The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East

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Were any proof required of the status the Kurdistan Region of Iraq[1] now has on the international stage, the networking activities of its president, Massoud Barzani, at the World Economic Forum in Davos at the end of January 2013 would give some indication. Only ten years earlier, Barzani would have struggled to be received as anything other than the leader of his party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—and even then, the reception in some quarters would have been frosty. Now, in Davos and other places, he is received as the president of the Kurdistan Region by international leaders and heads of the world's largest companies.[2] While the Kurdish leader's relationship with the United States remains cautious, owing to Washington's fear of the increasingly confident Kurds acting unilaterally in Iraq to secure ownership of the 'disputed territories' of Kirkuk, Ninevah and Diyala,[3] the Kurdistan Region has already become a state-

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[1] The formal name of Kurdistan in Iraq is 'the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', as described in the 2005 constitution of Iraq. For the purposes of this article, the term 'Kurdistan Region' is used as shorthand for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and does not refer to the entirety of 'Kurdistan' across Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. These other parts of the wider Kurdistan will be referred to as 'Kurdistan-Iran', 'Kurdistan-Turkey' and 'Kurdistan-Syria' as necessary. The Kurdistan Region's government is known as the 'Kurdistan Regional Government' (KRG—often used incorrectly to refer to the region itself), and its parliament is known as the 'Kurdistan National Assembly' (KNA).

[2] During his attendance at Davos, in late January 2013, President Barzani met with King Abdullah of Jordan, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Swiss Foreign Minister Yves Rosseir, the President of the Syrian National Coalition Ahmad Mouaz al-Khatib, and the former head of the Arab League Amr Moussa. In addition to these heads of state, he also met with Chevron's global head of business development, Jay Pryor, and the president of Exxon Mobil, Rex Tillerson—both of whose companies have signed hydrocarbons contracts with the KRG. See 'President Barzani meets world leaders in Davos', KRG press release, 31 Jan. 2013, http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?l=12&a=46494, accessed 20 Feb. 2013.

[3] See 'Barzani meets US ambassador', *Aswat al-Iraq*, 26 Dec. 2012; 'US Ambassador cautions Barzani', *Kurdistan Tribune*, 27 Dec. 2012, http://kurdistantribune.com/2012/ambassador-cautions-barzani/, accessed 21 Feb. 2013. For analyses of the contestation of the disputed territories, see Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: the ethnopolitics of conflict and compromise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Iraq and the Kurds: trouble along the trigger line*, Middle East Report no. 88 (Brussels: ICG, 2009); Stefan Wolff, 'Governing (in) Kirkuk: resolving the status of a disputed territory in post-American Iraq', *International Affairs* 86: 6, Nov. 2010, pp. 1361–79; Peter Bartu, 'Wrestling with the integrity of a nation: the disputed internal boundaries of Iraq', *International Affairs* 86: 6, Nov. 2010, pp. 1329–43; Sean Kane, *Iraq's disputed territories: a view of the political horizon and implications for U.S. policy*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) report (Washington DC: USIP, 2011).
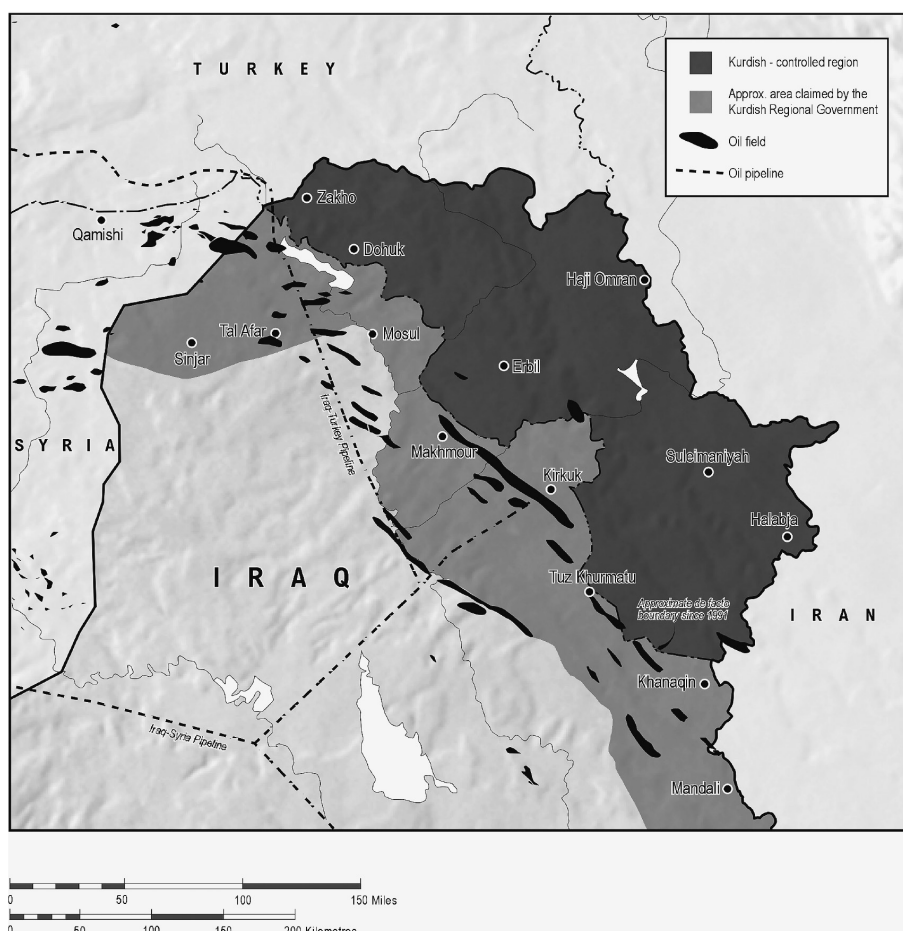
Figure 1: Map of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the 'disputed territories'

Source: Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: the ethnopolicies of conflict and compromise* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. xi.

like entity that has begun to transform the pattern of Middle East international relations.

This article will consider how the Kurdistan Region has matured into an institutionalized reality in territorial, political and economic terms, and is now transforming the patterns of international relations in the Middle East, altering established norms of interaction and forcing the reappraisal of orthodox views concerning the national interests of regional states that are embracing the idea of Kurdistan, at least for now, rather than denying it.[4] As a method of emphasizing

[4] For an exposition of the orthodox view of Turkish policy towards the Kurds in the 1990s, see Philip Robins, 'The overlord state: Turkish policy and the Kurdish issue', *International Affairs* 69: 4, Oct. 1993, pp. 657–76. Robins then considers the shifts in Turkish foreign policy in the 2000s, in 'Turkish foreign policy since 2002: between a "post-Islamist" government and a Kemalist state', *International Affairs* 83: 1, Jan. 2007, pp. 289–304. Writing more recently, Denise Natali roots her analysis of the Kurdish 'quasi-state' (the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) firmly in the orthodox tradition of the Kurds remaining dependent upon host states (focusing on the Kurdish situation in Iraq). She noted, in 2010, that 'the concern about the Kurdistan Region "becoming too

the potential scale of the transformations apparent over recent years and the trajectory of further autonomy from Iraq, if not of independence itself, it presents a purposefully provocative future scenario looking back from 2036, on the twentieth anniversary of the declaration of independence of the Republic of Kurdistan (what had been the Kurdistan Region of Iraq), raising the question of this hypothetical state's formative moments and conditions.[5] While the Republic of Kurdistan is hypothetical, the scenario is constructed on facts and events that have come to pass in recent years and is therefore one possible manifestation (admittedly one of many) of current societal, political and economic trajectories. The utility of the scenario is that it heightens awareness of the transformative developments that are taking place and the emergence of the Kurdistan Region as an actor with the agency to change some patterns and processes of international relations in the Middle East—as a 'subject' of history, in the sense of being master of its own future, rather than remaining an 'object' to be used in pursuance of the national interests of other powers.[6]

The scenario further emphasizes certain key ways in which the Kurdistan Region's existence has altered the international relations of the Middle East. It highlights the interplay between the Kurds' aspirations to secure as much autonomy as possible from Iraq, including the drive to generate income through their own oil and gas sector independently of the controls imposed by Baghdad,[7] and the wider contestation that is coalescing across the Middle East between the Sunni and Shi'i worlds, as exemplified by the political stalemate and brinkmanship in Iraq between the Maliki government and Sunni Arab political groupings,[8] the increasingly sectarian conflict in Syria,[9] and the overall increased competition for influence between Iran and Sunni-associated states (namely those of the Arabian Peninsula and Turkey) across the region.[10] It also exposes the mutual interests that have developed between Ankara and Erbil, owing partly to Turkey's policy

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autonomous" and getting ahead of the rest of Iraq is a misguided one that neglects its high levels of under-development, landlocked condition, and institutional weakness': Natali, *The Kurdish quasi-state: development and dependency in post–Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010), p. 133.

[5] This should not be viewed as the taking of a normative stance that an independent Republic of Kurdistan (if that is what any as yet hypothetical entity would be called) would be a 'good' or 'bad' development; it is merely a tool to facilitate the analysis and assessment of the transformative dynamics that structure Kurdistan's relationship with the wider region.

[6] Writing about the condition of the Kurds of Iraq in 2002, Andreas Wimmer argued the opposite—that the Kurds had become objects of history, subjugated to the national interests of other powers. See Andreas Wimmer, 'From subject to object of history: the Kurdish movement in northern Iraq since 1991', *Kurdische Studien* 2: 1, 2002, pp. 115–29 at p. 115.

