

Special Political

*“The question of the
independence of Iraqi Kurdistan”*



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Forum: Special Political
Issue: The Question of the Independence of Iraqi Kurdistan
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Table of Content

Context & Historical background	Page 3 - 7
United Nations Involvement	Page 7 - 8
Different Perspectives	Page 8 - 9
Questions to Consider	Page 9
Key Terms & Phrases	Page 9
Work Cited	Page 10 - 11

A. Context & Historical background

The Kurds are an indigenous group that originated from the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands which are today in Southeastern Turkey, Northeastern Syrian, Northern Iraq, Northwestern Iran and Southwestern Armenia. Although the majority are Sunni Muslims, they also adhere to a number of different religions and creeds. Furthermore, they make up the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, but have yet to obtain a permanent nation state.

After multiple years of rebellion, the Kurds in Iraq want to evolve from an autonomous state, a state that is self-governed, to an independent state, a state that is sovereign and doesn't have to adhere to another country's rules. The Kurds have been dispersed around Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, but have only been able to claim autonomy in Iraq. Due to the abundance of oil in Kirkuk and the dependence of the US-led coalition on the Kurds to fight both Saddam Hussein and the Islamic State, the Kurds' international profile improved. To the United States, this poses a major threat since the Iraqi Kurdistan's fight for independence could tear at Iraqi unity and disrupt the fight against the Islamic State.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the twentieth century, nation states in the Middle East started to form leaving 30 million Kurds residing in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. They were one of the largest populations without a sovereign state. In 1920, after the First World War, the Treaty of Sevres dissolved the Ottoman Empire and proposed an autonomous Kurdish state. The Turks, under the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rejected the content of the treaty because they opposed the autonomy of the Kurds. In 1928 another treaty was proposed, the Treaty of Lausanne. This one replaced the Treaty of Sevres because it did not mention an independent Kurdish state thus leaving the Kurds with no national state. This led to a diaspora of the Kurdish community to modern day Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Fast forward to 1946 when Mustafa Barzani founded the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq. The KDP, was very popular all the way to the 1970's. Since Abdal-Karim Qasim, ruler of Iraq, didn't fulfill his promise to grant autonomy to the Kurds, they rebelled in 1961. This rebellion lasted for approximately an entire decade under the command of Mustafa Barzani. After the rise of the Iraqi socialist party in 1968, Ba'ath party, the rebellion was halted in 1970 because this new party promised to grant Kurdish autonomy. When the Iraqi government created a draft of the autonomy agreement, Mustafa Barzani rejected it since it didn't include Kirkuk, a city rich in oil. This led to the cancellation of the autonomy plan and a continuation of rebellion by the Kurds. When the Algiers Accords of 1975- a set of agreements between the United States and Iran targeted to resolve the Iran hostage crisis- ended the Iranian support of the Kurdish uprising in Iraq, Barzani withdrew from the

political scene and in 1979 Massoud Barzani took the leadership of the KDP over. Finally in 1991, the Kurdish state in Iraq gained its autonomy where they could be self-governed but still part of Iraq. With the autonomy, two major democratic parties were created in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In the 1990s, civil wars occurred throughout the autonomous region due to disputes between the KDP and the PUK. However in 2002, the parties moved towards unity in order to oppose the United States invasion in Iraq.

Along with the formation of a formal Kurdish parliament in 2005, foreign firms began drilling for oil that was discovered in the area. This generated a major economy for oil in Iraqi Kurdistan. Disputes with the central government in 2012 lead the Kurds to build a pipeline to Turkey in order to export oil to foreign companies. In 2014, the Prime Minister of Iraq, to sabotage the Iraqi Kurdistan's economy and make sure that it remains independent on the Iraqi government, closed the oil pipeline, which lead to major debts in Iraqi Kurdistan. This resulted in Barzani announcing plans for independence claiming it to be a natural right of the Kurds. However, the plan for independence was halted as the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria became a top priority. In 2015, Iraqi Kurdistan asked for a constitutional reform in order to advance their independence. Due to Masoud Barzani's refusal to resign as president, political violence steadily increased in the region.

The quest for Iraqi Kurdistan's independence from Iraq is the cause of the conflict because the Iraqi government refuses to lose territory. Another persisting issue is the economic instability of the oil market since prices have rapidly declined recently which led to numerous financial issues in the region. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have also been a problem in the region as they have taken control of various cities in Iraqi Kurdistan.

