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Sub-state actors and foreign policy risk-taking: The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq

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Abstract

The analysis presented here offers a possible framework for understanding when sub-state actors behave prudently and more strategically in their foreign relations, and when other priorities might instead heighten the chances of seemingly irrational, erratic, or dangerous, foreign policies. Using a case study of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq to illustrate the argument, the author attempts to show how “regime consolidation” plays a key role in allowing such actors to prioritise policies aimed at grappling with external challenges, threats and opportunities. Internally legitimate, consolidated regimes can better present “one face” to the outside world and behave more strategically in the international arena. Political systems lacking consolidation or internal legitimacy, in contrast, turn to the external environment in search of resources to help them with domestic threats and challenges. This may lead to seemingly erratic, unpredictable and risky foreign policies on their part.

Keywords: Iraq; Kurds; foreign policy; paradiplomacy; neo-classical realism

Abstract in Kurmanji

Aktorên bin-dewletî û girtina rîskên siyaseta derve: Hikûmeta Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê

Analîza ku li vir hatiye pêşkêşkirin çarçoveyeke muhtemel ji bo fehmkirina demên ku aktorên bin-dewletî di têkiliyên xwe yên derve de bi hişyarî û stratejîk tevdiagerin û demên di dewsê de pêşkiyên din şansên siyaseta derve yên xeternak, guherbar û îrrasyonel didine ber xwe. Bi bikaranîna mînakê Hikûmeta Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê nivîskar hewl dide ku nîşan bide ka çawa “xurtkirina rejîmê” roleke serekî dilîze di destûrdana van aktorên de ku pêşkiyê bidin politikayên ku bi dijwarî, tehdît û talûkeyên derve bigre. Rejîmên di hundir de meşrû û xurt dikarin baştir “rûyekî” nîşanê cîhana derve bidin û di qada navneteweyî de bêhtir stratejîk tevbigerin. Lê belê sistêmên siyasî yên ne xurt û di hundir de ne meşrû jî berê xwe didin derdora derve di lêgerîna çavkaniyan de da ku alîkariya wan bikin ji bo talûke

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û zehmetiyên hundirîn. Ev dikare bibe sedem ku ew politikayên derveyî yên birîsk, netexmînbar û hevnegrîr ên berçav bigrin ji aliyê xwe ve.

Abstract in Sorani

Ektêre dewllete lawekeyyekan û xoleqerey metrisî danî syasetî derewe: hkumetî herêmî kurdistanî 'êraq

Ew şikaryaney lêreda amadekrawn , çwarçêweyekî guncaw pêşkeş dekat bo têgeyîştin lewey le katêkda ektêre dewllete lawekîyekan beşêweyekî wiryayane û sitratîjyanetir le peywendîyekanî derewe xoyanda hellsukewt deken, we katêkîş ewlewîyetekekanî tir renga şansî ewey le rukeşda wek syasetî derekî na'eqlanî, namo, yan trisnak derdekewêt berizbkatewe. Hkumetî herêmî kurdistanî 'êraq wek keysî twêjînewe bekarhatuwe bo rûnkirdnewey ew argumêntey ke nûser hewll dedat nişanî bdat çon "ptewkirdnî rjêm" rollêkî serekî debînêt le rêgedan bew core ekterane bo ewey ew syasetane bkate ewlewîyet ke amanc lêy berberkaney allingarîy û hereşe û derfete drekiyekane. Ew rjêmaney ke şer'iyetî nawxoyyan heye û çespaewn baştîr detwanin "yek rûiy" pişanî dinyay derewe bken û le meydana nêwdewlletîşda sitratîjyanetir hellsukewt bken. Bepêçewanewe, ew sisteme syasyaney ke neçespaewn û şer'iyetî nawxoyyan kurtidênêt, le gerran bedway serçawekanda rû le jîngey derekî deken bo ewey yarmetîyan bda le herreşe û allingarîye nawxoyyekan. Eme lewaneye wabkat ke ew syasete derekiyaney ke be namo, pêşbînî nekraw û metrisîdar derdekewn le terefî ewanewe bêt.

Abstract in Zazaki

Failê bindewletkî û riskgêriya siyasetê teberî: Hukmatê Herêmê Kurdîstanî yê Îraqî

No analizê tîyayî seba fehmkerdîşê wextê ke failê bindewletkîyî têkilîyanê xo yê teberî de bitedbîr û hîna zaf stratejîk hereket kenê û wexto ke herinda ci de prîorîteyê bînî asayîş ra gore ihtîmalê politikayanê teberî yê bêmantîq, bêqerar yan zî xeternakan kenê zêde, ci rê çarçewayêka potansîyele pêşkêş keno. Bi xebata nimûneyî yê Hukmatê Herêmê Kurdîstanî yê Îraqî no arguman nişan diyeno. Nuşttox wazeno bimusno ke "konsolidasyonê rejîmî" senî rolêko sereke gêno ke tede kerdoxanê winasîyan rê destûr diyeno ke politikayanê xo yê çareserkerdîşê zehmetî, tehdîd û îmkananê teberî prîorîtîze bikerê. Eke zere de meşrû yê, rejîmê kondolîdekerdeyî eşkenê xo bi "yew rî" teber rê bimusnê û sahneya mîyanneteweyîye de hîna zaf stratejîk hereket bikerê. Heto bîn ra, sistemê siyasyîyî ke tede konsolidasyon yan zî meşrûiyetê zereyî çin ê, ê xo çarnenê dorûverê xo yê teberî ke seba helkerdîşê tehdîd û zehmetîyanê zereyî ro çimewan bigêre. No seba înan beno ke bibo sebebê politikayanê teberî yê bêqerar, nevervînbar û rîzîkodaran.

Introduction

During the fall of 2002, when it seemed increasingly likely that the United States would invade Iraq, government agencies in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom began contacting the author with a pressing question: "If the Americans overthrow Saddam's regime, what will the Iraqi Kurds do? Would they use the opportunity to declare their independence? Would their drive for a Kurdish state make common cause with the Kurdish

populations of Turkey, Syria and Iran?" Policymakers in the West appeared very worried about the destabilising repercussions of any such Kurdish moves in the wake of a political vacuum in Baghdad.

The author's answer at the time was always the same: "No, the Kurds in Iraq will not make any risky moves for immediate independence, nor will they engage in irredentist games aimed at the territory of neighbouring states. They will work with Coalition forces to build a new Iraq, they will participate in the new government in Baghdad and they will try to have the autonomy they already enjoy officially recognised." In the decade after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Kurds did exactly that and more, they worked hard to reassure both the international community and neighbouring states that they represented a moderating, stabilising force with whom one could do business. They especially courted Turkish investments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and avoided putting their hands into the "Kurdish pots" of Turkey, Iran and Syria. They opened unified representation offices in various capitals abroad to represent their region, and they started courses in protocol and dress to train a new cadre of young Kurds to be their diplomats. The KRI's president, Massoud Barzani, was soon being received abroad, in Europe, Turkey, Iran, the United States and elsewhere, with honours normally accorded only to heads of state. All the while, the KRI's leaders avoided any risky moves such as a unilateral declaration of independence. The KRI's position on the matter only changed in 2017, when they announced a referendum on independence and finally held the referendum on September 25.

As a political scientist, however, it soon occurred to the author that one should have had some kind of theory to back up a "gut feeling" prediction on the issue. Why did the author expect prudence from the Iraqi Kurds for so long, when the international political landscape remains littered with plenty of examples of both states and non-state actors engaging in very risky, maximalist and even seemingly foolhardy foreign policy behaviour? Under what conditions should one expect such prudence to come to an end (as it may have ended for the Kurds in 2017)? Palestinian militants from Hamas launch Qassem rockets towards a much more powerful Israel on a regular basis, while stubbornly insisting that they will settle for nothing short of the total "liberation" of all of Palestine. Hizbullah fighters from Lebanon regularly launched border raids into Israel, sparking devastating Israeli reprisals similar to what levelled entire neighbourhoods of Gaza City. The "Islamic State" launched a war on some five different fronts simultaneously, taking on Syrian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, the Syrian state, the Iraqi state and competing Sunni Arab groups in both Syria and Iraq. Even established states, such as Jordan and Syria, engaged in seemingly

unjustifiably risky behaviour by pursuing wars against a much stronger Israel in the 1960s and 70s, with predictable results.

