler families have expressed willingness to return to their former cities if they were to be compensated⁸⁷. Finally, the Iraqi government insistence on its obligation to implement the constitutional article related to Kirkuk is another positive indicator.⁸⁸ Consequently, Kirkuk is more secure and stable than many other Iraqi mixed cities. Nevertheless, contrary to the popular claim, leaving these disputed areas unresolved means leaving the future of these cities as a time bomb that could explode at any time.

⁸³ Article 140 stipulates that “First: The executive authority shall undertake the necessary steps to complete the implementation of the requirements of all subparagraphs of Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law. Second: The responsibility placed upon the executive branch of the Iraqi Transitional Government stipulated in Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law shall extend and continue to the executive authority elected in accordance with this Constitution, provided that it accomplishes completely (Normalization and census and concludes with a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens), by a date not to exceed the 31st of December 2007”. However, Article 58 of Transitional Administrative Law stipulates that “The Iraqi Transitional Government, and especially the Iraqi Property Claims Commission and other relevant bodies, shall act expeditiously to take measures to remedy the injustice caused by the previous regime’s practices in altering the demographic character of certain regions, including Kirkuk, by deporting and expelling individuals from their places of residence, forcing migration in and out of the region, settling individuals alien to the region, depriving the inhabitants of work, and correcting nationality”.

⁸⁴ Sometimes individuals or small groups of two different ethnicities might quarrel over properties or land, and this could spark a wider confrontation between these groups.

⁸⁵ The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2005, Iraq: country reports on human rights practices 2004, US Department of State:

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41722.htm> (accessed 24 September 2006).

⁸⁶ Rizgar Ali is the Kirkuk’s Provincial Council president.

⁸⁷ Rizgar Ali, We will not allow the civil war to break out in Kirkuk, PUK Media (Arabic), <http://www.pukmedia.com/arabicnews/4-5/news22.html>, accessed (14 November 2006).

⁸⁸ In article 22 of his programme for the formation the permanent government, al-Maliki pledged to implement Article 140 of the Constitution by the end of 2007 (see Endnote no. 3).

Fourth, Kurdistan functioned successfully as a semi-independent state between 1991 and 2003, the most peaceful period in its recent history. This period, which is described by many commentators as the Kurds' 'golden era'⁸⁹, demonstrates that secession is the best means to resolve the 80-year conflict between the Kurds and Baghdad. It is also interesting to note that the former Yugoslavia passed through a similar experience. Ethnic cleaning and identity-based conflicts, which were common in that country after the collapse of the Yugoslavian regime, were ended when Yugoslavia was divided into constituent states. For all these reasons the Kurdish case should be treated separately. In other words, whether or not Iraq is partitioned, there is a case for an independent Kurdistan.

Another reason commonly cited against partition is the possibility of conflict over oil resources. For example, Cordesman argues that:

Once the nation effectively divides, so does its major resource, and in ways that make the territorial losers in non-oil areas effectively dysfunctional. This leaves the losers with little choice other than further conflict.⁹⁰

Again, this statement is based on the likely outcome if the country were to be partitioned into three states, and not merely on the separation of Kurdistan. By considering Kurdistan's case separately from other parts of Iraq it becomes clear that Cordesman's claim is inaccurate. The Kirkuk region sits atop only as much as 10 billion barrels of Iraq's 112 billion barrels of proven oil reserves.⁹¹ Thus, even if Kurdistan were separated with Kirkuk, almost 90 percent (or more than 100 billion barrels) of the nation's oil resources would remain in Iraq.⁹² Moreover, Cordesman's solution for the problem of ownership of the oil revenue is to keep it in the hands of Baghdad. His justification is that "more than 90 percent of Iraq's government revenue comes from oil

⁸⁹ Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, "The Implications of Elections for Federalism in Iraq: Toward a Five-region Model," *Publius* 35 (2005), no. 3: 371; Gareth Stansfield, "The Kurdish Dilemma: the Golden Era Threatened," *The Adelphi Papers* 354 (2002): 135.

⁹⁰ Cordesman, "Dividing Iraq".

⁹¹ Cameron W. Barr, "Kirkuk, a Mirror of Iraq's Schisms," *Christian Science Monitor* 95 (2003), no. 67: 6; Elizabeth Rubin, "Spring Time," *New Republic* 228 (2003), no. 11; International Crisis Group, "Iraq: Allaying Turkey's Fears Over Kurdish Ambitions," *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, no. 35: 1:

http://www.iraqfoundation.org/reports/pol/2005/35_iraq_allaying_turkey_s_fears_over_kurdish_ambitions.pdf htm (accessed September 9, 2006).