[7] For analyses of Kurdistan's oil and gas sector developments, see Raad Alkadiri, 'Oil and the question of federalism in Iraq', *International Affairs* 86: 6, Nov. 2010, pp. 1315–28; Peter Cameron, 'Contracts and constitutions: the Kurdish factor in the development of oil in Iraq', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 5: 1, 2011, pp. 81–99; Rex Zedalis, *Oil and gas in the disputed Kurdish territories: jurisprudence, regional minorities and natural resources in a federal system* (London: Routledge, 2012).

[8] See Gareth Stansfield, 'A year of endemic instability in Iraq', RUSI Analysis, 3 Jan. 2013, http://www.rusi.org/go.php?structureID=commentary&ref=C50E592AAAEC92, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[9] See Jonathan Githens-Mazer, Paul Newton, Andrew Rathmell and Gareth Stansfield, *Syria: alternative perspectives and implications for UK*, Occasional Paper no. 1 (Exeter: Strategy and Security Institute, Nov. 2012), http://www.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/strategyandsecurityinstitute/reports/Syria_Workshop_Web_Report_(with_quotes).pdf, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[10] See Vali Nasr, *The Shia revival: how conflicts within Islam will shape the future* (New York: Norton, 2007).

of 'zero problems with neighbours',[11] and partly to the purposeful building of the relationship by President Barzani and his nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, which has created ties that bind in ways that may prove less ephemeral and more durable than sometimes speculated.[12]

Twenty years ahead: the Republic of Kurdistan[13]

The year is 2036, 20 years after the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan.[14] Analysts, in this hypothetical future in a hypothetical think-tank, are looking back on the reformation of the state system of the Middle East in the period 2014–26, which the historically minded among them have realized was exactly a century after the formation of the state system in the aftermath of the First World War.[15] With the benefit of hindsight and the ability to see a continuum of events, these analysts explain the reformation as the culmination of a series of events, developments and transitions that afflicted the region over a 30-year period. These included the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the 'war on terror' of 2001 onwards, the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, and the wave of popular uprisings of 2011–13, known as the Arab Spring, against authoritarian rule and the subsequent, often violent, contestation for power within states that characterized the region's politics for the next decade.

A subject of keen interest was the remarkable transformation of what had been known, rather vaguely, as 'the Kurdish question' in the late twentieth century into what became 'the Republic of Kurdistan' in the second decade of the twenty-first.

[11] As articulated by Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Policy of zero problems with our neighbors', http://www.mfa.gov.tr/policy-of-zero-problems-with-our-neighbors.en.mfa, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; and further discussed by Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, 'Turkey's zero-problems foreign policy', *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys_zero_problems_foreign_policy?wp_login_redirect=0, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[12] Denise Natali, for example, describes the Ankara–Erbil relationship as one in which neither partner can fully honour its commitments to the other, particularly with regard to Barzani being 'unable, or unwilling, to control PKK [the Kurdistan Workers' Party—a Kurdish–Turkish guerrilla organization undertaking attacks against targets in Turkey from bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq] activities inside Iraqi Kurdistan or in Syria', and notes that even though 'Turkey supports Kurdish energy development, it also is working with Baghdad to expand southern exports from Basra through the northern line, potentially bypassing the KRG': Denise Natali, 'The limits of Turkey's Kurdish efforts in Iraq', *Al-Monitor*, 17 July 2012, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/turkeys-tactics-in-iraq.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013. For an articulate exposition of the Kurdistan Region's success, and possible weaknesses, see Patrick Cockburn, 'A decade after the invasion of Iraq, the Kurds emerge as surprise winners', *The Independent*, 17 Feb. 2013, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/a-decade-after-the-invasion-of-iraq-the-kurds-emerge-as-surprise-winners-8498103.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[13] A note on this scenario section: while the scenario is written in terms of being, or having been, reality, and projects an imagined situation, references in the following footnotes all refer to events, facts and developments that have taken place up to February 2013 and so are all factual. The citations refer to actual reports and pieces of work, and have not been manufactured in order to serve the scenario.

[14] This scenario is not dissimilar to that presented in the US National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2030: alternative worlds* assessment of November 2012. For the NIC, 'in [the] event of a more fragmented Iraq or Syria, a Kurdistan would not be inconceivable' (p. 74), and, in an interesting presentation of an analysis written from a Marxist perspective, the changes in the Middle East include 'a Kurdistan, carved out of several countries. Winston Churchill and Gertrude Bell—architects of a united Iraq after World War I—would be spinning in their graves' (p. 128), http://globaltrends2030.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/global-trends-2030-november2012.pdf, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[15] For the formation of the Middle East state system, see David Fromkin, *A peace to end all peace: the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern Middle East*, 2nd edn (New York: Holt, 2009).

When asked to explain the formative events that led to the secession of the Kurdistan Region from Iraq and the declaration of the independent Republic of Kurdistan by President Massoud Barzani on 16 August 2016,[16] analysts referred to the brief Arab–Kurdish war[17] that erupted in 2014 following inconclusive and divisive Iraqi parliamentary elections in which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sought a third term, with Barzani openly comparing the Iraqi Prime Minister to the former dictator Saddam.[18]

Maliki's demand to stay in office for a third term[19] saw the Kurdish leader order the occupation of Kirkuk.[20] Initially unchallenged, the Kurdistan army (otherwise known as the *peshmerga*) had rapidly to contend with guerrilla attacks from Arab and Turkmen *isnad* (support councils) loyal to Maliki,[21] followed by the deployment of several brigades of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in support of the ISF Dijla Operations Command, controversially established by Maliki to the west of Kirkuk in the autumn of 2012.[22] Totally loyal to their Prime Minister following years of careful reorganization, the combined forces of the ISF and *isnad* moved quickly against Kurdish forces, with worrying references made to 'repeating Anfal', in reference to the genocide of the Kurds committed some 25

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[16] This date was also, coincidentally, his 70th birthday, as well as being the 70th anniversary of the founding of his party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, by his father Mulla Mustafa Barzani.

[17] Some of the analysts suggested that the Arab–Kurdish War of 2014–15 should have been labelled more accurately as the second round of the Sunni–Shi'i war that afflicted Iraq on and off from 2007 to 2016, as the war was one of survival for the Shi'i-dominated Maliki government. The significant possibility of an Arab–Kurdish conflict taking place in Iraq had been raised by senior US military figures as early as 2009. Towards the end of that year, the then-commander of Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I), General Raymond Odierno, described Arab–Kurdish tension as 'the greatest single driver of instability in Iraq': quoted in David Gurney and Jeffrey Smotherman, 'An interview with Raymond T. Odierno', *Joint Forces Quarterly* 55:4, 2009, p. 123, and referred to in Larry Hanauer, Jeffrey Martini and Omar Al-Shahery, *Managing Arab–Kurd tensions in northern Iraq after the withdrawal of US troops* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011), p. 1.

[18] The divisiveness of Maliki's position became abundantly clear from the end of 2012 onwards, if not before. By January 2013, anti-Maliki demonstrations were taking place across Sunni-dominated Iraq, with pro-Maliki events in Baghdad. See Salah Naswari, 'Widening divisions in Iraq', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 28 Nov. 2012 http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/396/19/Widening-divisions-in-Iraq.aspx, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; Prashant Rao, 'Hundreds back Maliki amid calls for Iraq PM to quit', AFP, 12 Jan. 2013. For Barzani's comments on the rise of dictatorship in Iraq, see 'Iraq Kurd leader accuses PM Maliki of "dictatorship"', AFP, 8 April 2012.

[19] Maliki began making moves to secure a third term of office in mid-2012, prompting opposition from many sectors of the Iraqi political establishment, and especially the Kurdish leadership. '"Unconstitutional": Maliki rejects law seeking to limit his term', *Al-Arabiya*, 3 Feb. 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/03/264064.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[20] President Barzani, in addition to other members of the Kurdish leadership, has focused upon bringing Kirkuk province within the territory of the Kurdistan Region from the outset of the post-Saddam period. Following the failure to implement article 140 of the constitution (which prescribed a process for resolving the question of the disputed territories), the Kurdish leadership began to use more belligerent rhetoric on the subject. Speaking on the outskirts of Kirkuk in December 2012, President Barzani said: 'We are against war and we do not like war, but if things come to war, then all Kurdish people are ready to fight in order to preserve the Kurdish identity of Kirkuk': 'Iraq's Barzani says Kurds to fight over disputed city', Reuters/Zaman, 11 Dec. 2012, http://www.todayszaman.com/news-300806-iraqs-barzani-says-kurds-ready-to-fight-over-disputed-city.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[21] From 2008, Maliki copied the US strategy of building loyal groups among Sunnis—known as the 'Sons of Iraq' (*sahwat al-Iraq*)—and supported the formation of tribally based groupings focused upon providing local security, known as the *isnad*, or 'support', councils. The Kurds were particularly concerned that the *isnad* were nothing other than a private militia, loyal to the prime minister, and located across the disputed territories. See 'What after al-Maliki's (support) Councils?', *Kurdistani Nwe*, 12 Nov. 2008.

[22] For details about the formation of the Dijla Operations Command, see 'New Iraq army headquarter fuels Arab-Kurd row', AFP, 16 Nov. 2012, http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/11/kirkuk753.htm, accessed 22 Feb. 2013; Salar Raza, 'Iraq's Kurds and Sunni Arabs pushed closer by opposition to Maliki', *Rudaw*, 9 Jan. 2013.

years before.[23] Ferocious conflict broke out in the crowded urban environs of Kirkuk, but the *peshmerga* displayed their renowned tenacity and held the city for the remainder of the year.

However, after this initial success, they soon struggled to counter the ISF's newly acquired US armour, which ranged freely outside the tight confines of the urban spaces, preventing the movement of *peshmerga* reinforcements from Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. Furthermore, the lightly armed *peshmerga* proved incapable of combating the incessant attacks made by Iraqi Air Force F-16s, ordered in 2012 by Maliki and viewed as an existential threat to Kurdistan by Barzani, who lobbied the US administration hard to prevent the sale.[24] Barzani's pleas fell on deaf ears, however, and the warplanes were delivered to the Iraqi Air Force in September 2014, becoming operational by the end of the year. In a strike as important symbolically as it was tactically, President Barzani's headquarters in Sari Rash, in the mountains north of Erbil next to the town of Salahaddin, was attacked with impunity and levelled by the US-supplied warplanes.