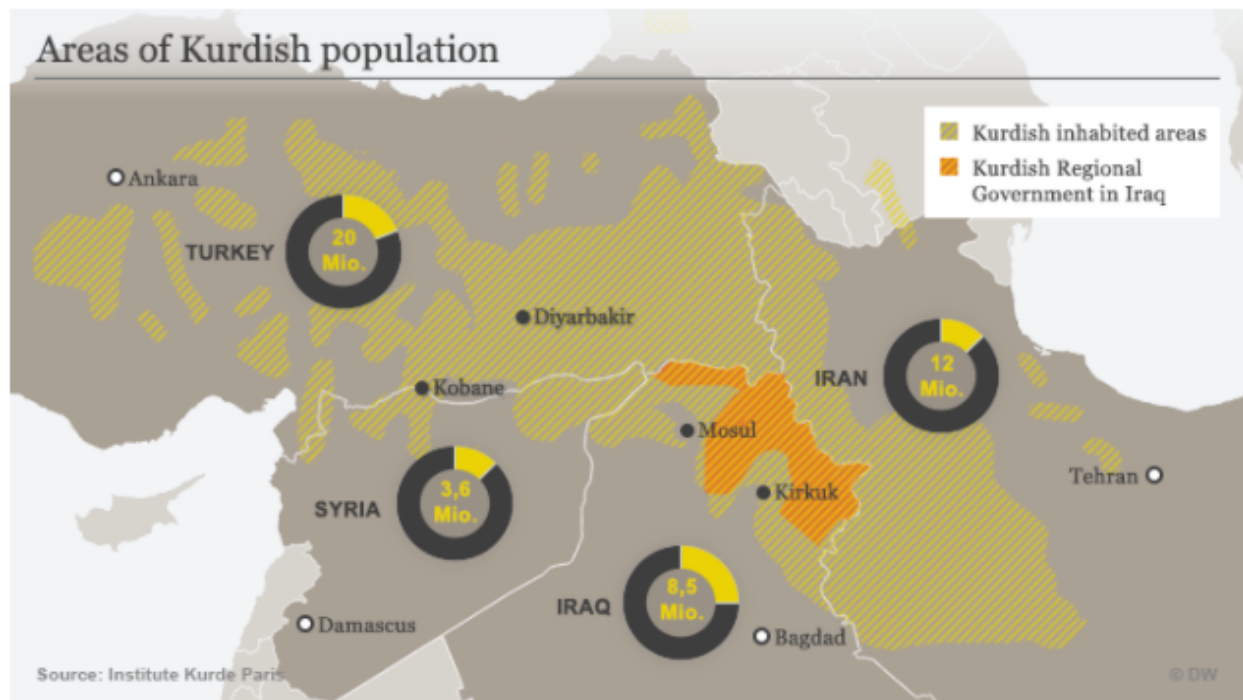
Issue's Current State and its Relevance to the International Community

In September 25, 2017 an independence referendum in the disputed areas between the northern city of Erbil and the capital Baghdad, as well as the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, initiated by the KDP, took place. A vast majority, 93 per cent, voted in favour of Kurdish independence from Iraq. Although this vote is registered as non-binding, the KDP considers it as binding. The KDP claimed that this referendum would trigger the start of state building and negotiation with the Iraqi government rather than an immediate declaration of independence. On the other hand, the referendum's legality was rejected by the federal government of Iraq, thus insinuating that no negotiations on such matter will be held or tolerated.

Countries like Turkey and Iran are afraid the Kurdish nationalism will spread to them. This will obviously be the start of multiple rebellions aiming at independence thus potentially taking away valuable territory. Furthermore, the US led coalition rely on the Kurdish forces, peshmerga, to defeat the Islamic State so they can't risk having them be distracted with their independence instead of fighting for the United States. Germany also depends on the Kurds as a force whom they arm and train to defeat ISIS.

The Goal of the committee

The goal is to find a way in which the Kurds find a middle ground with the Iraqi federal government when considering the question of complete independence. Furthermore, discuss if Kurdistan can legally become independent.



Adulla, Namo , et al. "The Time of the Kurds." *Council on Foreign Relations* , www.cfr.org/interactives/time-kurds#!/p36547.

Main Points

Independence from the Iraqi Republic

Kurdistan leader, Masoud Barzani expressed that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is prepared to be independent from Iran. It is important to note that although most countries involved in the issue are too distracted by the crashing of the oil market and ISIS, which may seem as an

advantage for Iraqi Kurdistan to push their agenda, Since most countries are focusing greatly on the crash of the oil market and ISIS, this may seem as an opportune moment for Iraqi Kurdistan to push their agenda towards independence. This may not be the case since they will have to cater to those issues as a newly formed nation, thus inhibiting them from creating a state that will flourish and prosper.