So why did the Kurds, with their “mad dreams of independence”,² prove different for so long? During the mid-1990s, the Iraqi Kurds did not in fact seem so dissimilar from the aforementioned actors, supporting Kurdish movements in neighbouring states and even fighting each other in a civil war that saw different Kurdish factions turn to Iran, Turkey and even Saddam for help against fellow Kurdish groups. What changed by 2002 to engender, for a time, more coherence and foreign policy prudence on the part of Iraqi Kurds? Did the factors accounting for such prudence shift again by 2017?

Towards a theoretically-informed understanding of sub-state actors’ foreign policies

“Paradiplomacy” refers to the international activity of regional governments, as a number of these bodies have begun pursuing foreign policies parallel to, or occasionally at odds with, the states of which they form a part. Regional governments “...are negotiating and signing international agreements, developing representation abroad, conducting trade missions, seeking foreign investment, and entering into bilateral and multilateral relations with states. Their action is no longer limited to the ‘internal’” (Lecours, 2002, p. 92). The literature on paradiplomacy focusses on regional governments of European and North American states,³ probably because many of these states boast sufficiently open and pluralist governing systems to allow regions to legally pursue their own international agendas. Examples of regional governments frequently examined in the paradiplomacy literature include Quebec and other Canadian provinces, Wallonia and Flanders, the Basque region of Spain, various German regional governments, and various states of the United States of America.

In less permissive states ethno-nationalist and regional groups may also control “liberated territory” and engage in foreign policy (Somaliland, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, for instance), but until they attain some form of legal or internationally recognised status, these seem to be ignored or viewed by writers in the paradiplomacy field as simply “non-state actors”. Other observers call these entities, which typically reside in more “security-challenged” contexts, “unrecognised states”.⁴ In other cases entities such as Palestine, Western

² This is a reference to the title of a well-known article by Chris Kutschera (1994).

³ For representative examples of this literature, see Aldecoa & Keating (1999), Balthazar (1993), and Lecours (2002).

⁴ For instance, see Caspersen & Stansfield (2011). There have been other cases outside of the paradiplomacy literature wherein scholars devote considerable attention to such sub-state actors, however. In Kingston &

Sahara and pre-2002 East Timor enjoy international recognition (via the United Nations) of their independence and suitability for statehood, but their lack of *de facto* control over their territory seems to place them in a very different category.

The existing literature on paradiplomacy, while arguing for a less state-centric approach to the study of international relations, nonetheless generally treats regions engaged in paradiplomacy and protodiplomacy (paradiplomacy aimed at setting the stage for independence) as unitary and strategic foreign policy actors. The accounts in such literature fit well within the neo-liberal paradigm of international relations, focusing on the economic and material goals of these unitary actors as they try to maximise their international standing. Such an approach seems reasonable enough when the focus of analysis appears centred on established, secure and developed states (and their regions) in the Western world, such as Canada (Quebec), the United Kingdom (Scotland) and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia).

A starting assumption of unitary, strategic actors nonetheless appears somewhat curious, however, especially if one wants to extend the analysis to weaker states, less secure regions and sub-state actors in general: One would expect regional governments to exhibit the same or more of the fractured political systems and foreign policy disagreements that many recognised states suffer from. While examining how and when regional governments act internationally certainly appears a worthy undertaking, the bigger puzzle may first involve determining when they speak with one voice and act strategically on the international system level of analysis, in other words, when they can be expected to behave more like strong states.

The neo-realist and neo-liberal paradigms of international relations, as well as many variants of realists, assume that states mostly behave as unitary, rational and strategic actors at the international system level of analysis. States act in the international arena in order to maximise their objectives, the most important of which are security and power.⁵ A soft (rather than mathematical) definition of rationality expects states to choose the best means to maximise their desired foreign policy ends, within the constraints of available information (“bounded rationality”).⁶ This “unitary rational actor” assumption allows us to develop a number of parsimonious theories and expectations about the world, simplifying a complex and unpredictable

Spears (2004) (which is not part of the paradiplomacy literature), the contributors examine the cases of Sierra Leone, Sudan’s Blue Nile Territory, militia cantons in Lebanon, the FARC in Columbia, Eastern Zaire, Somaliland and pre-2003 Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁵ For one of the more prominent neo-realist advocates of such a starting assumption, see Waltz (1959). Although the rational unitary actor assumption has been criticised by a great deal of work in the international relations literature, it still seems to serve as the default, starting point assumption when trying to understand or predict states’ behaviour, in Graham Allison’s terms, “Model 1” (1999). This appears true of both students of international relations as well as policymakers.

⁶ For more on “bounded rationality,” see Jervis (1982/83).

reality into cognitively manageable chunks wherein states generally act in a predictable fashion. International relations scholars do not monopolise such cognitive short-cuts, of course, foreign policy makers also find comfort in looking at other states as strategic foreign policy actors, as it allows them to believe they can predict behaviour and generally deal with such “rational” actors with more confidence. In contrast to the devil they know, the alternative of apparently irrational (at least at the systemic, international politics level of analysis), unpredictable and risk-prone foreign policies unsettle both policy makers and scholars.

Many weakly consolidated states likewise fail the test of unity and strategic foreign policy decision making. Weak, unconsolidated regimes often rely on foreign policies full of symbolism and very demonstrative political acts to gain legitimacy at home. Foreign policy choices that these regimes make therefore often appear irrational to outside observers, given that they are made with an eye towards domestic politics rather than the exigencies of external relations. The basis of several consecutive Syrian regimes’ ideological legitimacy, for example, lay in pan-Arabism. This led weak Syrian regimes before 1970 to pursue irredentist policies in the Middle East, from surrendering their sovereignty to Cairo in an ill-fated merger with Egypt (the United Arab Republic of 1958-61) to costly military failures against Israel. Hinnebusch explains why realist assumptions of unitary rational foreign policy making by states appear especially problematic for weaker entities of the Global South:

In the Third World...institutions are fragile, regimes must constantly defend their legitimacy, and, being new states, nationalism is inevitably a key test of legitimacy. If they ignore the effect of foreign policy on public reception of their nationalist legitimacy, they risk the regime’s stability. Thus the Third World policy maker must balance between coping with external threats and defending regime legitimacy internally. (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002, p. 1-2)

As Hafez al-Assad consolidated his rule over Syria (he took power in 1970), however, Syrian policies at the international system level of analysis began to look more strategic. For instance, Syria maintained a peaceful border with a more powerful Israel from 1973 until its post-2011 collapse into civil war, preferring to pressure its rival through Lebanese and Palestinian proxies. By 1980 Assad also felt sufficiently strong at home to ignore pan-Arab sentiment and back Iran against fellow Ba’athist and Arab Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, a policy choice that helped weaken Syria’s Iraqi neighbour, rival and threat.

Perhaps the most well-known international relations study of this interplay of domestic and foreign policy imperatives comes from Robert Putnam's 1988 "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games" (p. 427-460). Putnam discusses how state leaders can turn to the international realm and external actors for support against domestic rivals, as well as how domestic political constraints can prevent state leaders from pursuing policies that would appear to be in the national interest. Putnam's approach, however, seems to come from a liberal or neo-liberal IR tradition and remains focused on consolidated, strong states (Germany and the United States, for instance) trying to maximise their economic gains. Such an argument does not really speak to the realist and neo-realist concern for states faced with significant threats, scholars from these schools of thought would simply retort that Putnam's observations may hold true for "low politics", but when it comes to the "high politics" of security, power and survival, states behave rationally and strategically or perish.⁷

There exist other examples of this "two-level games" logic specifically applied to weak states in high-threat foreign policy environments, however. Steven David's 1991 examination of the alignment patterns of Third World states explicitly tackles the interplay of internal and external threats that affect state leaders' decision making (p. 233-256). Calling his theory "omnibalancing", Steven David writes that:

Omnibalancing agrees with the central assumption of balance of power – that threats will be resisted. But it departs from balance of power in explaining Third World alignment decisions as a result of the Third World leadership's need to counter all threats. Thus, whereas balance of power focuses on the state's need to counter threats from other states, omnibalancing considers internal and external threats to the leadership, and, as a result, it fundamentally alters our understanding of why Third World leaders align as they do and also provides insights that explain a wide range of Third World behavior. (*ibid.*, p.233)

David then goes on to explain that perfectly rational Third World state leaders may view threats emanating from the domestic political environment as more pressing than external threats, leading to choices on their part that appear irrational or non-strategic to outside observers focused on international politics (*ibid.*, p. 235). In their work on the foreign policies of Middle Eastern states, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami likewise rely on David's "omnibalancing" concept to describe the political choices of weak states such as Syria and Jordan during the 1960s (2002). Robert Olson also used Stephen David's concept of omnibalancing to help us understand

⁷ See, for instance, Buzan (1996).