Ignominious defeat seemed to be a certainty for the Kurdish forces, with President Barzani already hurling blame at the Kurds' one-time allies in the West who failed to come to his aid, just as they had failed to do so for his father in his moment of need against Saddam's regime in the 1970s, and for himself against Saddam in 1991.[25] But times had changed. Following the destruction of the Kurds' Kalak (Khormala) refinery facility north-east of Erbil[26]—which was critical to the success of the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas plans— by an Iraqi tank column, the near-defeat of the *peshmerga* was averted by an overwhelming show of support from Turkey and Sunni Arab states and, in a more passive but nonetheless influential way, the United States.[27] In what was seen as a stand against the further penetration of Iranian Shi'i influence in the region, but was perhaps as much to do with Turkey needing to secure access to abundant oil and gas supplies for its

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[23] See comments of KDP MP Hamid Bafi, All Iraq News, 17 Feb. 2012, http://alliraqnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=58490:2012-11-17-14-13-05&catid=41:2011-04-08-17-27-21&Itemid=86, accessed 22 Feb. 2013.

[24] 'Barzani to US: don't sell F-16 to Iraqi PM', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 24 April 2012, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/barzani-to-us-dont-sell-f-16-to-iraqi-pm.aspx?pageID=238&nid=19128, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; 'Iraq says signs contract for 18 F-16 fighter jets', Reuters, 18 Oct. 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/18/us-iraq-military-jets-idUSBRE89H14B20121018, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; 'The new Iraqi air force: F-16IQ block 52 fighters', *Defense Industry Daily*, 17 Dec. 2012, http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/iraq-seeks-f-16-fighters-05057/, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[25] For an account of US involvement with the collapse of the Kurdish revolt in Iraq of 1974–5, see David Korn, 'The last years of Mustafa Barzani', *Middle East Quarterly* 1: 2, June 1994, pp. 13–27. For a detailed account of the US choosing not to support the Kurds in the mid-1970s and in 1991, see Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: building a state within a state* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012), pp. 125–51 and 197–208 respectively.

[26] The Kalak refinery was capable of processing 185,000 barrels per day by 2013. See John Lee, 'KAR Group to expand Kalak refinery', *Iraq-Business News*, 9 Aug. 2012. Owned by the Kurdish company KAR group, the refinery is the focal point of the Kurdistan Region's hydrocarbons sector, being the nexus of pipelines coming from the eastern fields (of Taq-Taq and around Sulaymaniyah), and going to the north, to the Tawke fields, with speculation rife that these pipelines would cross the international boundary into Turkey. In the scenario, this would later happen, following the establishment of the Republic.

[27] Turkey protecting the Kurdistan Region should not be viewed as an improbable aspect of the scenario. As noted by Joost Hiltermann, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is 'said to have promised Barzani that Turkish forces will protect the Kurdish region in the event of a military assault from Baghdad': Hiltermann, 'Revenge of the Kurds: breaking away from Baghdad', *Foreign Affairs* 91: 6, Nov.–Dec. 2012, pp. 16–22 at p. 22.

own domestic consumption and to further Ankara's ability to be a provider for the Europeans, who still remained dependent upon gas imports from the east,[28] Turkey moved militarily to protect the fledgling Republic of Kurdistan from Iraq's increasingly successful operations, while the US and Europeans sought a UN mandate to intervene.

Iran, meanwhile, viewed developments in the Kurdistan Region with concern, not least because Tehran had always considered the Kurds of Iraq to be natural allies who, while dealing with Ankara and the Arabs for immediate economic and political benefit, would always have a sense of the deeper ties binding them to Iran. Tehran's threats to intervene, by deploying the Islamic (Iranian) Revolutionary Guards Corps to the Baneh region of Kurdistan-Iran in preparation for the Iranian occupation of Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk (with plans dusted off from the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s), quickly backfired, however. Unwilling to see Iranian intervention into the north of Iraq, the US drew a red line around the Kurdistan Region, in effect ending the conflict and putting all parties and stakeholders on notice that, against all the odds, the Kurds of Iraq had looked into the abyss of defeat but, this time, were saved rather than destroyed by international political realities.

Instability continued to reign in the disputed territories, however, with the southern boundary of Kurdistan remaining contested between Erbil (the capital of Kurdistan) and Baghdad. A UN-mandated US- and Turkish-led mission ensured that Iraqi and Kurdish military forces disengaged and stood down in disputed Kirkuk and later established a mechanism for the dual administration of the province, in keeping with UN recommendations made in 2008.[29] By 2021, the Republic of Kurdistan had matured into a full and active member of the international community, albeit under Turkish tutelage, and the Kurds could no longer claim to be the largest stateless people in the world with only the mountains as their friends.

Domestic, resource-based and 'regional security complex' transformations

The scenario presented is only one of countless possible outcomes that may come to pass, but while the situation being considered by the analysts of 2036 is hypothetical, it is derived from actual facts, on-the-ground realities, articulated views, and events that have happened over recent years—all of which have contributed to the increasingly autonomous status of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, its growing sense of security and stability, and its state-like posture in the international community.

In explaining this transformation, Ofra Bengio states that it has been achieved through the 'juxtaposition of different domestic, regional, and international factors

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[28] For a detailed account of Turkey's role in European energy security, see Ksenia Krauer-Pacheco, *Turkey as a transit country and energy hub: the link to its foreign policy aims* (Bremen: Forschungsstelle Osteuropa Bremen, Arbeitspapier und Materialen no. 118, Dec. 2011).

[29] United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), 'Disputed internal boundaries', internal UN document distributed to Iraqi stakeholders, 2008.

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[that] have made possible the Kurds' leap forward into post-Saddam Iraq'.[30] This is certainly the case: interests and dynamics at these levels have come together to create an environment, in terms of political and economic space, that the leaders of the Kurdistan Region have exploited to the full. To add granularity to this levels-of-analysis approach, certain cross-cutting themes enrich the understanding of what the formative factors in Kurdistan's ascent have been.[31] Three interrelated developments occurred in the post-2003 period that came together to crystallize the Kurdistan Region's position in the region:[32]

1. The consolidation of the Kurdistan Region's autonomy within Iraq and, by 2011, the polarizing of Iraq's politics into a camp centred on Prime Minister Maliki in Baghdad and a Kurdish–Sunni alliance in which President Barzani was pre-eminent. This polarization, from a Kurdish perspective, has been ideological (in terms of their focus upon federalism); from the Sunni perspective it has been increasingly sectarian.[33]

2. The pursuing by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of an oil and gas strategy that would give the Kurdistan Region the capability to be fiscally independent, if needed, of the government of Iraq. This strategy was complemented by an energetic drive to encourage foreign direct investment (FDI) into the Kurdistan Region from across the entirety of the Middle East, including the Arab Gulf, and further afield in the Far East, once again without reference to Baghdad's control.[34]

3. The overlapping of the broader security and national interests of the Kurdistan Region with those of Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and the emergent Sunni-dominated states as a product of the sectarian civil war in Iraq in 2006–2008,[35] and the Arab Spring transitions from 2010 onwards. This trend is in the process of realigning the Kurds, by association, in the emerging contestation between Iran and the Shi'i world on the one hand and, on the other, those Middle

[30] Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, p. 319.
[31] Michael Gunter provides a positive view of the 'Kurds ascending', focusing strongly upon the domestic successes of the Kurds in Iraq, compared to their non-Kurdish partners in the country. See *The Kurds ascending: the evolving solution to the Kurdish problem in Iraq and Turkey*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[32] These three themes are similar to those presented by David Hirst who, in what may prove to be a prescient analysis of events to come, considered three 'breakthroughs' that have brought the Kurds closer to statehood. For Hirst, they are (1) Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the establishment of Kurdish self-government in 1991–2; (2) the post-2003 new constitutional order of Iraq, which codified the status of the Kurdistan Region; and (3) the impact of the Arab Spring on the Middle East state system, and the continuing courtship by Turkey of Iraq's Kurds. See David Hirst, 'A Kurdish state is being established, and Baghdad may accept it', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 24 Dec. 2012, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2012/Dec-24/199715-a-kurdish-state-is-being-established-and-baghdad-may-accept-it.ashx#ixzz2FwqD2beD, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.
[33] See 'Iraq protests signal growing tension between Sunni and Shia communities', *Guardian*, 26 Dec. 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/26/iraq-protests-tension-sunni-shia, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.
[34] See e.g. the official publications of the KRG aimed at encouraging FDI: *The Kurdistan Region: invest in the future* (London: Newsdesk Media, 2008); *Kurdistan: invest in democracy* (London: Newsdesk Media, 2011), http://www.krg.org/uploads/documents/Kurdistan_Investment_Guide_2011.pdf, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.
[35] The Iraqi Civil War(s) of 2006–2008, which were dominated by sectarian currents, considerably politicized the wider Middle East region, particularly as the conflict acted as a magnet for combatants from across the Islamic world. See Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, *Things fall apart: containing the spillover from an Iraqi civil war*, Analysis Paper no. 11 (Washington DC: Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Jan. 2007); Gareth Stansfield, 'Accepting realities in Iraq', briefing paper (London: Chatham House, May 2007), http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/108556, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

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Eastern states in which political Islam of a Sunni complexion was already, or was becoming, the norm. While mainly Sunnis themselves, the Kurds' ethnic closeness and geographical proximity to Iran had previously encouraged them to act as neutrally as possible in matters relating to sectarian tensions. However, with the Kurds being drawn into the Syrian civil war through their engagement with nascent Syrian Kurdish governing structures, and driven by the deepening of their relationship with Turkey, the Kurdistan Region has found itself being drawn away from its neutral position and instead being aligned more, if not fully, with a grouping dominated by Turkey and the Arab Gulf states rather than with Iran.