⁹² This calculation is based only on the proven oil reserves.

exports”.⁹³ But giving Baghdad the right to manage oil revenue will increase the possibility of the strongest group exploiting the funds to dominate the nation and so return it to tyranny. Besides, Kurds see that their protection from Baghdad’s threats depends on preventing Baghdad from controlling all the oil resources. As Nechirvan Barzani explains, “for the Kurds, oil was a curse because the central government used the revenue to buy weapons which were then used against them”.⁹⁴ Therefore it would continue to be a source of confrontation. Particularly, the Kurds see that it is their right to develop and invest their oilfields by themselves.

The claim that Sunnis would be the losers in partition (to three states) because they would receive little revenue from oil is exaggerated. There are “reports of major oil deposits in al-Anbar, an almost exclusively Sunni Arab governorate, no exploration has taken place”.⁹⁵ Similar information was reported by the Energy Information Administration, confirming that deep oil-bearing formations located mainly in the vast Western Desert region could yield large additional oil resources (possibly another 45-100 billion barrels), but that these have not been explored.⁹⁶ Because al-Anbar province covers a significant part of Iraq’s western desert, the Sunnis would have future access to a huge oil resource, even if three independent states were formed. Further, most Iraqi industries (including Iraq’s two largest oil refineries) are located in Sunni provinces.

Another counter-argument is that the geopolitical barriers are the main obstacle to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state and are the main reason behind the Kurdish leaders’ denial of their ambitions for independence. We will describe each of these barriers without discussion, but then follow them with a consideration of their merits.

One geopolitical barrier that is often promoted as a reason for rejecting Kurdish independence is that such a state would be confronted by hostile surrounding countries. The popular argument is that an

⁹³ Cordesman, “Dividing Iraq”.

⁹⁴ Nechirvan Barzani 2005, “Why Kurdistan Insists on Kirkuk”, Financial Times, <http://registration.ft.com/registration/barrier?referer=http://www.kurdmedia.com/articles.asp?id=10342&location=http%3A/news.ft.com/cms/s/52ecd8ba-0e0e-11da-aa67-00000e2511c8.htm> (accessed September 9, 2006).

⁹⁵ International Crisis Group, “The Next Iraq War?”: 14.

⁹⁶ Energy Information Administration, “Iraq; Oil”, Energy Information Administration (EIA), Official energy statistics from the U.S. Government: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Iraq/Oil.html> (accessed 19 October 2006).

independent Iraqi Kurdistan could foster wider Kurdish aspirations for independence and spark similar movements among Kurds of these countries.⁹⁷ Therefore in the long run, they argue, Kurdish independence would threaten the territorial integrity and security of Turkey, Iran, and Syria, and might result in military confrontation with neighboring states. Turkey has even warned that it would be a *casus belli* if the Iraqi Kurds declared their independence.⁹⁸ Accordingly, it is a difficult task to maintain an independent Kurdistan.

Another geopolitical consideration is that a Kurdish state could create a new balance of power in the region because an independent Kurdistan represents calls for redrawing the region's map. The borders and geopolitics of those countries with Kurdish minorities, and the traditional balance of power in the region, could change in unpredictable ways.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Gunter argues, "the possibility of instability and turmoil would not only be detrimental to the region but to the U.S. and the broader international community".¹⁰⁰ In other words, as Fuller argues, "the international system characteristically does not welcome the break-up of existing states and the resulting turmoil and violence, as witnessed by Yugoslavia".¹⁰¹ Also, Gelb argues, an independent Kurdish state has been unthinkable in Washington for decades because a united Iraq was deemed essential to preventing neighbors like Turkey, Syria and Iran from picking at the pieces and igniting wider wars.¹⁰² Consequently, neither the regional governments nor the international community would welcome the break-up of

⁹⁷ Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurds in Iraq: Why Kurdish Statehood is Unlikely", *Middle East Policy* 11 (2004), no. 1: 108; Nihat Ali Özcan, "Could a Kurdish State be Set Up in Iraq," *Middle East Policy* 6 (2004), no. 1: 120; Eland, "The Way Out of Iraq": 67; Nimrod Raphaeli, "Kirkuk: Between Kurdish Separatism and Iraqi Federalism," *The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Inquiry and Analysis Series* (2005), no. 215, <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=countries&Area=iraq&ID=IA21505>; Dawn Brancati, "Can Federalism Stabilize Iraq?," *The Washington Quarterly* 27 (2004), no. 2: 11; Michael M. Gunter and Hakan Yavuz, "The Continuing Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Middle East Policy* 12 (2005), no. 1: 120.