Turkish foreign policy. He summarises the perspective as considering “internal threats to regimes as important as external threats” (Olson, 2004, p. xxv). More specifically, Olson alerts us to the notion that “omnibalancing emphasizes that when external threats are significant and internal ones manageable, priorities tilt toward the external threat” (ibid., p. 42). Alternately, when the internal threats appear more salient and external ones manageable, leaders prioritise accordingly.

More recently, the budding international relations school of neo-classical realism has been making steps to incorporate such observations into analyses of the foreign policy choices of both great and second-tier state powers. Jeffrey Taliaferro, Steven Lobell and Norrin Ripsman describe neo-classical realism’s core concern of “How and under what circumstances will domestic factors impede states from pursuing the types of strategies predicted by balance of power theory and balance of threat theory?” (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009, p. 1). Part of a growing body of literature in international relations theory,⁸ neo-classical realists pay attention to how “unit-level variables constrain or facilitate the ability of all types of states – great powers as well as lesser states – to respond to systemic imperatives” (Lobell, et al, 2009, p. 4). Neoclassical realists begin with neorealists’ assumption that the international system “structures and constrains the policy choices of states” (ibid., p. 19). The approach likewise aspires to theoretical and methodological sophistication, but shares classical realists’ willingness to closely examine individual states and their relations with domestic society. In line with the present study, the approach “...seeks to explain variation in foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints” (ibid., p. 21). In a recent interview with the author, the former Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (who is currently the President of Iraq) put it more simply when he chuckled that “There is no ‘foreign policy’ or ‘domestic policy’ – there’s just politics.”⁹

Analyses in the neo-classical realist tradition have yet to be applied to sub-state actors, however. Nations with a region but without a state often lack even a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within their territory (one of Max Weber’s minimal requisites for statehood), and such sub-state actors may engage in risky, destabilising foreign policies as they compete with domestic rivals, attempt to build domestic legitimacy, seek allies abroad and struggle to consolidate themselves in general.

⁸ Although there exist at this point too many studies in the neo-classical realism tradition to cite here, three pioneering works that are often cited include Gideon (1998), Sterlin-Folker (2002), and Schweller (2003).

⁹ Author’s interview with Barham Salih, December 18, 2017, Erbil, Iraq. The author obviously does not agree with the view that there exists no difference between foreign policy and domestic policy. The challenge for analysts, rather, revolves around determining how and when policy makers will prioritise one over the other.

The following graph, adapted from an unpublished paper by Raymond Hinnebusch (n.d., p. 263), may help demonstrate the different kinds of dynamics that may affect the formulation and pursuit of strategic, or rational, foreign policies:

| | | Level of External Threat | |
|--------------------------------|------|--------------------------|----------------|
| | | High | Low |
| Extent of Regime Consolidation | High | Rational Actor | Economic Actor |
| | Low | Unpredictable Actor | Dramatic Actor |

In this schema, consolidated regimes in high threat environments generally behave as realists and neo-realists expect them to, pursuing prudent foreign policies that prioritise the power and security of their state. They pursue what is referred to in this study as “rational” or “strategic” foreign policies that match their goals to their means and place a high value on international prudence. The paradiplomacy literature discussed earlier focused on cases of established, consolidated sub-state actors such as Quebec and Scotland in low-threat environments, placing them in the “economic actor” category of the schema above. Such actors look mainly for economic goods and seek to maximise their absolute gains, to the point that referendums regarding secession in both regions (in 1980 and 1995 for Quebec and 2016 for Scotland) revolved very much around the potential economic costs or gains of independence. This kind of foreign policy fits well into liberal and neo-liberal paradigms of international relations theory. The Palestinian, Lebanese Hizbullah and pre-1970 Syrian cases mentioned above, in contrast, fall into the “unpredictable actor” category, unconsolidated regimes that often prioritise domestic politics even in the face of high external threats, leading to seemingly (from outside perspectives) irrational and less than strategic foreign policies. Finally, the “dramatic actor” lacks any significant external threats but seeks to manufacture such threats anyhow, in order to

create a “rally around the flag” effect to buttress an unconsolidated, weak regime. Cases such as Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe or Hugo Chavez’ Venezuela come to mind here: Presidential strongmen making dramatic and bellicose statements about foreign plots and malevolent outside forces threatening the country, thus justifying whatever power grabs or other shenanigans they engage in domestically, using these “threats” to mobilise their supporters.

What of sub-state actors, or regions, that exist in high threat environments but have consolidated themselves to levels comparable to many established states? Can their foreign policies compare more with those of stronger states strategically pursuing their foreign policy agendas? If so, one would expect to see the following minimal traits and characteristics, whether a sub-state actor’s ultimate goal were secession and statehood or just paradiplomacy:

(1) *The actor presents one diplomatic face to the outside world, representing the entire region or nation.* A united front vis-a-vis outsiders serves as a very strong indicator of strategic behaviour (on behalf of the region or sub-state) at the international system level of analysis.

(2) *A defined “national interest” is strategically pursued and elevated above sectarian or domestic political interests.* Although the “national interest” often proves difficult to define in all but the most general sense, much less arrive at a consensus on, one can more readily identify when political actors behave in a manner contrary to the broad security, economic, and power interests of a state or a region and its population. Referring to previously cited cases, examples could include Hizbullah’s 2006 launching of attacks into Israel and backing of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon, or many Palestinian groups’ decision to continue armed attacks on Israel even after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords.

(3) *The actor pursues “realistic” (rather than maximalist or messianic) goals reflective of the national interest and consistent with available means.* Strategic behaviour and rationality must include matching one’s goals and policies to one’s available power. Failure to do so, such as with the Hamas movement’s unbending demand to liberate “100% of occupied Palestine” (which includes places like Tel Aviv in Hamas’ rhetoric), leads to ridicule, isolation and impotence in the international system.

An examination of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq should illustrate the logic at work for such a theory. Three key periods prove crucial to understanding Iraqi Kurdish foreign policies: The 1991 to 2002 period (a period of unrecognised and unconsolidated autonomy); the 2003-2014 period (a period of a more consolidated KRI and strategic Kurdish foreign policy); and the post-2014 (a period of flux, with a weakened KRI at risk of sliding back into less strategic foreign policy behaviour). Dividing an analysis of Iraqi

Kurdish foreign policy into these three time periods helps cognitively manage a complex issue and focus attention on the theoretical issues raised in this study. Readers should keep in mind, however, that the delineation between the time periods lacks precision and should be viewed as more of a continuum than totally distinct time periods:

Additionally, a good measure for regime consolidation probably needs more attention than this study can devote to it due to space limitations. While the three characteristics listed above could serve as an indicator of regime consolidation, this risks a sort of tautology, wherein consolidated regimes pursue strategic foreign policies and we know they are consolidated because they are acting that way. One could alternately rely on an interpretive appraisal to determine regime consolidation, or possibly (if these are available) opinion polls regarding the leadership of the regime in question. In the study that follows, both of these latter measures are utilised.