The domestic factor: growing legitimacy, developing competencies and acting in stately fashion

It is a futile exercise to attempt to pin down the success of the Kurdistan Region—measured in terms of its ability to exercise the right to self-determination—to one particular development. Indeed, explaining the situation of the Kurdistan Region ten years after regime change took place in Iraq in 2003 requires an appreciation of the complex situations that have affected the Middle East since the early 1990s, combined with an understanding of the peculiarities of the situation in Iraq and the decisions made (including those that led to failure as well as those successfully realized) by Kurdish leaders. This constellation of events, factors and dynamics has combined to result in today's reality. However, it would be incorrect to assume that the Kurds were mere observers, riding a wave of developments that fortuitously led them to the point where they could make the transition to near-statehood. On the contrary, from early on in the post-Saddam environment, the Kurds embarked upon a purposeful strategy of securing as much autonomy within Iraq as possible, while also benefiting from the continued development of a popular and vibrant Kurdish nationalist project. As the 2000s moved on, the new realities established by the Kurds met with opposition from their (mainly) Arab partners in the reconstituted Iraqi state, causing a clash of normative visions as to how Iraq, as a project, should develop. This section of the article presents the Kurdistan Region of 2013, and assesses the factors that have turned it from an undefined, anomalous, legacy of Saddam's Iraq into a codified, legal Region of the Federal Republic of Iraq that could, perhaps, continue to assemble the competences and capabilities necessary to support an existence independent of Iraq in the not-so-distant future.

Two decades in the making

The three component factors that explain how the Kurdistan Region developed into a transformed entity with wider transformational agency are all interlinked and interdependent. But a starting point is required, and so, for the purposes of this article, the explanation begins with the consolidation of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq as an autonomous entity with a permanent population, existing in

a territorially defined space (albeit contested to the south), with a government (the KRG) recognized by citizens as being legitimate (although with serious questions concerning its transparency and accountability), and with, in recent years, the capacity to enter into relations with other states. It is no accident that the characteristics selected match exactly the classic definition of a state as articulated in the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States.[36] In virtually every conceivable aspect, the Kurdistan Region has become an entity that possesses the necessary domestic attributes (such as a sense of nationhood and the cohesiveness of Kurdish society and territory), governmental competences (especially with regard to the advances made by the KRG), and regional alliances (most notably the Ankara–Erbil axis) to move from being a region of Iraq to the Republic of Kurdistan.[37]

Far from being a sudden achievement, this status has been over 20 years in the making. Following the effective quashing of the Kurdish rebellion in Iraq by Saddam's genocidal campaigns of the 1980s,[38] the broken national movement and its leaders were presented with a second chance following the withdrawal of Iraqi government offices from what was to become the Kurdistan Region, in the aftermath of Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait in 1991.[39] In the ensuing mêlée, from which the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Jalal Talabani emerged as the dominant political groupings, the Kurds organized themselves to fill the political and administrative vacuum left behind in the northern governorates of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, holding elections in 1992 that led to the formation of the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) and the creation of the KRG.[40]

The remainder of the decade proved to be traumatic for an anomalous, legally unrecognized entity within the international system. Nina Caspersen notes that 'unrecognized states exist in the shadows of international relations, in a kind of limbo, and the renewed outbreak of war is an ever-present risk and defining feature of their existence'—words that ring very true for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in this period.[41] While supported to some degree by western powers and

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[36] See Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, sovereignty and self-determination: the accommodation of conflicting rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 15–16.

[37] Some authors would question whether the durability of these attributes, the depth of these competences, and the longevity of these alliances should be accepted at face value. See e.g. Natali, *The Kurdish quasi-state*.

[38] See Kanan Makiya (Samir al-Khalil), *Republic of fear: the politics of modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and silence: war, tyranny, uprising, and the Arab world* (New York: Norton, 1993); Human Rights Watch, *Iraq's crime of genocide: the Anfal campaign against the Kurds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Joost Hiltermann, *A poisonous affair: America, Iraq, and the gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Choman Hardi, *Gendered experience of genocide: Anfal survivors in Kurdistan–Iraq* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

[39] See Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: political development and emergent democracy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*.

[40] See Michael Gunter, *The Kurdish predicament in Iraq: a political analysis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*.

[41] Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized states* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), pp. 1–2. For further analysis of unrecognized states in international relations, see Scott Pegg, *International society and the de facto state* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998); Tozun Bahcheli, Barry Bartmann and Henry Srebrnik, eds, *De facto states: the quest for sovereignty* (London: Routledge, 2004); Nina Caspersen and Gareth Stansfield, eds, *Unrecognized states in the international system* (London: Routledge, 2011).

Turkey (particularly with regard to the provision of a no-fly zone covering half of the Kurdistan Region),[42] the Iraqi Kurds were held in abeyance, encouraged to oppose Saddam's regime, but warned in no uncertain terms from undertaking any sort of action that could be interpreted as threatening Iraq's territorial integrity—a classic case of being damned either way.[43] The result was sadly predictable. With two powerful parties (the KDP and PUK) that were in effect arch-rivals for hegemony over the Kurdish national movement in Iraq, existing side by side in a territorially limited space located in one of the most vilified countries of the world at that time, positioned in a geopolitically tense environment and with neighbours who viewed the idea of Kurdistan as a threat to their own national interests, the Kurdistan Region was pushed into a state of civil war that did not fully abate until 1997.[44] Divided into two, between the KDP in Erbil and the PUK in Sulaymaniyah, the Kurdistan Region finally began to draw back together at the end of the 1990s, more strongly as the US moved towards invading Iraq in 2003.[45]

Destabilizing though the experience of the 1990s was, the Kurdistan Region survived, and the experience of that traumatic decade, along with the fact that the Kurds' control of Iraqi territory made them very useful allies for the US,[46] placed them in a position of prominence. By 2003, the leadership of the Kurds had learned from the experience of a destructive civil war the necessity of presenting a unified front against their opponents. They had also discovered through trial and error how to govern and administer and, even though they admitted they still had much to learn, their experiences placed them ahead of their Arab counterparts in Baghdad, most of whom, having returned from exile to political office, had little if any exposure to the pressures of public administration.

Perhaps more importantly, inside the Kurdistan Region itself a sense of legitimacy had grown around the notion that Kurds should govern themselves,

[42] See Helena Cook, *The safe haven in northern Iraq: international responsibility for Iraqi Kurdistan* (Colchester: Human Rights Centre, University of Essex, 1995).

[43] For accounts of the sanctions period, see Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: the politics of intervention in Iraq* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); Tim Niblock, *'Pariah states' and sanctions in the Middle East: Iraq, Libya, Sudan* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

[44] The civil war started in earnest in 1994 and was conducted primarily between the KDP and PUK, with the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) also involved. The conflict took on a more dangerous aspect in 1996, when Baghdad and Tehran supported the KDP and PUK respectively, even committing forces to the battlefield. The two-statelet solution was maintained from 1996 onwards, with the KDP in control of Erbil and Dohuk, and the PUK with dominion over Sulaymaniyah, Koya (the eastern part of Erbil governorate) and Darbandikhan-Kalar (the eastern and southern part of Kirkuk governorate). The KDP and PUK then engaged in their own local peace process aimed at normalizing relations, which was taken further with US sponsorship, culminating in the Washington Agreement of 1999. See Gareth Stansfield, 'Governing Kurdistan: the strengths of division', in Brendan O'Leary, John McGarry and Khaled Saleh, eds, *The future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), pp. 195–218 at p. 204.

[45] See Gareth Stansfield, 'From civil war to calculated compromise: the unification of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq', in Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield, eds, *The Kurdish policy imperative* (London: Chatham House, 2010), pp. 130–44.

[46] The utility of Kurdish-controlled Iraq territory was, however, significantly reduced by the Turkish parliament's rejection of a government proposal to allow the US to deploy invasion forces from Turkey into the Kurdistan Region weeks before the invasion in March 2003. This is not to say, though, that the Kurdistan Region was not used extensively by US intelligence services in the run-up to the invasion. For details on the Turkish parliament's decision, see Åsa Lundgren, *The unwelcome neighbour: Turkey's Kurdish policy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 98; Philip Robins, 'Turkish foreign policy since 2002'. For Turkish policy towards 'northern Iraq' at this time, see Bill Park, *Turkey's policy towards northern Iraq: problems and perspectives*, Adelphi Paper no. 374 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies/Routledge, 2005).

bolstered by the advancement of a nationalist vision of Kurdistan that blossomed in the 1990s and became increasingly focused upon the further advancement of autonomy, or even independence, in the 2000s.[47] This was most vividly and visibly represented during the January 2005 national election, when the popular desire for independence was reflected in an informal poll organized by the Kurdistan Referendum Movement.[48] Building upon an earlier signature-gathering exercise that saw 1,700,000 signatures collected in January and February 2004 (meaning that approximately two-thirds of the Kurdistan Region's adults signed in support of independence), the 'vote' for Kurdish independence, held alongside the national elections in January 2005, saw 98.8 per cent of those who voted favour an independent Kurdistan.[49]

Lastly, the Kurdish leaders had, almost imperceptibly, become statesmen on the international stage. Their opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein had won them seats at the most important tables in western capitals committed to regime change, and their engagement with the international community had created for them an impressive array of highly placed supporters following exceptionally active diplomatic work in the 1990s, establishing representations across Europe, the US, the Middle East and the Far East.[50] During this time they refined their political platform of federalism for Iraq, managing to ensure that wider Iraqi opposition groupings, most notably the Iraqi National Congress (INC), also adopted this idea.[51] They also became familiar with the mechanics of the international system, and key figures had become aware of the importance of the economic, as well as the political, drivers of international relations.