⁹⁸ Khalid Salih, "Kurdish Reality in an Emerging Iraq":124; Michael M. Gunter, "The Possibilities for an Independent Kurdish State," (paper presented at Kurdish Human Rights: Statelessness, Resistance and Survival Conference 9/4-9/5/04), *The Kurdish Human Rights Conference*, <http://www.kurdishrightsconference.org/presentations/gunter.pdf> (accessed March 10, 2006).

⁹⁹ Graham E. Fuller, "The Fate of the Kurds," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993), no. 2: 113; Stansfield, "Divide and Heal".

¹⁰⁰ Gunter, "The Kurds in Iraq": 108.

¹⁰¹ Fuller, "The Fate of the Kurds":109.

¹⁰² Leslie H. Gelb, "The Three-State Solution," *New York Times* 153, no. 52678, November 25, 2003: 27.

existing states.¹⁰³

A third difficulty posed by an independent Kurdistan is that it would be landlocked. Barkey & Laipson argue that their landlocked situation means that Kurds will always be vulnerable to embargos and blockades.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, Özcan insists that:

If an independent Kurdistan failed to integrate with the world economy, and if it is geographically trapped, it could survive only if an outside power such as the United States offered support and protection, or if a special relationship were established with a neighboring country.¹⁰⁵

But, he claims:

Neither the wider Arab community nor Turkey and Iran would be willing to cooperate with the United States if the latter had helped the Kurds establish their state.¹⁰⁶

That is why “the United States is less likely to become the protector of the Kurdish autonomy vis-à-vis millions of Arabs, Persians and Turks”.¹⁰⁷ So an independent Kurdistan would be isolated in its region and would have no ability to sustain its economy.

Considering that geography and power bases are strongly against the Kurds, advocates of federalism, such as Gunter,¹⁰⁸ Gunter and Yavuz¹⁰⁹, Karsh¹¹⁰, Brancati¹¹¹, believe that Barzani and Talabani are aware of the reality of the Kurds’ dilemma and so they were realistic when they denied any claims for independence, opting instead for federalism in a post-Saddam democratic Iraq. They also argue federalism became the Kurds next-best option and the most realistic hope.

However, some evidence suggests that these geopolitical considerations are less clear-cut than they appear to most observers. These geopolitical analyses are mostly based on the mistaken belief that the Kurds are both passive and vulnerable, but there are other factors to be taken into account. To better understand the geopolitical factors that

¹⁰³ Gunter, “The Kurds in Iraq”: 106.

¹⁰⁴ Barkey and Laipson, “Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq’s Future”: 70.

¹⁰⁵ Özcan, “Could a Kurdish State be Set Up in Iraq”:120.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.,120.

¹⁰⁷ Gunter and Yavuz, “The Continuing Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan”: 127.

¹⁰⁸ Gunter, “The Kurds in Iraq”: 108.

¹⁰⁹ Gunter and Yavuz, “The Continuing Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan”: 124.

¹¹⁰ Efraim Karsh, “Making Iraq Safe for Democracy,” *Commentary* 115 (2003), no. 4: 26.

¹¹¹ Brancati, “Can Federalism Stabilize Iraq?”: 11.

might impinge on any future independent Kurdistan, it is important to take note of the weaknesses of the surrounding countries. The neighboring countries, too, are vulnerable to any Kurdish developments, and this comes from three interconnected factors. First, these states are bound by strict ideological foundations; pan-Turkism or Kemalism in Turkey; pan-Arabism of the Ba'ath Party in Syria; and the pan-Shiite-Islamism of Khomeini in Iran. These ideological foundations make them feel that they are under constant threat from internal and external changes.

The implications of these ideologies have resulted in constant deprivation of minorities, particularly the Kurds. Among those deprivations are Turkey's denial of Kurdish identity¹¹² by reclassifying them as 'Mountain Turks'¹¹³, Iran's ethnic and sectarian repression of the Kurds¹¹⁴, and Syria's refusal to grant citizenship to more than 100,000 indigenous Kurds since 1962¹¹⁵. The third source of vulnerability of these countries is their unhappy past experiences with nationalist-inspired Kurdish violence. These countries have been hostages to the Kurdish issue since long before the U.S. occupation of Iraq or the emergence of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in 1991.¹¹⁶ Kurdish nationalism has been a challenge to the governments of the countries in which they live, and in Turkey the Kurds were perceived to constitute a threat "to the state itself and to the Turkish-based ethnic nationalism that legitimized it".¹¹⁷

¹¹² In Turkey, for instance, the Kurdish identity and language are denied, and according to Article 66 of The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey "everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk".