The analysis that follows begins with some background on Kurdish politics, an examination of the three periods in question and is then followed by analysis of the Iraqi Kurds' decision to hold a referendum on independence on September 25, 2017.

A very factionalised Kurdish politics

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) should have been one of the least likely regional governments capable of operating as a unitary, rational actor internationally. Kurdish nationalism suffered from notoriously high levels of factionalism and disunity throughout its history. Every major twentieth century Kurdish uprising against the Turkish, Iranian, Syrian or Iraqi states (of an estimated thirty such uprisings) witnessed an often equal number of Kurdish groups sitting out the rebellion or even being recruited by central government authorities to help quell the unrest. Tribal rivalries meant that Kurdish tribes raising the banner of revolt generally saw rival Kurdish tribes side with the government.¹⁰ A few years after a revolt was suppressed, tribes that had last sided with the state would rise in revolt, only to see the previous revolts' tribal leaders take their place beside the state. In addition to such problematic rivalries, a plethora of additional sectarian divisions seem disproportionately present amongst Kurds: A self-identifying "Kurd" may speak any number of Kurdish dialects from Kurmanji and Sorani to Zazaki, Gurani, Hewrami or others, or be so assimilated into a state's dominant nation that they only speak Turkish, Arabic or Persian. They may be Sunni but alternately Shi'ite, Alevi, Yezidi, Ahl-il-Haq, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Sufi and/or Communist. Detribalised city dwellers likewise manifested different political views than rural pastoral

¹⁰ For more on this, see Tahiri (2007).

tribesmen and *agha* landowners, who in turn had different interests than landless peasants.

In Iraq, the Kurdish nationalist movement has been plagued with such internal divisions since its emergence in the 1920s. One of the more recent and significant splits in the national movements of Iraqi Kurdistan occurred after the collapse of the 1975 Kurdish revolt, when Jalal Talabani left the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to found a separate and competing Kurdish party and militia, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Talabani represented more urban, Sorani-speaking Kurds from regional, tribal and religious networks outside Barzani's traditional base of supporters. Active fighting between the two Iraqi Kurdish movements broke out periodically, and while one would lead the fight against Baghdad the other could often be found negotiating with the Iraqi state. The central government in Baghdad would in turn encourage such divisions, offering a limited amount of arms, support and amnesty to whomever was willing to negotiate with the state and help fight the other Kurdish movements.¹¹ Additionally, Baghdad used a combination of threats and inducements to recruit significant numbers of Kurdish tribal forces to its side, whom Kurdish nationalists derisively referred to as *jash* (little donkeys).

When following his illness and death Mullah Mustafa Barzani's son Massoud took over the KDP, the internecine pattern of conflict continued. During the Iran-Iraq 1980-88 War, both Kurdish parties alternated between opposing each other, assisting Iranian forces and negotiating with Baghdad. As the war gradually ground to a halt, Saddam attempted to enact a sort of "final solution" to Kurdish unrest in Iraq. The Iraqi State's 1987-1988 campaigns of genocide and use of chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians killed up to 120,000 civilians.¹² The aftermath of the campaign witnessed large numbers of Kurdish refugees fleeing to neighbouring states and Kurdish nationalists demoralised and in disarray.

The emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq: 1991-2002

Kurdish autonomy and the Kurdistan Regional Government finally emerged under unlikely circumstances following the 1991 Gulf War. Led by the Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK, the Kurds immediately went to work setting up an autonomous government in the parts of Iraqi Kurdistan that Saddam's forces retreated from after the war. Within a year, the Iraqi Kurds organised largely free and fair elections within their autonomous

¹¹ For more on Iraqi Kurdish nationalism and divisions within the movement, see Romano (2006), p.171-183.

¹² For more on this, see Makiya (1992) or Human Rights Watch (1993).

region, a first for Kurds anywhere in the Middle East.¹³ The KDP and PUK split the vote fairly evenly, leading them to establish a coalition government in which every minister had a deputy from the other party. The resulting Kurdistan Regional Government ruled over a Switzerland-sized territory devastated by war and the genocide campaigns of 1987-88, and subject to both the post-Gulf War international sanctions against Iraq and an additional embargo from the parts of Iraq still controlled by Baghdad.

By the summer of 1994, the resulting competition over what little resources could be had, along with old rivalries, led to a breakdown of the KRG. While most Iraqi Kurds looked on in horror, the KDP and PUK launched a civil war. Turkish, Iranian, Syrian and especially Iraqi state leaders witnessed the situation with satisfaction, feeling that the impossibility of Kurdish self-rule now lay plainly evident for the entire world to see. The situation began to look surreal when on August 31, 1996, the KDP found itself losing ground to an Iranian-assisted PUK and requested military assistance from Saddam Hussein's regime. Saddam obliged the KDP, sending Republican Guard Iraqi armoured and infantry forces north into the Kurdish autonomous region, where they pushed PUK forces out of Erbil (the *de facto* capital of Iraqi Kurdistan at the time). The United States responded by launching air strikes on Iraqi targets south of the Kurdish autonomous region until Saddam withdrew his forces around one week later ("Kurdish leader", 1996).

To invite in the military forces of a state that just a few years before had worked hard to eradicate Iraqi Kurds as a people seemed unfathomable to most of the KRG's population, no matter what the justification. For our purposes, it serves as a pre-eminent example of prioritising more narrow political interests over that of a nation, region, or state, in other words, the failure to behave as a strategic, unitary actor on the IR level of analysis. The KDP prioritised the threat from the rival Kurdish PUK over the external threat from Baghdad, placing its foreign policy decision making into the lower left-hand box of the diagram provided here ("unpredictable actor" in a high threat but low regime consolidation environment).

This whole sorry affair and the internecine fighting in general led Gunter to conclude a 1997 article on "The Foreign Policy of the Iraqi Kurds" with the following observation:

Unfortunately for them, the Kurds' internecine internal fighting has often vitiated their opportunities. The Iraqi Kurds have also been the victim of leaders guilty of selfish partisanship and

¹³ Although Turkey has a somewhat democratic system and electoral politics, the Turkish Constitution forbids political parties formed "along ethnic lines" and Kurdish politicians are forbidden from speaking Kurdish to their electorates. In Iran, the unelected Council of Guardians vets candidates to the point of not allowing for free elections.

greed. They remain divided as were the Germans before 1871 and the Italians before 1861. They also lack a Bismarck or Garibaldi.

As a result ... one would conclude that in most instances, the Iraqi Kurds have failed – at times egregiously – to achieve their foreign policy goals. (Gunter, 1997).

Two separate Kurdistan Regional Governments emerged as a result of the fighting between 1994 and 1998, with the KDP controlling most of the Duhok and Erbil governorates (provinces) and the PUK running Suleimaniya governorate (including Halabja). Each administration had its own parallel ministries and a coalition of smaller Kurdish parties in its government. In 1998, the KDP and PUK signed the Washington Peace Accord, under which they agreed to cease hostilities, hold KRG-wide elections in 1999, share the meagre revenues of the region and reunite their administrations. For the next several years, only the cessation of hostilities part of the Accord was implemented, however. The peace nonetheless allowed the situation in both regions of Iraqi Kurdistan to improve and normalise. Both the KDP and PUK increasingly consolidated their administrations in their respective fiefdoms. In 1997, the “Oil-for-Food” U.N. program (under which Iraq was allowed to sell its oil and use the proceeds to import food and other non-military or dual-use supplies) had also begun alleviating economic hardship in the KRGs. The Kurdish region as a whole received 13% of the Oil-for-Food revenues, which the U.N. administered and used part of to provide a food basket to every Iraqi Kurd in the KRG (Saddam administered the program in the rest of Iraq, where the proceeds of the program did not reach every Iraqi). With the minimal needs of their population met, the KDP and PUK could both turn their attention to consolidating their institutions and rebuilding the thousands of villages destroyed by war and Saddam between 1980 and 1991. The dynamic that emerged from these two parallel regimes produced positive results, as each competed to outdo the other in civil infrastructure projects, various popular domestic initiatives, and good governance in general, without the bickering and paralysis of a polarised government (Stansfield, 2002).