The Kurdistan Region: advancement vs containment

By 2003, then, the Kurds were ahead of the game of state-building in Iraq, having already effectively built their own state, which Iraq then had to accommodate. This simple fact has considerable explanatory value when considering the political development of Iraq after 2003. As key elements of the post-regime change government that formed under US tutelage in July 2003, the Kurds were ideally placed to ensure that the Iraqi state would be reconstituted according to Kurdish interests, and this meant that, far from being a subordinated component within the Iraqi state, the Kurdistan Region would become a partner in the Iraqi state, along with the government of Iraq itself. The constitution of Iraq, ratified by a popular referendum in 2005, gave formal recognition to the Kurdistan Region within a

[47] For an analysis of Kurdish nationalism in pre-2003 Iraq, see David Romano, *The Kurdish nationalist movement: opportunity, mobilization and identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 183–247.
[48] Laurel Miller, 'Designing constitution-making processes: lessons from the past, questions for the future', in Laurel Miller, ed., *Framing the state in times of transition: case studies in constitution making* (Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace Press, 2010), p. 623.
[49] See Stansfield, 'Governing Kurdistan', p. 216; Peter Galbraith, *The end of Iraq: how American incompetence created a war without end* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 171; Mahir Aziz, *The Kurds of Iraq: ethnonationalism and national identity in Iraqi Kurdistan* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), p. 92.
[50] See Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, p. 298.
[51] Peter Galbraith, 'Kurdistan in a federal Iraq,' in O'Leary et al., eds, *The future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, pp. 268–81 at p. 270.

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federal Iraqi state and, albeit loosely, to its competences. Again, this constitution was drafted with a keen eye to the wishes of Kurdistan's negotiators, incorporating articles that gave regions the responsibility to develop their own hydrocarbon sectors, and specified a process, articulated in article 140, by which that most contentious of issues in Iraq—over ownership of the disputed territories—was to be resolved.[52] These new arrangements became a focal point for successive Iraqi governments. The fact that the Kurds had the power and authority to act with full stakeholder authority within the structures of the Iraqi state, combined with the fact that they were building their own autonomous state seemingly independent of Baghdad, served to generate first suspicion among their colleagues in Baghdad, followed by aggravation, then animosity.[53]

The Kurds were alerted to the possibility that the constitution would be treated as merely a document that could be interpreted in a variety of ways by the attempts of Nationalist, Sunni and Shi'i parties (especially by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition) to amend the decentralization articles to favour greater government control, with Maliki and his predecessor, Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, also attempting to bolster Baghdad's authority from 2005 onwards.[54] Even more aggravating for the Kurds was that the implementation of the time-specific article 140 was never addressed, resulting in a debate over whether it was redundant.[55] For the Kurds, article 140 was the chief reason why they had eventually supported the passing of the constitution of 2005, and they viewed their very participation in Iraq as dependent upon its implementation. Without this happening, and along with what were perceived as broader provocations, the rhetoric of Kurdish leaders moved notably from a discourse about their future within a federal Iraqi state to one about their future as an independent entity.[56]

The formation of the second Maliki government in November 2011, as the result of a compromise that the Kurds believed they were responsible for negotiating

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[52] For analyses of Iraq's constitution, see Brendan O'Leary, 'Power-sharing, pluralist federation, and federacy', in O'Leary et al., eds, *The future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, pp. 47–91; John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, 'Iraq's constitution of 2005: liberal consociation as political prescription', *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 5: 4, 2007, pp. 670–98; Andrew Arato, *Constitution making under occupation: the politics of imposed revolution in Iraq* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[53] There are signs, though, of a final 'acceptance' stage. This way of thinking, that Iraq may be better placed to deal with the issues facing it if the Kurdish dimension is removed through their secession, has been apparent among various Arab groupings for some time, but has never been anything other than a marginal, radical view. However, attention was raised at the beginning of January 2013 by an article in the pro-Maliki newspaper *Al-Sabah*, written by its editor Abd al-Jabbar Shabbout, who suggested that the 'age-old problem' between Arabs and Kurds should be ended in a peaceful way by establishing a Kurdish state. See David Hirst, 'This could be the birth of an independent Kurdish state', *Guardian*, 9 Jan. 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/09/birth-kurdish-state-ottoman-syria-arab-spring, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[54] Alkadiri, 'Oil and the question of federalism in Iraq', p. 1318.

[55] See Anderson and Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk*; Larry Hanauer and Laurel Miller, *Resolving Kirkuk: lessons learned from settlements of earlier ethno-territorial conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012).

[56] KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani provided an example of this shift in rhetoric in a recent interview in *Time* magazine. When asked: 'Will there come a point where you feel you can no longer bargain with Maliki and it is time to be on your own?', Barzani answered: 'We have a constitution in this country. We will not take any other step until we lose hope in that constitution. There is no doubt if and when we lose hope that the constitution is not adhered to, certainly there are other options': Jay Newton-Small, 'An interview with Nechirvan Barzani: will there be an independent Kurdistan?', *Time*, 21 Dec. 2012, http://world.time.com/2012/12/21/an-interview-with-nechirvan-barzani-will-there-be-an-independent-kurdistan/, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

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(the Erbil Agreement), came with expectations that Maliki would therefore be more malleable. The failure of the Prime Minister to implement the agreement led to a tense stand-off between Maliki and his critics from January 2012 onwards. The agreement required the Prime Minister to relinquish his hold on the key security ministries of the state and to satisfy Sunni Arab and Kurdish demands on the sharing of power. However, rather than implement the agreement, the Prime Minister used the time to consolidate his own position and to strengthen his standing in the Council of Representatives, with a view to the possibility that his opponents might attempt to oust him through constitutional means. When Maliki's opponents attempted to organize a vote of no confidence, led by Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, in June 2012, it failed to unseat the tenacious Prime Minister, but the attempt left Maliki even more determined to limit the ambitions and activities of what were now clearly his Kurdish rivals.[57]

This situation unfolded quickly throughout 2012, resulting in political infighting and one-upmanship, brinkmanship of nerve-wracking proportions and military stand-offs in the disputed territories. Some of these stand-offs, including that at Tuz Khurmato to the south-west of Kirkuk in November 2012—itself preceded by a significant stand-off earlier in the summer, at Zummar, in the north-west of Iraq—saw the Kurdish *peshmerga* and the ISF deploy against each other.[58] By the beginning of 2013 the situation in the disputed territories was more serious, unstable and dangerous than it had ever been—and made all the more so because the political leaderships on both sides seemed to have adopted a mindset to fight sooner rather than later.[59]

Securing economic independence

The experience of the 1990s had educated the Kurdish leadership in the necessity of securing independent income streams, for their parties and, in later years, for the KRG. The Kurds realized even before regime change in Baghdad that for the Kurdistan Region to be truly autonomous within Iraq, they would need to have a mechanism whereby revenue would at least be transferred to them from the centre, or at best allow them to generate the revenue themselves. This mechanism was to be found in the relationship between the federal structure of Iraq and the management of the oil and gas sector.[60] Indeed, the two issues are inseparable, and disputes over hydrocarbons bring together all the other disputes concerning state structure (federal or unitary), control of resources (central or regional), redistribution of revenue (by the centre or from the producing region),

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[57] See Dina al-Shibeeb, 'Iraq: the great game of unseating a premier', *Al-Arabiya*, 5 June 2012, http://english. alarabiya.net/articles/2012/06/05/218777.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013. The vote very nearly succeeded, but unravelled following President Talabani's withdrawing of his support for the motion. There are strong suggestions that Iran's wishes, articulated by the Commander of the Al-Quds Brigade of the Islamic (Iranian) Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Qassem Suleimani, had a formative impact on the proceedings that saw the vote fail.

[58] Bassim Francis, 'Tensions high following Iraqi Army–Peshmerga clashes', *Al-Hayat*, 19 Nov. 2012.

[59] See 'Maliki trades blame with Barzani for ongoing political row', Middle East Online, 20 Jan. 2013, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=56566, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[60] Alkadiri, 'Oil and the question of federalism in Iraq', p. 1319.

management of the industry, the disputed territories (which have within them considerable hydrocarbons resources) and rights to license new fields in them, future constitutional changes, and the relationship of Iraq, and its regions, with neighbouring powers. In fact, while it is understandable that some say the dispute between the KRG and the government of Iraq is over oil, that is merely the tip of a very complex set of interrelated disputes.

From being seen as something akin to a hydrocarbon sector cottage industry, the KRG's oil and gas strategy came into its own in October 2011 with the signing of production sharing agreements (PSAs) with Exxon Mobil on six blocks in the Kurdistan Region—three of them in the disputed territories.[61] This was a game-changing move. Previously, the Kurds had attracted a range of companies to operate in Kurdistan, but none of a size that would allow them to show that international oil companies (IOCs) of significant stature viewed the Kurds' interpretation of their rights as legitimate.[62] Exxon Mobil's signing of contracts changed this and, within months, several other significant IOCs followed suit. In July 2012 Chevron signed contracts, followed by French giant Total at the end of the same month and Russian energy giant Gazprom Neft in August.

The question that must now be asked is what impact these developments will have upon Kurdistan's, and Iraq's, future. While IOCs understandably shy away from the large political questions concerning independence, federalism and secession, the scale of IOC involvement in the Kurdistan Region is such that a wider set of political ramifications will inevitably follow. With several major US concerns now operating in the Kurdistan Region, along with other very large IOCs, the future of the Kurdistan Region will begin to rise up the agendas of foreign services across the world, and particularly in Turkey. And it is this relationship that is now key to understanding the direction the Kurdistan Region will take. The question of oil exports from the region, sitting as it does on significant and impressive reserves, and exercising de facto if not de jure sovereignty over its territory, will now begin to take on a new dynamism. Turkey, for its part, is not merely a passive player which happens to sit on an export route. It has very real gains to make in the Kurdistan Region, and its own very pressing energy security demands to take into consideration.