¹¹³ Arthur Bonner, "Turkey and the European Union and Paradigm Shifts," Middle East Policy 12 (2005), no. 1: 48; Michael M. Gunter, "Kurdish Future in a Post-Saddam Iraq," Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs 23 (2003), no. 1: 9.

¹¹⁴ In addition, Kurds are deprived from studying in their language in Iran, and Iranian Kurds (most of whom are Sunni) are also deprived from holding specific posts. For example Article 5 of the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran stipulates that "the wilayah and leadership of the Ummah devolve upon the just ('adil) and pious [muttaqi] faqih". In other words the leadership of the Islamic Republic is exclusive for Shiite Jurisconsult.

¹¹⁵ Chatham House, "Iraq in Transition": 19.

¹¹⁶ For example, the first Kurdish state ever to be established was in Iranian Kurdistan in 1946, but it lasted just one year. Later in 1979 the Iranian Kurds rose up against the state in a bid for independence immediately following the Iraqi invasion of Iran. Occurring at a time when the Islamic Republic was at its weakest, the revolt was suppressed in 1984 following several years campaign by the Iranian army. Meanwhile, in the mid-1980s the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) started its military movement in Kurdistan of Turkey, in a bid for independence. The PKK rebellion, which has hit Turkey the hardest, has led to the deaths of 35,000 and cost the Turks billions of dollars (See Endnote no. 35).

¹¹⁷ Robert Olson, "Turkey-Iran Relations, 1997 to 2000: The Kurdish and Islamist

Three (almost) irreversible factors have further exacerbated those countries' vulnerability. Firstly, factors such as globalization, the emergence of a new world order, the telecommunication revolution, and increased international attention to human rights issues have contributed to an awakening of Kurdish self-awareness.¹¹⁸ In other words, the borders that isolated Kurds from one another are no longer effective. Second, as Yavuz and Özcan noted, the American occupation of Iraq has abetted the secessionist desire of the Kurds by opening the Pandora's box of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria.¹¹⁹ The third factor is the heightening of Kurdish identity in Iraq, and their achievement of greater political, cultural and social rights, including the Kurdish veto, the formation of a Kurdish bloc in parliament, and official use of the Kurdish language. All these factors have advanced the Kurdish nationalist movement throughout the region.

With these factors in mind, when reviewing the options for Iraq's future development it is important to consider that the potential for Kurdish (con)federation in Iraq to affect neighboring nations is almost as significant as an independent Kurdistan. The events of the last three years proved that, like an independent Kurdish state, federalism is a form of government that could become a model for other Kurds and a threat to the stability and integrity of the surrounding countries. This was evidenced in the 2004 uprising by Syrian Kurds in Qamishli and Damascus, and in the clashes between Kurds and Syrian security forces in Aleppo and Qamishli in 2005.¹²⁰ These demonstrations, which began only one week after the signing of the TAL¹²¹, were for federalism of a type granted to the Iraqi Kurds.¹²²

Simultaneously, Iranian Kurdish demonstrations were held in the

Questions", *Third World Quarterly* 21 (2000), no. 5: 872.

¹¹⁸ For example, the Iraqi Kurds have established a strong broadcast telecommunications service which transmits in Kurdish. The Kurds of Iran Syria and Turkey who are deprived from their own medias in Kurdish are motivated by Iraqi Kurdistan TV channels.

¹¹⁹ Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ali Özcan, "The Kurdish Question and Turkey's Justice and Development Party," *Middle East Policy* 13 (2006), no. 1: 116.

¹²⁰ Political Risk Services, "Syria Country Forecast Comment & Analysis 2005," *Political Risk Services*, no. 1054-6197: 12:

<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=4&hid=106&sid=0a66e262-2469-4da5-9050-e99fa0e0bf82%40sessionmgr109>.

¹²¹ Gary C. Gambill, "The Kurdish Reawakening in Syria", *Middle East Intelligence* 6 (April 2004), no. 4, http://www.meib.org/articles/0404_s1.htm.

¹²² Jacob Sullum, "The Doctor is Not a Criminal," *National Review* 57 (2005), no. 9: 27; Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: a People Discovered", Chatham House, (2006), <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/pdf/research/mep/BPSyrianKurds.pdf>.