With the important exceptions of Kurdish Islamist militias in a small swathe of territory near the Iranian border and militants from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) based in remote mountains near the Turkish and Iranian borders, both Kurdish administrations managed to establish a monopoly on the use of force in their territories. From the early 1990s, they also maintained “foreign offices” in the capitals of Turkey, Iran, Syria, various European states and the United States. Embassies in all but name and recognition, these foreign offices ran the nascent foreign policies of the KDP and PUK. They did not, however,

represent the foreign policy of a unitary, strategic foreign policy-making Kurdistan. Each party maintained its own foreign offices separate from the other's and promoted its own party interests. Between 1994 and 2000 the author visited the different party offices in Ankara, Damascus and Teheran many times and found that the KDP and PUK representatives typically spent more time criticising each other than Saddam or other external forces. The offices nonetheless helped to maintain a dialogue with the states in which they were established, and also allowed each party to strengthen and maintain links to the Kurdish diaspora.

In the aforementioned theoretical lens of this study, the 1991-2002 period saw the Kurdistan Region of Iraq behaving as an unpredictable actor, more focused on domestic threats (the rivalry between the KDP and PUK mainly) than foreign policy goals. The KRI did not speak with even the semblance of one voice and the KRI's leaders failed to pursue a defined "national interest" elevated above sectarian or domestic political interests.

A more unitary, strategic Kurdistan Regional Government: 2003-2014

After the 9/11 attacks and in light of the growing possibility of an American invasion of Iraq, the KDP and PUK began to work harder towards fulfilling the rest of the provisions of the 1998 Washington Peace Accord. They no doubt recognised that they needed to prepare and position themselves better in the face of the myriad opportunities and risks that would arise after Saddam's overthrow. In 2002, the entire KRG's parliament met for the first time in six years: "In the words of Hoshyar Zebari, a senior Iraqi Kurdish official, the opening of the parliament signalled the burying of discord and disunity" ("Kurdish parliament", 2002). The parliament unanimously ratified the 1998 Washington Accord and began debating a new constitution for the KRG. In addition to reiterating their demands for an autonomous Kurdistan within a federal and democratic Iraq, Kurdish leaders called for all majority Kurdish-inhabited areas of northern Iraq, and Kirkuk in particular, to be incorporated into the KRI.

During the 2003 invasion and overthrow of Saddam's regime, U.S. forces also helped the PUK *peshmerga*¹⁴ attack and eliminate the armed Kurdish Islamist groups controlling territory near the Iranian border. This left the PKK militants fighting Turkey as the only significant remaining challenge to the KRG's monopoly on the use of force within its territory.

¹⁴ A term for Kurdish fighters in Kurdish forces (as opposed to in the service of a non-Kurdish state), *peshmerga* literally means "those who face death". The KDP, PUK and the Iranian KDP refer to their fighters this way, while the PKK, Iranian Kurdish Komala and some other groups call their fighters "guerrillas" or "partisans".

Under pressure from both their constituents and the Kurdish diaspora to unite their administrations, the KDP and PUK officially announced the merger in 2005. All but three ministries (Peshmerga Affairs¹⁵, Finance and Interior) were successfully merged, while behind the scenes party control (despite an official discourse of unification) continued to hamper the merger of these three key ministries. The key to the merger and unification of the KRGs lay in a new power sharing agreement between the KDP and PUK. Since each party had grown sufficiently used to and comfortable with the other (and consolidated within their own respective parts of Kurdistan), they were able to set aside their differences and agree to a formula wherein the KDP's Massoud Barzani would become the President of the Kurdistan Region and the KDP would in turn lend its support for the PUK's Jalal Talabani to become President of Iraq. This proved an effective means of getting past old rivalries between the two leaders.

A single KRG also created a new, unified diplomatic corps abroad, with representatives such as Qubad Talabani (the KRG's equivalent of ambassador to the United States from 2006 to 2014) speaking for all of the KRI and reporting back to the KRG rather than his party. The KRG opened fourteen representation offices abroad, in places such as Washington, London, Paris, Geneva and Moscow ("KRG: No foreign offices", 2016). United foreign policy action began before 2005, however, as the KDP, PUK and all the other Kurdish political parties (with the December 2005 exception of the Kurdistan Islamic Union) presented a unified electoral list in the Iraqi elections of January and December 2005 as well as subsequent national elections (the KDP and PUK even ran on a consolidated electoral list in Kurdistan's regional elections in 2005 and 2009, garnering 89.55% and 53% of the vote respectively¹⁶). We can describe this as presenting a united foreign policy front because Iraqi Kurds view the Arab parts of Iraq as "external", not much different than Syria, Iran or Turkey. Foreign policy for them thus includes policy towards Baghdad.

Iraqi Kurdish leaders also eagerly entered the Iraqi central government's political system as soon as they had the opportunity to do so. They reasoned that one of the best ways to secure Kurdistan involved remaining politically active and relevant in Baghdad. Among the most important posts secured by Kurds, the PUK's Jalal Talabani managed to become the President of Iraq, while Barham Salih received one of the Deputy Prime Ministerships and the KDP's Hoshiyar Zebari became Foreign Minister. While Kurdish representatives in the federal Iraqi government pursued myriad policies on

¹⁵ The Kurdish equivalent of a Ministry of Defence.

¹⁶ The 2009 Kurdistan Parliamentary election netted the KDP-PUK alliance a smaller proportion of the vote than in 2005 because of the emergence of a new PUK splinter party, Gorran, which ran separately and garnered 22% of the vote.

the behalf of the entire country, they also advanced the particular interests of Kurdistan. For example, they fought strongly for the speedy implementation of the Iraqi Constitution's Article 140, which mandated that a referendum on Kirkuk's possible inclusion into the KRI be held by December 2007. During negotiations over a new "oil law", they argued for a regional role in oil and gas equal to the role of the central government (Romano, 2014). When Iraq initially looked into purchasing a new air force, Kurdish leaders expressed their reservations and sought guarantees that the weapons could never be deployed against the KRI ("Iraq's PM must not obtain", 2012). Essentially, whenever conflicts over the allocation of resources and power emerged, these Kurdish leaders pursued the interests of the Kurdistan Region first and those of the Iraqi central state second.

Throughout this period both the KRG and the Kurdish leaders representing the Iraqi state refrained from declaring independence (or even holding a referendum on the issue) and carefully avoided any pan-Kurdish rhetoric or the kinds of policies and statements that would threaten relations with neighbouring Turkey, Iran, Syria or other states. Despite overwhelming popular sentiment in favour of independence, the Kurds remained cognisant of their limited power, their geography and the need to maintain the security and welfare of their autonomous region. Although speeches about the need to liberate all of Kurdistan and aggressive rhetoric towards the states oppressing neighbouring Kurdish communities would no doubt increase their domestic popularity, KRG leaders preferred to pursue foreign policies more in line with their limited power capabilities. This stands in stark contrast to some of the Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian actors discussed earlier. In the same way that many Arab states allied to Washington must pursue domestically unpopular foreign policies, the KRG found itself obligated to pursue good relations with Turkey, Iran and Syria. It could do so consistently and reliably because the state, meaning the KRG region in this case, was now sufficiently consolidated. Twelve years of autonomy (1991-2003) had provided the Iraqi Kurds time and experience to develop their own political institutions and get used to a political process resembling that of established states. Various Kurdish political leaders could thus agree on certain red lines in their intra-Kurdish political rivalries, which included not incurring the wrath of neighbouring states or inflaming pan-Kurdish nationalist rhetoric. During this period all the Kurdish parties for the most part avoided tactics and positions such as siding with or explicitly praising the PKK in order to maintain relations with Turkey, which remain absolutely crucial to offering Iraqi Kurdistan alternatives to dependence on the Baghdad-Tehran axis.