It is now not beyond the realms of speculation to consider that the strategic interests of the Kurdistan Region are converging with the national energy security and economic interests of Turkey, and with the financial business models of some of the world's largest, and most influential, private sector organizations. Two factors now come together very clearly. The first is that Turkey needs energy for

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[61] Sylvia Pfeifer, 'Exxon signs Kurd exploration contracts', *Financial Times*, 10 Nov. 2011, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4e44f860-0bda-11e1-9861-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2KYCUYodt, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; Patrick Cockburn, 'Exxon's deal with the Kurds inflames Baghdad', *Independent*, 9 Dec. 2011, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/exxons-deal-with-the-kurds-inflames-baghdad-6274452.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[62] See Aiyob Mawloodi, 'Giant Exxon Mobil enters Kurdistan oil market', *Kurdish Globe*, 19 Nov. 2011, http://www.kurdishglobe.net/display-article.html?id=39777E8CCB61AA9895E7333B5611627A, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

its own domestic usage, and to supply western Europe.[63] The second is that the Kurdistan Region desperately needs to find a way to export its oil and gas independently of Baghdad's control.[64] By mid-December 2012, for example, Kurdistan's IOC exports were nearly at zero owing to the expectation that Baghdad would not facilitate payment.

These pressures, combined with Ankara's own sectarian-based animosity towards the Maliki government, have acted as a catalyst in a development that could be of profound importance for the future map of the Middle East: direct dealings between Ankara and Erbil to arrange Turkish imports of oil and gas in a relationship with the KRG.[65] This would formerly have been unthinkable, because it would seem logical that the moment when the Iraqi Kurds begin to export independently of Baghdad is the moment when Erbil begins to talk openly about secession from Iraq. By embracing this agenda, Ankara is actively, knowingly and willingly supporting a trajectory leading sooner rather than later to Kurdish secession. Reports suggest that Turkey is in the process of setting up a new company poised to acquire rights for five exploration blocks in the Kurdistan Region—reportedly those close to the disputed territories currently operated by Exxon.[66] The move, which would bring together Turkey, the KRG and Exxon in a powerful partnership, would then facilitate the creation of an energy corridor that would send as much as 3 million barrels per day of oil and 10 billion cubic metres a year of gas over the border directly into Turkey.

Recent events suggest that the plan is not merely hypothetical—the KRG and the government of Turkey agreed in May 2012 that they would press ahead with building an oil and gas pipeline that would connect the Kurdistan Region and Turkey directly, without having to rely on the established Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline owned and operated by the government of Iraq's State Organization for Marketing Oil (SOMO). This pipeline seems to be under construction already.[67] Furthermore, the KRG began to sell oil openly to Turkey, transported by tanker, in June, emphasizing to even the most sceptical observers that Turkey, far from seeking to limit the Kurdistan Region's ambitions, was instead encouraging them.[68] Figure 2 gives a view of how developed the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas sector has become, and how extensive are its plans for the future. Of particular interest is the situation at the four-way boundary meeting point in the north-west, between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The planned Kurdish oil and gas pipelines are left poised to cross the border into Turkey; whether they would

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[63] See Krauer-Pacheco, *Turkey as a transit country*.

[64] The established Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline is owned by the government of Iraq.

[65] For an account of the transformation of the foreign policy of Turkey towards the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by the AKP government, see Morton Abramowitz and Henri Barkey, 'Turkey's transformers: the AKP sees big', *Foreign Affairs* 88: 6, Nov.–Dec. 2009, pp. 118–28 at p. 122.

[66] This new company is, at the time of writing, unnamed. See Isabel Coles, 'New Turkish company in talks over Kurdistan oil-sources', Reuters, 8 Nov. 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/08/energy-iraq-kurdistan-idUSL5E8M8AQD20121108, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[67] 'Iraqi Kurds press on with oil pipe to Turkey despite US fears', Reuters, 7 Feb. 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/07/us-iraq-kurds-oil-idUSBRE9160KD20130207, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[68] See Emily Gosden, 'Kurdistan "begins oil exports to Turkey"', *Telegraph*, 5 July 2012 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/oilandgas/9380009/Kurdistan-begins-oil-exports-to-Turkey.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.
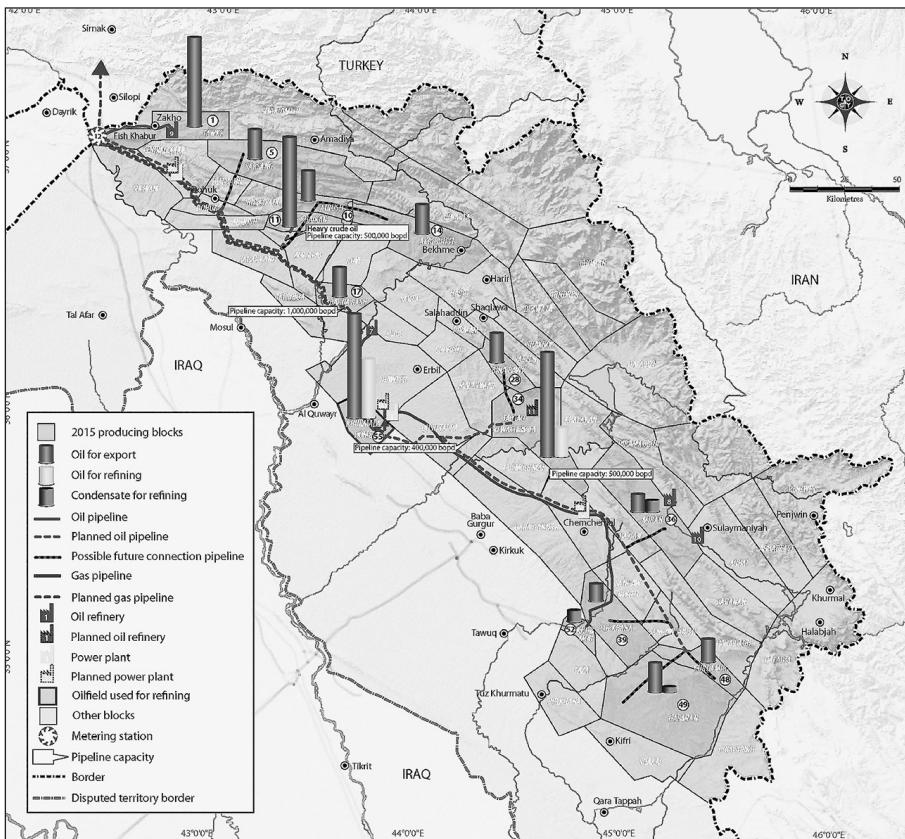
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Figure 2: Current and planned oil and gas sector infrastructure in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, including planned pipeline routes

Source: The oil and gas year: the Kurdistan region of Iraq 2012 (Glendale, CA: Wildcat International, 2012).

first connect with the SOMO-controlled Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline, or instead cross directly from territory controlled by the Kurdistan Region into Turkey, with Kurdish gas being used to supply the Silopi power station, as is currently rumoured, is left tantalizingly unclear.[69]

This sudden expansion of the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas sector has created consternation in Baghdad, particularly as the Kurds have shown themselves able to renegotiate the constraints of international boundaries and relationships with previously hostile states (Turkey). With this in mind, the export of even limited quantities of oil to Turkey represents a potential sea-change in Middle East political life. To understand the reaction of Baghdad, it is necessary to view the move not only from the perspective of pure economic gain and loss, but through the lenses of nationalism and national pride: for Iraqi Arab nationalists, and particularly among the Shi'i leadership around Maliki and Deputy Prime Minister Hussein al-Shahristani, the exportation of Kurdish oil to Turkey is not

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[69] Author's interview with observer of the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas sector, Erbil, 2 Oct. 2012.
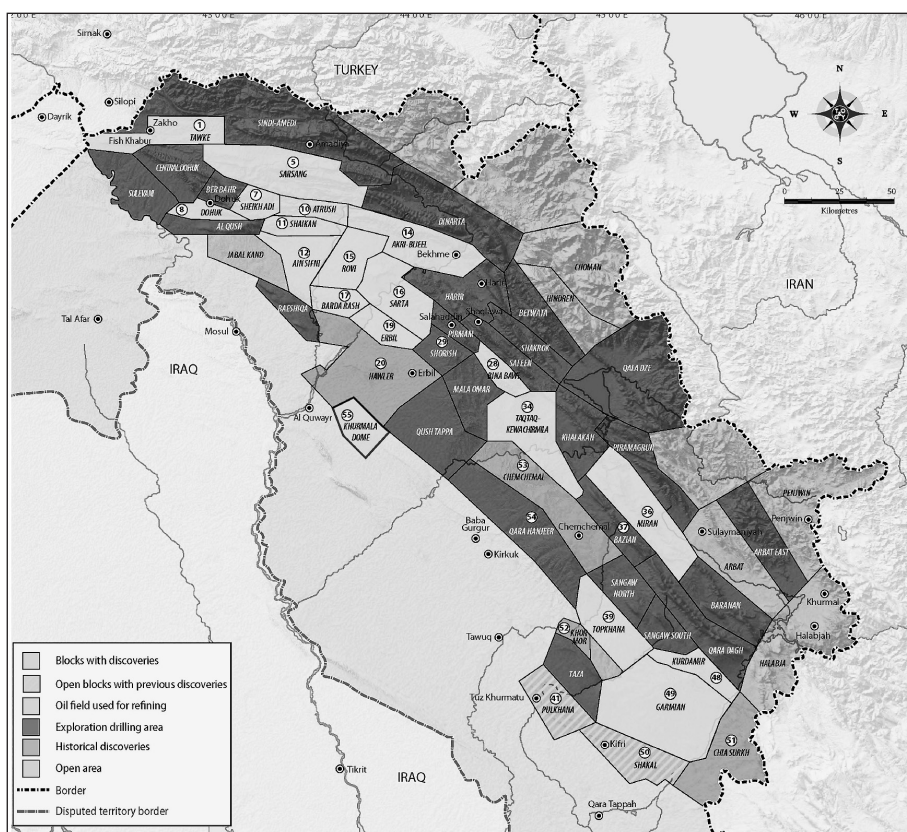
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Figure 3: Kurdistan region oil and gas sector, active blocs

Source: The oil and gas year: the Kurdistan region of Iraq 2012 (Glendale, CA: Wildcat International, 2012).

only theft from Iraq; it is treason against Iraq. For the Kurds, the export of oil is their public implementation of a constitutionally agreed mechanism that is in the interests of Kurdistan and of all Iraq. Privately, however, many feel that it is the first move towards allowing the Kurdistan Region to be economically and financially independent of Baghdad, and to build stronger ties with Ankara that may ultimately allow the KRG to secede.