Meriwan region¹²³, followed by demonstrations in Sanandaj where some Kurds demanded federalism while others called for independence.¹²⁴ Turkey's Kurds, too, sought "to avail themselves of the changed regional conditions when a faction of the PKK renounced the 1999 cease-fire and resumed hostilities against the Turkish Republic in June 2004".¹²⁵ Facing heightened Kurdish nationalism and federalism in Iraq, both Turkey¹²⁶ and Syria¹²⁷ have asserted their opposition to federalism for Iraqi Kurdistan.

Whether or not Iraqi Kurds were complicit in these disturbances, the events have signaled the emergence of Kurds as active players in the Middle East political and security equation. The disturbances showed the ability of Iraqi Kurds to increase political uncertainty in the neighboring countries if those countries threatened their interests. In other words, although Iraqi Kurdistan has lacked recognition as a state, it has developed patterns of functional independence and become the focal point for the regionalization and internationalization of Kurds as a force to be reckoned with. This new status, which seems irreversible, highlights the capability of Iraqi Kurds to deal with outside threats. Therefore, pressure by neighboring states for Kurds to abandon their quest for statehood could backfire and instead lead to a resurgence of Kurdish nationalism within their own borders. This might be so if Iraqi Kurds feel forced to encourage their fellow Kurds to rise up against their oppressors. Particularly, Iraqi Kurdistan has become a magnet for trans-border Kurdish nationalists.

It is important to realize that although the surrounding nations have constantly declared their hostility to any Kurdish entity, in practice they have all managed to cooperate since the formation of the semi-independent Kurdistan in 1991. The neighbors have (in one way or another) tacitly supported the KRG and in so doing have accepted the status quo. For their part, the Kurds have refrained from fomenting

¹²³ James Brandon, "Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK," *Terrorism Monitor* 4 (2006), no. 12: 2.

¹²⁴ Chris Kutschera, "An Island of Prosperity and Calm," *Middle East* (2004), no. 341: 42-44.

¹²⁵ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "The Kurds and Regional Security: an Evaluation of Developments Since the Iraq War," *Middle East Brief*, no. 14: 3:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/crown/publications/MEB/MEB14.pdf>.

¹²⁶ Michael M Gunter, "The US-Turkish Alliance in Disarray," *World Affairs* 167 (2005), no. 3: 121.

¹²⁷ Charles Recknagel, "Iraq: Kurdish Factions Struggle to Achieve Unity," *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty*:

http://www.rferl.org/features/features_Article.aspx?m=12&y=2005&id=94BB303E-382C-41B4-8F64-1D866488186D (accessed July 18, 2006).

rebellion among the Kurds in neighboring states and have supported only those moderate Kurds who seek peaceful solutions. It can be surmised from this that if the surrounding countries were less hostile to the Iraqi Kurdish independence, the Kurds would feel more secure and so would be less likely to support their ethnic kinsmen (and particularly the hard line nationalists) in those countries. Based on this scenario, it would be possible for both an Iraqi Kurdish state and the neighboring nations to accommodate each others' respective interests.

One striking example is that "in October 1992 Barzani and Talabani supported a major Turkish military campaign inside the Kurdish zone, an action that delivered a devastating blow to the PKK's infrastructure and personnel".¹²⁸ Ironically, it was Saddam's regime, and not the Kurds, who "issued threats and supported the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against Turkey during the 1990s".¹²⁹ For its part, "Turkey had contributed significantly to the consolidation of Kurdish self-rule in northern Iraq in the 1990s and even provided Kurdish leaders Barzani and Talabani with diplomatic passports".¹³⁰ Further, Turkey "has established de facto working agreements with Kurdish authorities to maintain border security".¹³¹ It also "recognized some government-to-government relations with Kurdistan-Iraq both before and after the invasion".¹³²

Similarly, there have been instances of cooperation between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran. As Galbraith notes, "Iran has historically supported Kurdish separatists in Iraq".¹³³ In return, since 1991, when the Iraqi Kurds took control of the region, the KRG has banned incursions into Iran from those armed camps of the Iranian Kurdistan opposition parties that have been based within the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan.¹³⁴ In the same way, The Iraqi Kurdish parties have distracted Syrian Kurds from the struggle in Syria.¹³⁵ In return, Syria has consistently kept channels open with both the PUK and the KDP.¹³⁶ The (PUK) was even formed in Damascus. Thus commentators on the geopolitical situation

¹²⁸ Özcan, "Could a Kurdish State be Set Up in Iraq":120.

¹²⁹ Chatham House, "Iraq in Transition": 23.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³¹ Fuller, "The Fate of the Kurds,": 113.