The author's interviews with various top Kurdish leaders confirmed the high value they place on a united Kurdistan foreign policy focused on

Kurdistan's national interests. In a 2010 interview with KRG Minister of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir (who is from the KDP), Mr. Bakir stated that "All the Kurdistan parties want the region to be protected and to continue growing economically. In any KRG-Baghdad dispute we have one voice. It's a national identity issue" (Bakir, personal interview, 2010). Interviews between 2008 and 2014 with PUK and Gorran (a PUK-splinter party) leaders unearthed, without exception, similar sentiments about the need for a united Kurdish voice vis-à-vis Baghdad and the rest of the world. Former Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari (KDP) explained recently that "We [Kurds] always accomplished our goals whenever we were united – such as what we wanted with the Constitution of 2005. It is a different story when we are divided and follow the agendas of others in the region" (Zebari, 2016). Even the populist opposition Gorran Movement (discussed further below) expressed recognition of national interests above party politics, telling the author that:

Well of course, the KDP and PUK in their relations with Baghdad want parts of the Iraqi government – ministries to control. For us, this is not important. We're interested in issues – Article 140 [an article of the Iraqi Constitution with a mechanism to incorporate Kirkuk and other disputed territories into the Kurdistan Region], salaries for the Peshmerga, oil. They [the KDP and PUK] haven't solved anything. We have the same main goal, but differ in how to achieve it. The KDP and PUK are about parts [a reference to control of government ministries and the funds attached to them]. We want solutions. (Tawfiq, personal interview, 2010).

As with states, the interests of the KRI centre first and foremost around security, power and autonomy/independence. If one were to define a "national interest" of the Kurds in the post-2003 period, it would include these general principles upon which there exists wide consensus between all the myriad parties and within the population of Kurdistan: maximising Kurdish self-determination (or, as the results of the September 25, 2017 referendum demonstrated, outright independence),¹⁷ security of the KRI, and the economic welfare of the KRI and its people. These are the objectives that a strategic foreign policy on the part of the KRG would prioritise ahead of any domestic political disputes. As a nation and region interested in sovereignty and engaging in protodiplomacy, the KRG would also like to eventually join the community of states, but at least until 2017, the Region's leaders remained keenly aware of their limited power and landlocked status, two key problems that tempered their pursuit of independence. The desire

¹⁷ The referendum results, with a turnout of over 70% of voters, were 92.7% in favour of an independent Kurdistan. Qiblawi (2017).

of KRI leaders to have the international community accept their autonomous region as a prospective state also probably increased their proclivity for prudent foreign policy during this period, beyond what we might expect for recognised states. If the world could come to view Kurdistan as a responsible and dependable actor on the world stage, this would increase the chances of gaining recognition for Kurdistan's sovereignty in the future (in the event of an Iraqi state collapse, for instance).

In the 2003-2014 regional context, a Kurdish declaration of statehood would have likely provoked too many risks compared to the advantages of remaining within Iraq (with their recognised autonomy). Foremost among these risks was embargo or military intervention from neighbouring states (all of whom have Kurdish populations chafing for group rights and greater autonomy). Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Kurds would prefer their own Kurdish state,¹⁸ KRI leaders consistently and prudently limited their demands to autonomy within a democratic Iraq. From 2003 until around 2011 (when relations with Baghdad started to sour more), one could often hear Kurdish leaders say that independence would happen one day, perhaps decades later, but hopefully within their lifetime.¹⁹

In the meantime, the KRI appeared to be a much more consolidated, unitary and strategically rational actor than the post-Saddam Iraqi state itself, whose ineffective politicians demanded the withdrawal of American troops even while still depending upon them for security from al Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State. As an indicator of regime consolidation in Kurdistan during this time period, one might refer to opinion polls regarding the principal Kurdish leaders: In 2012, KRG President Massoud Barzani (of the KDP) had an approval rating of 65% amongst people in Iraqi Kurdistan, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani (of the KDP) had an approval rating of 64%, and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (of the PUK) had an approval rating of 66% (National Democratic Institute, 2012, p. 56-60). Leaders in many Western states often only dream of such high approval ratings. Adding to the KRG's good fortune and consolidation during this time period, windfall revenues from their 17% share of the Iraqi national budget led to an unprecedented economic boom in the region. With security much better in Kurdistan than the rest of Iraq and significantly less corrupt political leaders in charge in Erbil (although corruption there is still a problem), the KRG spent much of that revenue on infrastructure, social

¹⁸ PUK leader Salih Barham (2016) explains that "there is no Kurd anywhere in the world that doesn't hope for independence and look forward to seeing their flag with that of others".

¹⁹ As relations with Baghdad under an increasingly authoritarian Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki grew more tense after 2011, the risks of remaining within Iraq began to outweigh the risks of declaring independence, and in the author's unofficial discussions with Kurdish leaders, the timeframe for Kurdish independence grew shorter.

services, employing a large civil service and other things from which the population benefitted.

One could easily imagine an alternate scenario. KDP and PUK forces could have continued their bitter and violent rivalries of the 1980s and 90s, turning to a myriad of post-Saddam, non-Kurdish political forces for alliances and support. KRI leaders could have tried to outdo each other in a contest of populist rhetoric and symbolic politics, speaking up on behalf of neighbouring Kurdish communities in Turkey, Iran and Syria or making maximalist demands for immediate Kurdish statehood or pan-Kurdish irredentism. The *peshmerga* forces that took Kirkuk and Mosul before the United States military could enter the cities in 2003 could have refused to leave or run amok long enough to thoroughly ethnically cleanse these cities before agreeing to cease and desist.

The Iraqi Kurds' moderation and prudence paid off handsomely for them during the 2003-2014 period. Besides securing most of their goals in the Iraqi constitution-writing process²⁰ and many important posts in the post-Saddam government, the international community (including neighbouring Turkey and Iran) began receiving Kurdish leaders with honours normally accorded only to recognised heads of state. Iraqi Kurdish leaders became familiar and prominent faces in North American, European and Asian capitals as well international forums such as the annual meeting in Davos Switzerland (PUK, 2013). International investment in Iraqi Kurdistan likewise swelled to unheard of levels, particularly from Turkey and major international oil companies (as new oil and gas fields were discovered in the region) (Cagaptay, Fidan, & Sacikara, 2015). The KRG opened representation offices (unofficial embassies) in Germany, Italy, the United States, Iran, France, Italy, Spain, Austria, Russia, Poland, Australia, Sweden, Belgium, and Switzerland. Some nineteen countries in turn opened consulates in Erbil, the KRG's capital. As the KRG held to its policy of not "stirring the Kurdish pot in Turkey" and encouraging Turkish business investments in Iraqi Kurdistan, even relations with Ankara blossomed to previously unimaginably warm levels (Romano, 2015). KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani could thus tell his audience in 2016 that "We have demonstrated to our neighbors that we are a factor for stability rather than instability in the region", simultaneously clarifying that "When we talk about independence, we are talking only about Iraqi Kurdistan" (Barzani, 2016).²¹

²⁰ These goals revolved around securing maximum levels of autonomy for Kurdistan, a Kurdish veto power over constitutional changes, Kurdish posts in the new Baghdad government, recognition of their own autonomous Peshmerga security forces (a first in any federal system in the world), and guarantees against a return to Baghdad's direct control over Kurdistan. For more on this, see Romano (2014).

²¹ The latter part of the statement was a way of saying that the Iraqi Kurds have no irredentist ambitions regarding the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Syria and Iran.

This period thus marked the KRG's entry into the top-left of the diagram presented here, the "rational foreign policy actor" under conditions of high external threat and high regime consolidation. During these years, the KRI usually presented a united front to the outside world, elevated a "national interest" above sectarian or domestic political interests, and strategically pursued "realistic" (rather than maximalist or messianic) goals reflective of that national interest and consistent with their available means.