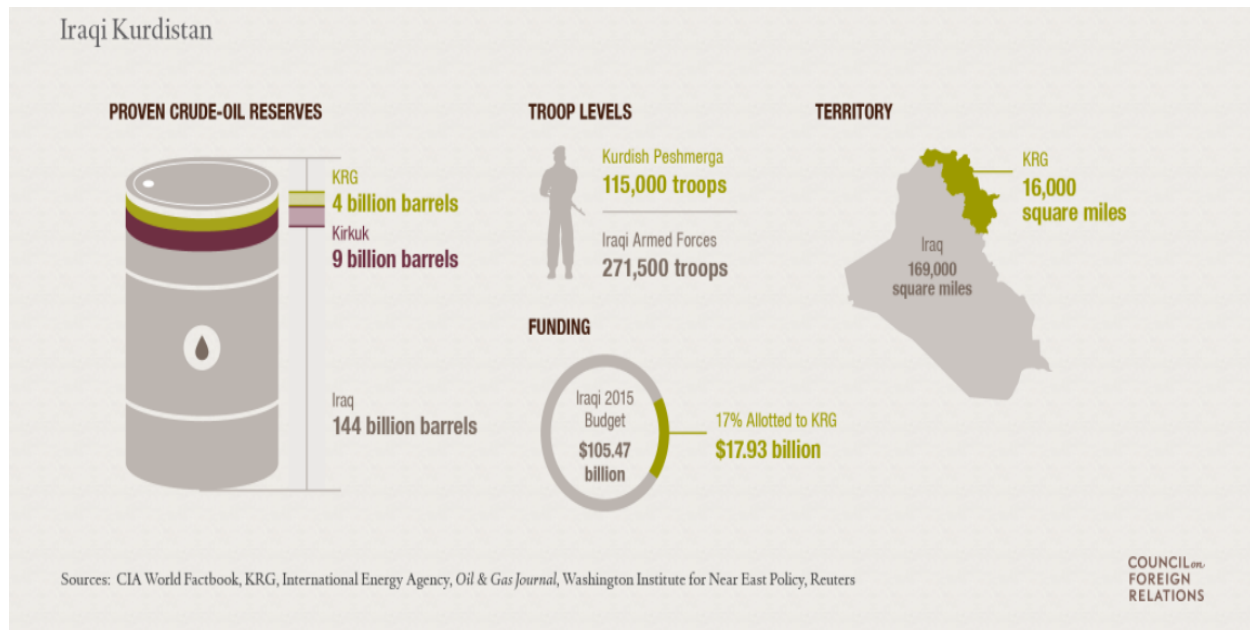
Economic instability of the oil market

Seeing as the Iraq has the world's fifth largest proven petroleum reserves after Venezuela, Saudi, Arabia, Canada and Iran, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is heavily dependant on the oil market, but that is being jeopardized due to governmental disputes and the crash of oil prices which is causing them to face financial issues. Because a pipeline leading to Turkey has been constantly bombed by Kurdish oil smugglers, the KRG is failing to meet pre-set deals with their traders. Ultimately, this places them in major debts which is another motive to push for independence. Independence would give Iraqi Kurdistan full control of oil in Kirkuk without intervention from the Iraqi government that limits their oil exportation .

Between February and March of 2016, the Turkish pipeline was bombed by rebels thus causing it to be closed down by Ankara for security reasons. This led the oil exports to start declining in 2016 since the crash in petroleum prices. For three weeks, the Kurdish oil was not able to reach the international market since it couldn't pass through Turkey. However, due to the reopening of the pipeline, the Iraqi Oil Ministry wanted the North Oil Company (NOP) to stop supplying oil to Kurdistan in order to pressure the KRG into budget talks. Since the NOP leads to oil fields in Kirkuk- which supplies the Turkish pipeline- the Kurdish sank into even more debts.

When Baghdad cut off 25 percent of Kurdish exports, Kurdistan fell into more debts seeing as they could no longer fulfill their pre-paid quotas with oil companies. To recover from their debts, KRG needs approximately \$730 US million. At this point, the KRG is four month behind in paying its employees and in order to compensate, they cut their wages by 15.75 per cent thus causing continuous protests by previous employees(Council on Foreign Affairs).