¹³² Robert Olson, "Turkey and Kurdistan-Iraq," *Middle East policy* 6 (2004), no. 1: 115.

¹³³ Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, 218.

¹³⁴ Iranian Refugees' Alliance 1998, "Unsafe Haven, Iranian Kurdish Refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Iranian Refugees at Risk*, no. 97, <http://www.irainc.org/text/pub/Nireport.pdf> (accessed September 7, 2006).

¹³⁵ Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds": 4.

¹³⁶ Chatham House, "Iraq in Transition": 20; Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds": 4.

of the region have failed to distinguish between the ideological considerations of the surrounding countries and their practical relationships with the Kurdistan Government.

This Kurdish policy of supporting moderate Kurds in other nations, and of seeking peaceful solutions to Kurdish problems in Syria, Turkey and Iran, has been followed in the post-invasion period. On the one hand, Barzani declared that “we call for a peaceful democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in every part of Kurdistan and in accordance with the special character of this or that part”.¹³⁷ On the other hand, the KRG has become home to thousands of nationalist Kurds from surrounding countries. For example, around 11,000 Kurdish refugees from Turkey, some of whom are affiliated with the PKK¹³⁸, and more than 7000 Iranian Kurds, are living in Kurdistan. However, to avoid giving the neighboring nations a pretext for hostility, the PUK-KDP leadership urged the PKK and Iranian organizations not use KRG territory to stage attacks against Turkey or Iran.¹³⁹ This Kurdish policy has two advantages for the surrounding countries. It reduces disturbances in those countries by preventing military attacks on them, and it absorbs the hard line nationalist Kurds by giving them refuge in the KRG and so reduces their direct influence on the Kurds of those countries.

There are other important factors that support the idea that the Kurds should not be seen as a threat to their neighbors. Indeed, an independent Kurdistan could provide more security, stability and economic advantages to the neighbors than Iraq has done in the past. Despite the geopolitical concerns of some commentators, the Kurdish independent state could act as a buffer for Turkey as well as assist in its economic recovery. According to Chatham House, Turkey is now more likely “to accommodate Iraqi Kurdish independence than oppose it militarily”, because “Turkey will prefer an independent Kurdish state over the Iraqi state dominated by an Islamist government”.¹⁴⁰ Galbraith even suggests that “being secular and pro-western makes the Kurds natural allies for Turkey and a buffer to an Islamic Arab state to the

¹³⁷ Fayad, “Interview with Iraqi Kurdistan Region”.

¹³⁸ Pola Aral, “Turkey’s Kurdish Refugees in Makhmur Want to Return Home,” Ministry for Extra Regional Affairs:

<http://www.moera-krq.org/articles/detail.asp?smap=01010000&lngnr=12&anr=11669&rnr=138>
(accessed 29 November 2006).

¹³⁹ Shifrinson, “The Kurds and Regional Security”: 4.

¹⁴⁰ Chatham House, “Iraq in Transition” : 4.

south".¹⁴¹

Another reason that could encourage neighbors to recognize a stable independent Kurdistan is the wars, anarchy and rebellions that characterized the last eighty years of Iraq's history. Since 1932¹⁴², Iraq has clashed with all six of its neighbors, including the eight years of the Iraq-Iran war.¹⁴³ Also, it has been embroiled in conflicts with the U.S in 1991 and 2003. Additionally, "at least 10 times in Iraq's history, the army intervened to change the government, either by actual coup, threatened coup, or political pressure".¹⁴⁴

One of the consequences of all these conflicts has been economic damage. For example, abiding by international sanctions before the first Gulf War, Turkey closed its border with Iraq, and it has been estimated that the cost of the closure to Turkey might have been as high as US\$100 billion.¹⁴⁵ However, a stable independent Kurdistan would help reverse this, and Kurdistan already enjoys relatively good economic links with Turkey. As noted by Dizayi¹⁴⁶, Kurdistan has been flooded with Turkish companies which operate everywhere and are involved in most sectors of the economy. By the beginning of 2006, Dizayi explains, hundreds of Turkish companies had signed contracts for projects worth \$2.5 billion.¹⁴⁷

Turks are even involved in the oil industry which is central to the Kurdistan economy, and agreement has been given for Turkish oil companies to operate in Kurdistan's oil fields.¹⁴⁸ This has created a new balance of economic interdependency between the two countries. As Birand notes, should the Kurds declare their independence, then in the event of Turkey closing its borders, the southeast of Turkey would

¹⁴¹ Galbraith, *The End of Iraq*, 117.

¹⁴² The year of Iraq's independence from Britain.