Centrifugal tendencies and a return to unpredictable policies: 2014-present

The centrifugal tendencies in the KRI discussed here actually began in 2009, however, when the splinter Gorran Movement emerged from the PUK ("Gorran movement", 2017). "Gorran" means "change" in Kurdish, and the movement presented itself as an anti-system party fighting against corruption and poor governance in the region, which it blamed on the traditional ruling parties of Iraqi Kurdistan (the KDP and PUK). While Gorran's emergence may have been beneficial to democracy within the KRI, it proved devastating to regime consolidation and the KRG's ability to strategically pursue its foreign policy priorities. Gorran refused to run on the same Kurdistan list as the KDP and PUK in Iraqi national elections, preferring to promote its own independent line even in Baghdad (and thereby weakening the KRG's projection of a united front to the outside world). Evidence from *Wikileaks* shows Gorran leaders telling the Americans (behind closed doors) in 2010 that they opposed Kurdish statehood, opposed the incorporation of Kirkuk into the Kurdistan Region, supported a strong central government in Baghdad, and supported Baghdad's control of oil revenues ("Ambassador meets", 2010). While Gorran leaders were probably trying to ingratiate themselves with the American ambassador to Iraq at the time, these positions all appeared to be in stark contrast to the KRI's "national interest" and even what Gorran was telling its own supporters.

In the 2011 Arab Spring-inspired protests centred in the KRI's major metropolis of Suleimani, Gorran came out in strong support of the demonstrators and was even viewed by many as a major instigator of and force behind the protests ("Iraqi Kurdistan's Liberation Square", 2011). In the September 21, 2013 parliamentary elections in Kurdistan, the populist Gorran Movement displaced the PUK to become the region's second largest party (with 24% of the vote compared to the PUK's 18% and the KDP's 38%).²² Despite a predictably acrimonious relationship with the PUK and KDP, Gorran nonetheless joined the Kurdistan government formed after this election and took several cabinet posts. Disputes with the KDP, especially over the extension of KRG President Massoud Barzani's term in

²² For more on this, see Chomani (2013).

office and the method of selecting the president (via direct election or, as Gorran preferred, via parliament's choice), soon led to increasing paralysis of the KRG's governing institutions. In the KDP narrative of the breakdown, Gorran politicians did Iran's bidding against Kurdistan's national interest, continuously tried to instigate destabilising protests in the region, and would not compromise on any issues.²³ For the KDP, the extension of Barzani's presidency was necessary at a time when Islamic State forces had launched a war against the Kurds and no other high profile and experienced figure appeared available to lead the KRI in this time of crisis.

In the Gorran telling, the KDP's Massoud Barzani extended his presidential term a second time in contravention of the law (using a compliant Kurdistan judiciary to secure *ex post facto* justification for the extension) and sought to establish a corrupt Barzani dictatorship over the region (Hassan, 2013). The political breakdown came to a head in 2015, when KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani (KDP) expelled Gorran cabinet members from the government and blocked the Gorran Speaker of the Parliament from entering Erbil ("Iraqi Kurdish PM", 2015). The KRG's parliament then remained closed for the next two years as various political camps traded accusations against each other.

The emergence of Gorran challenged the legitimacy of both the ruling KDP and PUK, increasingly undermining the consolidated rule they had enjoyed between 2003 and 2014. Combined with the economic crisis that hit Kurdistan in 2014 (due to a cut-off of the KRI's share of the Iraqi national budget that year, plummeting oil prices, an influx of refugees and the war with the Islamic State), the KRG's leadership found itself increasingly beleaguered. According to Qubad Talabani, the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG (PUK), Gorran's emergence and growth at this time wrecked the power sharing agreement and stability between the KDP and PUK:

Today's disunity was especially caused by the birth of Gorran, which created a battle for Suleimani [the traditional PUK stronghold], a traditionally anti-KDP area. As a result the parties competing in Suleimani [the PUK and Gorran] needed to look increasingly anti-KDP, which weakened the entente between the KDP and PUK. This all harmed national unity in favour of domestic political considerations. The fight over the KRG presidency and other political disputes were a symptom, not a cause of this. The internal disputes were not based on policies, but on personalities and political rivalries. (Talabani, personal interview, 2016)

²³ This narrative was told to the author by numerous KDP leaders between 2013 and 2017.

When the long-time PUK leader Jalal Talabani suffered a stroke in late 2012, removing him from the political scene and creating a vacuum in the PUK leadership (as well as the Iraqi Presidency), the problems of political stability for the KRG worsened further.

In stark contrast to past periods of Kurdish unity in Baghdad and abroad, the KRG after 2010, but especially as of 2014, entered an era of domestic political instability and problems of declining internal legitimacy. These stemmed especially from the 2014 financial crisis and the failure to pay salaries to the extremely large proportion of the KRI's population employed in the public sector. As a result, the KRG ceased to act as unitary strategic actor in its foreign policies. The Gorran movement took any opportunity to show outsiders the democratic shortcomings of the region while the KDP increasingly tried to run the KRG unilaterally and the PUK imploded, rent by different factions competing for leadership of the party. The late 2016 vote in Baghdad over the 2017 Iraqi national budget serves as an example of the new divisions: While KDP members of the Baghdad parliament walked out of the vote in protest (the proposed budget would have funded Shiite militias but not the Peshmerga, and would have required the KRG to turn over control of all its petroleum marketing to Baghdad), Gorran, the small Islamist Kurdish parties and even some PUK parliamentarians voted in favour of the budget (in return for a promise that Baghdad would pay the salaries of public employees in the KRI) ("Iraq passes budget bill", 2016). The KRG (mostly under control of the KDP at this time) responded angrily, claiming that the vote was "a dangerous political conspiracy against the Kurdistan Region and unfortunately those Kurdish MPs who voted in favor committed a dangerous act, whether or not they knew about this", adding that "They (Kurdish MPs) voted against the public interests of the Kurdistan Region and its employees, without considering that this was not in the interest of the public" (ibid.) In other words, Gorran and the PUK members who voted for the Iraqi budget prioritised their rivalry with the KDP over the KRI's national interests.

When the author asked two prominent PUK leaders about the budget vote, Qubad Talabani stated that "The PUK faction in Baghdad was acting on its own without guidance. Parties in Kurdistan don't do what they should...they don't set policy or follow it, but rather, individual people or factions do" (Talabani, personal interview, 2016). Barham Salih, another PUK leader at the time, stated that "The budget vote [in Baghdad] was about domestic politics in Kurdistan and political posturing of the Kurdistan parties. They were taking their political differences to Baghdad. It was much ado about nothing. Neither Baghdad nor the Kurds will abide by the budget and they know it" (Salih, personal interview, 2016).

The decision to hold a referendum in 2017

It is in this context of decreasing regime consolidation that the KRG, increasingly led solely by the KDP after 2014, chose the more risky policy of holding a referendum on independence. While some PUK elements questioned the timing of the referendum, the Gorran Movement and the Kurdistan Islamic Group until the last moment actively campaigned for postponement of the referendum (recognising that holding out against Kurdish independence would be so unpopular it would amount to political suicide, at the last moment they both changed their position and announced that their members would vote “yes”) (“KRG parties”, 2017) Despite myriad warnings from Baghdad, Iran, Turkey, the United States, the European Union and even the U.N. (with only Israel expressing its support for Kurdish independence), KRG President Massoud Barzani went ahead with the vote in both the recognised Kurdistan Region and within the disputed territories that the KRG had controlled since the Iraqi army’s retreat from ISIS in August 2014.

Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara responded to the referendum by grounding all of the KRI’s civilian air traffic, holding joint military exercises on the KRI’s border, and threatening to completely embargo the region (including cutting off its oil exports to Turkey and trade) (Zuchinno & Cooker, 2017). A month later (in October, 2017), Iraqi forces forcibly retook Kirkuk and almost all disputed territories under the control of the peshmerga.

Despite the KRG’s insistence that the referendum would not lead to an immediate declaration of independence, the move looked like the kind of risky gamble one would expect from an “unpredictable actor” in the diagram presented in this study.