Essentially, Kurdistan has led an unstable path from the oversupply of oil to cutting prices and the major dependence of the Turkish pipeline which has been vandalized by rebels which caused it to be closed down thus devastating Kurdistan economy.



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B. UN Involvement

Nonetheless, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is expressed regret that Iraq's Kurds have gone ahead with an independence referendum. U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said Guterres noted the referendum was "unilaterally declared, included disputed areas" and was opposed by Iraqi authorities and the global community. The spokesman said Guterres regretted that opportunities for negotiations were not seized and viewed the decision to hold the vote as potentially destabilizing.

Similar to Iraqi Kurdistan, Montenegro was part of Serbia. The two countries were what was left of Yugoslavia after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2006, Montenegro decided to gain its sovereignty and claim its independence from Serbia and in May 21st they initiated a referendum. Unlike that of Iraqi Kurdistan, the referendum was considered legal, but it had to abide to certain rules in order for it to pass. Since the European Union wanted to remain neutral on the issue, it came to an agreement that 55% of voters have to be for Montenegro's referendum for it to pass (Council on Foreign Affairs). It is clear that 55% seems little compared to the 93% of voters who voted for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan (BBC). After the independence referendum passed, the UN had to recognize Montenegro as a country thus having to establish new rules that would cater to both Serbia and Montenegro. The UN decided that Montenegro would have to apply for

membership for both the UN and other international institution, Serbia would lose direct access to the Adriatic Sea which benefited Montenegro since they would have been at an advantage.

C. Different Perspectives

United States of America

The America-led-no-fly zone, an area aimed at protecting the Kurds in north Iraq and Shiite Muslims in the south, over Iraq proved to be very beneficial for the United States during the Gulf War and Saddam Hussein's decline. This led to the creation of deep-rooted alliance with the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. Their alliance further strengthened when the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds worked alongside the US in 2014 to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The reason behind their alliance is that Americans believe that the Kurdish army is stronger than that of Iraq. So far, the relationship between Iraqi Kurdistan and America has been successful at protecting the Kurdish territory from ISIS. Due to their alliance, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria lost 30 percent of its territory since August 2014 (BBC).

Turkey

Although the Iraqi Kurdistan oil pipeline has caused problems in Ankara, the relationship between Turkey and Kurdistan has been evolving. Due to oil trade and energy agreements previous tensions have been overcome. Additionally, since the two governments share an economic interest in the energy market, the KRG and Turkey have come to an agreement that would create, in 2012, one gas pipeline and two oil pipelines from Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey. Furthermore, in order to defend the town of Kobane, in Syria, from the Islamic State, Turkey has allowed Peshmerga fighters to cross their border into Syria. Although, after the referendum held in September 27 of this year, Turkey has threatened to close their borders to oil exports in order to put an end to the rebellions and cease the Iraqi Kurdistan independence.

Iraq

Iraq doesn't recognize the legitimacy of the independence referendum held in September 27 2017. Iraqi Kurdistan has been receiving strong objections especially from Baghdad and Tehran and the central government responded by banning international flights out of the region and threatening to suspend Kurdish representatives from the national parliament. On October 9th 2017, Baghdad's national security council announced that an investigation has been launched into Kurdistan's lucrative oil revenues and officials in the region who might have illegally monopolised the market. It is evident that Iraq values Kirkuk since most of their oil comes from

there and losing would be detrimental to the amount of oil they are capable of exporting. This would sabotage Iraq's position as the 12th largest oil exporter in the world (Turkish Police).

D. Key words

Referendum: It is an election process for all the citizens in a region or country on a single political issue, which has been represented to them for a verdict

Diaspora: The spread of a people across the world away from their homeland

De facto: exercising power as it it were legally constituted

Autonomy :A country or region that attains the freedom to govern itself or control their own affairs independently

Islamic State: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) is a jihadist militant group. It rose to the international scene in the year 2014, when it took control of large areas of territory in Syria and Iraq. The group has become famous for their brutality, including mass killings, abduction and beheadings (BBC).

E. Questions to consider

- How has the instability of the oil economy impacted Kurdish journey to independence?
- What are the implementations to declare independence?
- Is the Kurdish independence purely out of nationalism or economic motive?
- Who are the parties who need to approve of the referendum in order for it to be considered legal?
- What are certain guidelines that the UN could set in order to make the next referendum, if there is one, eligible?

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Timeline of Events

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