¹⁴³ Andrew Flibert, "After Saddam: Regional Insecurity, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Proliferation Pressures in Postwar Iraq," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (4004), no. 4: 551.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph McMillan, "Building an Iraqi Defense Force," *Strategic Forum* (2003), no. 198, <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/SF198/sf198.htm>.

¹⁴⁵ Carol Migdalovitz, "Iraq: the Turkish Factor," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, no. RS21336:

<http://www.fas.org/man/crs/RS21336.pdf>.

¹⁴⁶ Safin Dizayi, the foreign relations representative of the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

¹⁴⁷ Safin Dizayi, "Any Dialogue in the Region Will be Failed if the Kurds are Excluded," (*Kurdish*), Gulan (2006), no. 599. pp. 9-13.

¹⁴⁸ Olson, "Turkey and Kurdistan-Iraq," 115; Mark Dewhurst, "Assessing the Kurdish Question: What is the Future of Kurdistan?," USAWC Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College (2006):

<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/ksil327.pdf>.

starve.¹⁴⁹ Considering both economic and security issues, he commented that “Kurdistan and Turkey complement each other”.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, as the International Crisis Group notes, “Turkey needs stability in Iraqi Kurdistan (whatever its eventual status), and the only way it can facilitate this is to work closely with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to promote trade and funnel investment to the region”.¹⁵¹

One counter-argument could be that Iraqi Kurdistan was under constant threat throughout the 1990s, and there were constant incursions by Turkish troops into Kurdistan. However, most of the Turkish invasions were under the pretext of eliminating the PKK activities and destroying its camps¹⁵², and were directly or indirectly supported by Kurdish parties.¹⁵³ Moreover, prior to the invasion, Turkey was the strongest U.S. ally in the region. Turkey was also an important part of the U.S.-led protection process for the Kurds. For a number of years it acted as arbitrator between the two rival Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK. Further, due to the international and Iraqi sanctions imposed on Kurdistan, the Kurds experienced economic hardship and Turkey’s support was crucial for their survival.¹⁵⁴ For all these reasons, Turkey had a special say in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Nevertheless in the post-invasion period, significant alterations occurred in the balance of power. Turkey found that it was replaced by others as strategic partners of the U.S. and it lost many of its geopolitical advantages. With the fall of Saddam, Turkish protection was no longer necessary. The Kurds unified their administrations and founded a strong bloc. Eventually, the sanctions on the Kurds were lifted. Moreover, they found alternative ways to establish relations with the outside world by traveling abroad without returning to Turkey or to other neighboring countries as they did in the past. Therefore, as the Chatham House noted, “once the war began, Turkey’s self-proclaimed red lines were all but erased”.¹⁵⁵

Finally, the experiences of other nations have showed that a newly-

¹⁴⁹ Mehmet Ali Birand, 2005, “Bush’s Turkey Warning to Barzani,” Turkish Daily News, <http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=26871>: (accessed October 1, 2006).

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ International Crisis Group, “Iraq: Allaying Turkey”: 16.

¹⁵² Gunter, “The US-Turkish Alliance in Disarray,” : 120.

¹⁵³ Gunter, “The Kurds in Iraq”: 107.

¹⁵⁴ The Kurds were subjected to a double embargo, one imposed by the United Nations on all of Iraq and one imposed by Saddam on their region.

¹⁵⁵ Chatham House, “Iraq in Transition”: 23.

established state with minorities in surrounding countries can survive peacefully with those countries. One interesting case is Azerbaijan, which has many similarities with the case of Kurdistan. Just as Kurdistan has been divided amongst four countries, Azerbaijan was formerly divided between the Soviet Union and Iran. The Soviet part of Azerbaijan gained its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.¹⁵⁶ Similar to Iraqi Kurdistan (which located in the region where Syria, Iran, Turkey and Iraq meet), Azerbaijan is located “in the centre of the Russian-Turkish-Iranian geopolitical triangle”.¹⁵⁷ Also there are similarities in oil resources, population, and area. Moreover, the largest part of Azeri (with a population of almost three times that of independent Azerbaijan) is located in Iran, and Iranian Azerbaijan is contiguous to Azerbaijan. Additionally, there are almost three times as many Azaris in Iran as there are Kurds in that country.¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, similar to the Iraqi Kurds, Azerbaijanis have irredentist aspirations. For example, following its establishment, the Azerbaijani state “continuously challenged Iran on several occasions and called for the separation of Iranian Azerbaijan from the mainland”.¹⁵⁹ Iran remained “slow and cautious in establishing relations with the new state”¹⁶⁰, and there were some “hostile acts by Iran”.¹⁶¹ However Iran competed with other countries to establish a better relationship with Azerbaijan¹⁶², and despite some problems Azerbaijan has maintained peaceful links with Iran. A further example can be seen in regard to the Arabs in Iran. Arabs constitute a significant minority in oil-rich southern Iran, and despite the ethnic-nationalist tendencies of Arab nations, Iran has shown that it can manage the influence of those countries without significant problems. Iran has a long history of living peacefully side-by-side with countries that share the same ethnic origin as the Iranian minorities.