The International Crisis Group and a multitude of other observers (especially critics of Massoud Barzani and the KDP) described the referendum as an attempt by Mr. Barzani to counteract declining domestic legitimacy and create a “rally around the flag effect” (“KRG parties”, 2017).²⁴

Dylan O’Driscoll and Bahar Baser similarly argue that “...the referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was held due to internal political competition

²⁴ For a similar analysis, see Fantapie (2017), who writes that “the referendum is more a reflection of Iraq’s disorder than the Kurds’ readiness for statehood” and that “for those driving the referendum, namely the president of the Kurdistan region Masoud Barzani and his party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the most immediate objective is not so much to move quickly toward a declaration of independence, but rather to shore up their own political fortunes within Iraqi Kurdistan and its chief city of Erbil. By adopting an assertive nationalist stance, they hope to silence dissent and force opponents to fall in line”. Choman Hardi (2017) writing for *Middle East Eye* argues that “His [Barzani’s] real goal seems to be political survival, not Kurdish independence. The referendum is his way to sideline the legitimacy question that hangs over his presidency...”

and party politics rather than the ripeness of the timing for independence” (O’Driscoll & Baser, 2019).

In the view of Barzani’s critics and many others, the referendum thus constituted a very risky move that threatened the stability of the entire region. Turkish leaders expressed surprise that President Barzani actually went through with the referendum, admitting that they did not expect this (“Erdogan slams”, 2017). The post-referendum reaction of Baghdad and neighbouring states threatened to see the KRI facing the combined wrath of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, and doing so alone. Although the referendum results returned overwhelming support for Kurdistan’s independence (with 92.7% voting “yes” for Kurdistan’s independence), they also exposed the reemergent and serious divisions within the KRI. While turnout for the vote was 72.7% (including within disputed territories such as Kirkuk), around half of eligible voters in the PUK/Gorran dominated provinces of Sulaimani and Halabja did not vote at all. Explaining such results, Nicolle Watts argued that while almost all Kurds in Iraq support Kurdistan’s independence:

Critics of Barzani were loath to support what they saw as a partisan maneuver likely to legitimate his authority and further consolidate his Kurdistan Democratic Party’s grip on power, which has tightened since the closure of the Kurdistan regional parliament in late 2015....the Sulaimani-based opposition party Gorran – the second most successful party in the 2013 Kurdistan regional election – boycotted, as did the Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal), calling the vote and the referendum “unlawful.” A third of the lawmakers in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the traditional power in Sulaimani and rival-turned-junior-partner of the KDP, also stayed away. (Watts, 2017)

These intra-Kurdish divisions also paved the way for events just a few weeks after the referendum, when Iranian general Qassem Soleimani apparently held secret talks with key PUK peshmerga leaders and convinced (or threatened) them to withdraw their forces from Kirkuk and other disputed territories. Caught by surprise by the PUK withdrawal and suddenly facing an Iraqi army and Shiite militia advance unaided, the KDP quickly followed suit and also withdrew its forces from disputed areas.²⁵

The referendum could thus be described as costing the KRG control of roughly 40% of the territory it controlled in September 2017, while neither the United States nor any other outside actors lifted a finger to help them. In

²⁵ In addition to the KDP leadership, whom PUK leaders had assured they stood united with, even some PUK leaders were surprised by the sudden withdrawal of PUK peshmerga guarding Kirkuk and its environs. The *Guardian* describes the events of October 2017 as follows: “Kirkuk’s defences collapsed after peshmerga units loyal to a faction of the PUK withdrew, allowing Iraqi forces easy access to the southern half of the city (“Kurdish forces abandon”, 2017).

the language of this study, the KRI's serious foreign policy setbacks of October 2017 occurred because the region failed to present a united front to the outside world, lost the ability to elevate a defined national interest above sectarian or domestic political interests, and pursued goals that lay beyond its limited means. Due to decreasing regime consolidation after 2014, the KRI as a whole could no longer behave as a rational strategic actor on the foreign policy level of analysis.

Conclusion

Interpretations of the referendum as a stratagem by Massoud Barzani to buttress his rule in the face of growing opposition support the thesis presented here quite well, that regimes suffering from lack of legitimacy and consolidation will engage in riskier foreign policies aimed at bolstering their domestic political position. These foreign policies can often appear irrational or non-strategic.

Such evidence has its problems, however. If independence is the uncontested goal of the Kurds (their "national interest"), then the timing of the referendum may have actually been a fairly strategic, rational gamble on Barzani's part, taken on behalf of the interests of the KRI. Relations between the KRG and Baghdad had been steadily worsening since 2010 as leaders in Baghdad worked to consolidate and centralise power. Differences over oil, the disputed territories, the budget and various power sharing arrangements between the two grew with each passing year. With Baghdad weakened by the war with the Islamic State, Iran occupied in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere, a Trump administration in Washington intent on hurting Iran, Syria in disarray, and relations with Turkey better than they had ever been (due to billions of dollars in trade between the KRI and Turkey as well as oil and gas exports), it may have made perfect sense for the Kurds to take advantage of the current state of flux in the region to reach out and seize their aspirations. Barzani's referendum plan could have worked had all the Kurdish forces in Kirkuk and elsewhere remained united, in which case Baghdad's forces would have been unlikely to push forward against them. The strategy fell apart when some PUK leaders, perhaps fearing that a successful push towards independence would allow Barzani's KDP to take all the credit and eclipse their party politically, ordered their peshmerga's retreat from Kirkuk (in the PUK telling of the story, however, they were the ones being rational and prudent by backing down in the face of combined Iranian, Turkish and Iraqi threats).

Rationality or strategic foreign policy making in this sense should not be judged on the basis of outcomes, because even the most reasonable gambles sometimes turn out badly. Rather, one needs to ask whether or not an actor's foreign policy choices appeared to be reasonable risks (matching desired

ends to means), whether they elevated national interest above domestic or sectarian disputes, and to what extent they managed to present one face to the outside world. No tension exists between international politics and domestic politics when the same policy offers a chance to advance one's goals in both realms, of course. In a world of multi-causation, the fact that holding the referendum would cause a Kurdish nationalist rallying effect around Mr. Barzani could simply have reinforced what could be viewed as a reasonable foreign policy gamble for Kurdistan. Tragically for them, KDP leaders likely underestimated Iran and Baghdad's willingness to act forcefully in the face of a referendum and overestimated the Trump administration willingness to support them in such circumstances. The KDP's potential domestic gains from calling the referendum may have tipped a difficult policy choice towards the more risky option of going ahead with the referendum, despite serious risks, increasing divisions within the KRI and the KRG's limited means to resist retribution from Baghdad and neighbouring states.

Whatever the real reasons for the Iraqi Kurds' risky move of finally holding a referendum on independence, the analysis presented here highlights the likely effects of Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran punishing the Kurds too harshly for the move or trying to weaken the KRG as a whole. Turkey, Iran, Syria and the rest of Iraq need not embrace the KRI or its aspirations for independence, but they would do well to reconcile themselves with extensive Iraqi Kurdish autonomy. A KRI behaving as a unitary, rational and strategic actor would be an entity they could pursue relations with, negotiate with and maintain some degree of confidence about. The actions of a prudent pseudo-state focusing on its security and well-being remain understandable and easier to predict, much like those of stable states.

Failing political parties and collapsing regimes have fewer reasons to be cautious, however. Leaders desperate to maintain domestic political support would be more likely to pursue risky foreign policies. A unilateral declaration of statehood might draw sympathy from neighbouring Kurdish populations and spark more serious popular uprisings in Turkish, Syrian and Iranian Kurdistan, for instance, or it might fall on deaf ears across the world. The incentive to take such a gamble depends on how desperate one is. Were most of the approximately thirty to thirty-five million Iraqi, Turkish, Iranian and Syrian Kurds to find some semblance of a common cause for the first time in their history, the resulting regional instability might be severe.

An Iraqi Kurdistan Region that saw its most outstanding problems with Baghdad settled amicably and favourably, on the other hand, would likely prove willing to hold off on independence for another fifty years if necessary. That would be the wise and prudent thing to do. Wisdom and prudence in the foreign policy realm remain the privilege of stronger, more

consolidated actors. When the government in Baghdad refused to abide by the constitutional provisions of its federation with Kurdistan, when it refused to share control of oil production and revenues,²⁶ and when it cut Kurdistan off from the national budget, it encouraged more risky behaviour from the KRG. That leaders of the KDP felt pressure to do something “popular” in the face of declining regime consolidation significantly added to the pressure to hold a risky referendum on independence.

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²⁶ For more on this, see Romano (2014).

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