Questioning the orthodoxy of Turkish opposition to a Kurdistan Region: the PKK factor

The scenario of Turkey increasingly finding common ground with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, to the extent that the actions of Ankara may ultimately be strengthening Erbil's ability to pursue ever greater articulations of self-determination either within or outside the framework of the Iraqi state, flies in the face of the established orthodox view of Turkish–Kurdish relations. Upon assuming the premiership in 2002, for example, Erdoğan did not appear to be minded to acknowledge the

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salience of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, and certainly not to engage with the PKK in anything resembling a peace process, saying with equal humour and acerbity: 'We are against a Kurdish state even if it were established in Argentina.'[70]

While the positive engagement between Turkey and the Kurdistan Region suggests a dramatic shift in the relationship between the two, it is reasonable to ask just how durable and sustainable this new partnership is, particularly when it is placed in the context of a far more established and deeply antagonistic relationship that has endured at least for three decades (since the rise of the PKK), if not far longer.[71] Is the Ankara–Erbil alliance merely a geopolitical flash in the pan, destined to be snuffed out when Baghdad and Ankara once again find common ground? Or is this still young partnership displaying indications of durability that, given a catalytic set of regional transformations, could see it become the norm rather than an anomaly?

Even with regard to the PKK, there are indications that the position of the Turkish state is changing. Following Erdoğan's diluting of the power of the 'deep state'[72] by what has been known as the 'Ergenekon process', which has been under way since June 2007 and has led to the arrest of some 100 senior military officers and the subsequent weakening of the role of the military in the political life of the state, the Prime Minister's ability to challenge previous taboos has grown.[73] The greatest of all these taboos has been negotiating with the PKK. Erdoğan has been pursuing some form of peace process with the Kurdish rebels since 2009, the latest manifestation being in December 2012, when he publicly ordered the head of the National Intelligence Organization (Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı or MİT), Hakan Fidan, to open talks with the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Locked up in the island prison of İmralı, Öcalan has been engaged with the Turkish government in a peace process aimed at achieving the demilitarization of the PKK.[74]

While this is itself astonishing enough, even more so are reports suggesting that PKK active units, operating out of the Qandil mountains in the most inaccessible parts of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, are viewing the peace process positively.[75] Yet this seems to be the case: the PKK has even been allowed to send a delegation to İmralı, with the approval of Erdoğan, to meet once again with its

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[70] Quoted in Başak İnce, *Citizenship and identity in Turkey: from Atatürk's republic to the present day* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 172.

[71] For the history, development and politics of the PKK, see Ali Kemal Özcan, *Turkey's Kurds: a theoretical analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan* (London: Routledge, 2006); Aliza Marcus, *Blood and belief: the PKK and the Kurdish fight for independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

[72] In the words of the US Ambassador in Ankara, reporting to Washington DC on the 'deep state in Turkey' on the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, 'what Turks refer to as the Deep State [is the] informal, para-judicial governance motivated by an expansive definition of national security': quoted in Ayşegül Sabuktay, 'Tracing the deep state', *Perspectives: Political Analysis and Commentary from Turkey* 1: 12, 2012 (Istanbul: Heinrich Böll Stiftung Turkey Representation), pp. 4–7.

[73] For a detailed description of the Ergenekon process, including an analysis of the role of the 'deep state' in Ottoman and Turkish history, see H. Akin Ünver, 'Turkey's "deep-state" and the Ergenekon conundrum', *Middle East Institute Policy Brief* no. 23, (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, April 2009).

[74] See 'Editorial: Turkey and the Kurds: progress on the horizon', *Guardian*, 6 Feb. 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/06/turkey-kurds-progress-horizon-editorial, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[75] 'Erdoğan satisfied with PKK leader's attitude, eyes end to conflict', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 1 Feb. 2013, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-satisfied-with-pkk-leaders-attitude-eyes-end-to-conflict.aspx?pageID=238&nID=40348&NewsCatID=338, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

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leader—something that would have been deemed unthinkable before 2007. The acceptance of this move by Turkish society, and even the military, is indicative of a widespread desire to see the crippling conflict come to an end.[76] While there is still a long way to go in terms of negotiating the PKK out of its mountain lairs and into leaving the country, as Erdoğan wants, the fact that this peace process seems to have the broad support of the Turkish electorate, the political elite (apart from the nationalist MHP), the PKK and the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP—representing the Kurds), gives it a degree of durability that could see Erdoğan achieve what many had thought impossible.[77] What this peace process means for developments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as well as in the other host states of the Kurds, is now a pertinent question, as there is reason to believe that the once intractable Turkish–PKK conflict may be moving into an endgame that will bring positive developments for the Kurds in Turkey.

The Kurdistan Region as an international actor

The Kurdistan Region does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, the 'imagined' community of the Kurds has exploded in the virtual realm, there now being a more unified, vibrant Kurdish nationalist project than at any time in the past, with those adhering to a nationalist ideology being more expectant and aspirational than ever before.[78] It is clear that the creation, survival, consolidation and success of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has acted as a catalyst in what should, with good reason, be called a 'Kurdish Spring'.[79] There is another side to the internal identity dimension of this Kurdish Spring, which is just as important in considering how the status of the Kurds will develop in the near future, and that is the reaction of regional states to this emerging force in their midst. Completing the confluence of domestic (internal cohesion) and economic (hydrocarbons) conditions that

[76] Murat Yetkin, 'What does the PKK's founding leader want?', *Al-Arabiya*, 16 Feb. 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2013/02/16/266531.html, accessed 21 Feb. 2013. For an account of the change in posture of the Turkish generals towards previous constants of Turkish national security concerns, see Ersel Aydinli, 'A paradigmatic shift for the Turkish generals and an end to the coup era in Turkey', *Middle East Journal* 63: 4, Autumn 2009, pp. 581–96.
[77] There is a counter-argument to this optimistic view that sees Erdoğan's strategy as nothing more than a cynical attempt to build popularity at home and abroad, while avoiding violence in the run-up to the 2014 election. See Simon Tisdall, 'Turkish opposition leader condemns "dictator" Erdogan', *Guardian*, 15 Feb. 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/15/turkish-opposition-leader-dictator-erdogan, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.
[78] The term 'imagined community' comes from Benedict Anderson's seminal work on the genesis and dissemination of nationalism. See *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). For an account of virtual nationalisms, see Thomas Eriksen, 'Nationalism and the internet', *Nations and Nationalism* 13: 1, 2007, pp. 1–17.
[79] The *Guardian*, in an editorial on 6 Feb. 2013, referred to the possibility of a Kurdish Spring happening, but with particular reference to the situation in Turkey, not in Iraq: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/06/turkey-kurds-progress-horizon-editorial, accessed 21 Feb. 2013. The term 'Kurdish Spring' has also been used in reference to events in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in February 2012, when protesters held rallies in Saray Square in Sulaymaniyah. The ensuing days saw KRG security forces open fire on demonstrators, killing a 15-year-old boy, and skirmishes break out between supporters of President Barzani's KDP and supporters of Nawshirwan Mustafa's Gorran opposition grouping. As this event—important though it was—was in effect localized in Sulaymaniyah and was limited in its spread across the rest of the Kurdistan Region, it seems more accurate to refer to it as 'the demonstrations of 2012'. I am choosing to use the term 'Kurdish Spring' to refer to the broader articulation of clearer Kurdish national self-determination demands that have been emerging in Iraq since 2007, in Turkey since 2009 and in Syria since 2012.

have brought the Kurdistan Region to the brink of statehood is the Syrian civil war. Not only does the unfolding tragedy have Kurdish interests within it, in the form of a significant Kurdish minority population, but it is also seeing the KRG engage with interests inside Syria.[80] It is doing so to the extent that it could be said that the KRG has an interventionist foreign policy, which is also in opposition to the policy being followed by the government of Iraq. This, in itself, is worth reflecting upon: that there exist within Iraq two foreign policy centres, with foreign policies to a neighbouring state that are diametrically opposed, the KRG supporting the Kurds of the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), who are aligned with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and the Maliki government tending to support the maintenance of the Assad regime. It is therefore useful to reflect upon the KRG's role as a foreign policy actor, and what its policy in Syria may suggest about its future regional and international orientation.