From all of the above, we see that, contrary to those who predict geopolitical reasons for Kurdistan’s demise, an independent Kurdistan

¹⁵⁶ Azerbaijan, *The World Fact Book*:

<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/aj.html> (October 29, 2006).

¹⁵⁷ Nazrin Mehdiyeva, “Azerbaijan and its Foreign Policy Dilemma,” *Asian Affairs* 34 (2003), no. 3: 272.

¹⁵⁸ Azeris make up 24 percent of the Iranian population.

¹⁵⁹ Nader Entessar, “Iran’s Security Challenges,” *Muslim World* 94 (2004), no. 4: 550.

¹⁶⁰ Mehdiyeva, “Azerbaijan and its Foreign Policy Dilemma,”: 272.

¹⁶¹ Ayça Ergun, “International Challenges and Domestic Preferences in the Post-Soviet Political Transition of Azerbaijan,” *Perspectives on Global Development & Technology* 2 (2003), no. ¾: 648.

¹⁶² Mehdiyeva, “Azerbaijan and its Foreign Policy Dilemma,”: 272.

offers a realistic and permanent alternative, and that it can promote the interests of Kurds and surrounding countries.

Summary

Iraq, we have seen, is a country of contradictions. In the post-invasion years, Iraq's remaining (nominally) as a united country is not because of the Iraqis' willingness, but rather because the occupier forces have willed it. It is likely that with the departure of the occupying forces, not only the power-sharing regime will break apart, but also the country is likely to be partitioned. The conflict of ethnic-nationalists, the clash of identities and loyalties, the opposing interests, and exclusive visions over strategic issues are all sources of conflict between Kurds and the other Iraqi groups. For several decades the Kurdish secessionist and irredentist movement has been in conflict with Sunni Pan-Arab nationalism and territorialism. However, while the Sunnis were in power, their ethnic-nationalism gained ascendancy and defined the official state ideology, and in turn the Iraqi state and its institutions became instruments for implementing Pan-Arab-Nationalist projects. The conflicts between the Kurds and other Iraqi groups turned the Kurds into oppressed victims. Termination of this victim status required the Kurds to change that balance, and one way was to escape from Iraq. On the other hand, the accumulated effects of the conflicts created exclusive interests and loyalties. The divisions within the society are too deep and could trigger serious conflict if a federal or central system were to be imposed on the nation. The Kurdish secession is both the ultimate goal of the Kurds and a permanent solution to the country's woes.

As we have seen, some commentators assert that a Kurdish independent state is not a realistic solution because it could trigger further conflict in Iraq and because there are serious geopolitical barriers to such a move. However, the assumption that Kurdish secession could lead to civil war is mostly based on misunderstandings of the Kurdish case and on the belief that it is part of the bigger package that is the partition of Iraq into three states. The nature of the Kurdish-Baghdad conflict is different from the ongoing conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. The former is about how to escape from Iraq while the latter is about who controls the country. Further, the Kurdish approach to controlling the disputed areas is quite dissimilar to the violent confrontations between Sunnis and Shiites over controlling Baghdad. The issue of losers and winners in the event of the partitioning of Iraq is exaggerated. Judging by Iraqi history and the post-invasion events, the

permanent solution lies in the division of the mixed cities and oil resources, not in the forced maintenance of unity.

Geopolitical barriers are another factor that has been exaggerated. This is evidenced by the success of the KRG during the 1990s, for in that time the semi-autonomous state developed economically and established satisfactory diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. Contrary to the view that the Kurdish independent state could lead to anarchy in the region, it could act as an effective buffer between some hostile forces, reduce the threat of civil war, and limit the possible formation of an Islamic state in Iraq. Moreover, as the past decade has demonstrated, it could economically benefit surrounding countries. In their struggle for independence the Kurdish gains have reached the stage where they are irreversible. Both the international community and the regional countries have to recognize and support the Kurdish independent state if a peaceful, durable solution and human rights are to be achieved.

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