By the end of July 2012, the civil war in Syria was in full spate, with the Assad government coming under constant attack from the forces of the FSA and the major city of Aleppo (which has a significant Kurdish minority) becoming a battleground between the two sides. By mid-August, Assad's forces had managed to regain control of the city, but the situation remained violent and dangerously unstable across the entire country. The conflict was by this time heavily penetrated by regional powers, Turkey and the Arab Gulf states supporting the FSA, and Iran supporting the Assad regime. Tellingly, Iraq was divided: Maliki's government of Iraq was showing strong support for the Assad regime, while Barzani's KRG was supporting the FSA and Syrian opposition in general, and the KNC component of the opposition in particular.

Yet the situation has a further degree of complexity: the Kurds of Syria are notoriously fractured, the most powerful component being the Partiya Yekîtiya Democrat (PYD)—a party with strong links to the PKK, and therefore viewed with deep suspicion by Turkey.[81] Recognizing the importance of the PYD as potential supporters of his regime, President Assad had actively courted them, while also granting to the Kurds a range of rights previously denied them—including citizenship and land ownership. Then, rather than target the Kurds, as has happened to Sunni Arabs across Syria, the security organizations of the

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[80] For analysis of the Kurdish situation in Syria, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds* (London: Routledge, 2009); Robert Lowe, 'The *serhildan* and the Kurdish national story in Syria', in Lowe and Stansfield, eds, *The Kurdish policy imperative*, pp. 161–79; ICG, *Syria's Kurds: a struggle within a struggle*, 22 Jan. 2013, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/136-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.aspx, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

[81] The PYD was founded in 2003. It denies that it is a branch of the PKK, but it is a member of the Union of Kurdish Communities (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), an umbrella organization that shares the same leadership and charter as the PKK. See ICG, *Turkey: the PKK and a Kurdish settlement*, Europe Report no. 219, 11 Sept. 2012; ICG, *Syria's Kurds*, 2013. Illustrating the complexity of the civil war in Syria, PYD and FSA forces clashed throughout the end of 2012 and into the beginning of 2013, especially around the Kurdish-dominated town of Sari Kani, and also in the city of Aleppo itself. See Lauren Williams, 'Inter-Kurdish tensions mounting against FSA', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 20 Nov. 2012, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Nov-20/195610-inter-kurdish-tensions-mounting-against-fsa.ashx#axzz2L74FK0Im, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; Kurdpress, 'PYD and FSA agree to end clashes', 2 Feb. 2013, http://kurdpress.com/En/NSite/FullStory/News/?Id=3711#Title=PYD%20and%20FSA%20agree%20to%20end%20clashes, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.

regime embraced the PYD and allowed their supporters (including reports of PKK guerrillas) to take over Kurdish-dominated towns in the north-east: there were reports of some 2,000 PKK guerrillas crossing into Syria from Turkey in February 2012.

The situation in Syria brought to the fore Turkish sensitivities towards the possibility of another Kurdistan Region emerging—one that could prove to be far more antipathetic to Turkish interests than the version they were now contentedly dealing with in Iraq. It was in October 2011, with Turkey making very aggressive statements against the Kurds in Syria, that Massoud Barzani brought together some 16 smaller Syrian Kurdish parties to form the KNC.[82] As a means of attempting to marginalize the PYD, this strategy met with Ankara's approval. Yet Barzani's subsequent attempt, in Erbil in June 2012, to integrate with the KNC elements of the PYD leadership that had become increasingly concerned about having so many PKK figures among them, was met with consternation. At that meeting, a new joint leadership was formed between the PYD and the pro-Barzani KNC, which then attempted, albeit ultimately without success, to take over the running of Syrian cities previously dominated by the PYD.[83]

While events in Syria are difficult to assess, it is clear that the KRG is pursuing a policy that is as much governed by its need to maintain Erbil's close relationship with Ankara as it is about promoting the rights of the Syrian Kurds. President Barzani has to walk a very fine tightrope, ensuring that he manages to maintain some semblance of controlling influence over the Syrian Kurds and their majority tendency to sympathize with, if not support, the PKK, without raising suspicions in Turkey that he has greater ambitions than being president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq alone. His actions have arguably been pragmatic. While causing shock waves in Ankara, Barzani's move to find a compromise between the PYD and KNC reflects the lessons learned from the fierce internecine fighting he engaged in with PUK leader Jalal Talabani in the 1990s—fighting that greatly weakened the Kurdish national movement in Iraq.[84] Yet times have not moved on far enough to sweep away entirely the fear in Turkey that the Kurdish leader might have plans for some wider, pan-Kurdish entity over which to rule, whatever statements Barzani issues to the contrary.

These acts—supporting the opposition to Assad and maintaining an exceptionally close link to Ankara—have been met with concern in Iran. Indeed, Tehran's view of Erbil dimmed markedly over the course of 2012: with Turkey taking such expansive economic steps in the region, and with the Kurdish leadership in Iraq seemingly operating in conscious detachment from their one-time allies in Tehran, it seems that, for Erbil, Iran is of secondary importance. While Erbil is open about the importance of its relationship with Ankara, it still remains

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[82] ICG, *Syria's Kurds*, p. 3. The parties that form the KNC come from a wide spectrum of Syrian Kurdish political life, making for an organization that is factionalized from the outset.

[83] See Ben Gittleson, 'Syria's Kurds look to Iraqi minority for support', *New York Times*, 31 Jan. 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/31/world/middleeast/31iht-m31-kurds.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0, accessed 21 Feb. 2013; ICG, *Syria's Kurds*, p. 4.

[84] See Gunter, *The Kurdish predicament in Iraq*; Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*.

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painfully aware of the danger of building the Kurdistan Region's future security and survival around a single relationship. But they also know, perhaps better than most, just how destabilizing a neighbour Iran can be, if elements inside Iran were minded to create problems for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Lastly, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership also recognizes that Iran has a very real, perhaps determining, influence over the actions of Prime Minister Maliki. When all these factors are combined, it is perhaps not too surprising that KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani was rekindling the Erbil–Tehran relationship in November 2012, while his uncle, Massoud, was occupied with Turkey and Syria.[85]

But it will be the situation in Syria that ultimately dictates the Iraqi Kurds' alliances and future alignments. Having been drawn into the conflict by ethnic kinship, the KRG leadership has had little option, given the critical importance of Turkey to the Kurdistan Region's security and economic development, but to pursue policies that satisfy Ankara's demands. In so doing, the Kurdistan Region is being brought into the grouping of countries that have emerged in the Middle East as the champions of the post-Arab Spring Islamist governments—namely Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates; countries that, because of their religious identity, are fearful of Iranian ambitions in the Middle East. With representatives from across the Arab world now resident in Erbil, it seems to be the case that Erbil's association with a Sunni bloc in Middle East regional politics is strengthening, because of its relationship with Turkey and because the Kurdish leadership quickly supported the cause of the Arab transitions. This can only serve to further strengthen the prospects of the Kurdistan Region moving towards independence, particularly if Iraq once again becomes a front line in the sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'is.

Conclusion: the 'obliged Iraqis', but for how long?

I have had the good fortune to meet with Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani on many occasions. During one such discussion, in the spring of 2009, he spoke of the Kurds being 'obliged' to be Iraqis.[86] By this he meant that they had, in effect, no choice but to exist within the framework of the Iraqi state, as established by imperial powers at the end of the First World War: their obligation to be Iraqi was imposed by their situation within the historical legacy of Iraqi state formation, the realities created by the post-settlement states—including the rise of notions of dominant nationhood in each host state—and regional geopolitical realities that saw the international community consolidate, rather than question, the state system of the twentieth century.

The question to ask now is: how 'obliged' are the Kurds today to be Iraqis? Even in the space of the last four years, the factors that obstruct or promote Kurdish independence in what is currently the north of Iraq have changed almost beyond recognition. True, it is the case that there remains very significant disquiet

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[85] See 'Iran seeks improved ties with Iraqi Kurdistan', AFP, 12 Nov. 2012, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News Content/2/8/57895/World/Region/Iran-seeks-improved-ties-with-Iraqi-Kurdistan.aspx, accessed 21 Feb. 2013.
[86] Author's interview with Nechirvan Barzani, March 2009, Erbil.

in certain circles of Turkey concerning the emergence of any sort of Kurdish entity; but it is tempting to state that history, which is so depressing for a Kurdish secessionist, seems to be on their side for the first time in over a century. Nor is this swift change in the fortunes of a people seeking to apply principles of self-determination and move towards heightened autonomy, or even secession, without precedent. Increasingly, the crystallizing of factors that will influence the Kurdistan Region's future have many striking parallels with the way in which Kosovo gained its independence. From being a federal region of Yugoslavia, Kosovo's autonomy was challenged by Belgrade, resulting in its declaration of independence in June 1991, which saw Serbia retaliate by abolishing Kosovo's independent powers. It was only when international geopolitical alignments began to overlap with Kosovo's aspirations for independence, from 1995 onwards, while Serbia had sunk into pariah status, that Kosovo was finally able to successfully declare independence in February 2008. The question whether the impact of geopolitical alignments around Kurdistan will mirror those that empowered Kosovo is therefore a very pertinent one.[87]

How durable, though, are these changes of almost paradigmatic proportions? While it is always tempting to err on the side of caution, the developments outlined in this article suggest that the combination of local cohesion, popular Kurdish development, Iraqi state weakness, and the overlapping of economic and geopolitical interests between the Kurdistan Region and one-time opponents gives the current trajectory more durability than the Kurds have enjoyed in previous times when it looked as though they could challenge the established state system. It is now not so insane to talk about a future Republic of Kurdistan that would, by its very existence, alter profoundly the politics of the Middle East. Indeed, it would seem odd not to acknowledge it as a distinct possibility.

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[87] For analyses of Kosovo's trajectory towards independence, see Marc Weller, *Contested statehood: Kosovo's struggle for independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); James Ker-Lindsay, *Kosovo: the path to contested statehood in the Balkans* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).