



A Kurdish Peshmerga soldier holds a Kurdistan flag during a deployment in the area near the northern Iraqi border with Syria, August 6, 2012 | Reuters

KURDISTAN RISING: TO ACKNOWLEDGE OR IGNORE THE UNRAVELING OF IRAQ

GARETH STANSFIELD

The taking of Mosul by Islamist insurgents of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham – IS(IS) - on June 10 exposed as futile strategies followed by U.S. and European policy-makers since 2011 that had been aimed at healing Iraq’s sectarian and ethnic fissures.¹ These strategies, which were focused upon finding common ground between Shi’ite and Sunnis, and moderating the Kurds’ demands to self-determine their future, were understandable in an American context – too much U.S. blood and treasure has been sacrificed in Iraq to then not only have to acknowledge that the state has been failing and the country has been falling apart, but perhaps contemplate re-engaging with what is, by all accounts, a tremendously complex set of problems.



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But by embracing the concept of Iraq’s integrity so strongly as being crucial to American interests in the region, key allies and partners have been marginalized along the way. Furthermore, critical developments that will have ramifications for the United States and the West have been ignored, including the rise of Sunni Islamist radicalism. At the top of the list of spurned partners, by some margin, are the Kurds of Iraq. Having been autonomous in Iraq since 1991, they heeded the aspirations of the United States in 2003 to assist in the removal of the Ba’th regime of Saddam and played by the rules of the game established in the post-2003 period, even if at times unwillingly. But they have consistently refused to follow a path that would result in relinquishing the powers they enjoy, and have even taken steps to extend their autonomy to the point of having economic sovereignty within a federal Iraq – thus bringing them into serious dispute with Baghdad and the government of Nouri al-Maliki and earning the rebuke of the United States.

The fall of Mosul has changed matters for the Kurds, and American policy-makers now need to take stock of the reality of the Kurdistan Region in this “post-Mosul’ world.² The Kurdistan Region now stands on the threshold of restructuring Iraq according to its federal or confederal design, or exercising its full right to self-determination and seceding from Iraq, perhaps as the Republic of Kurdistan. By ignoring the realities of Kurdish strength in Iraq, the U.S. and European powers run the risk of losing influence in the only part of Iraq that can be called a success story, and antagonizing what could be a key ally in an increasingly unpredictable Middle East.³ But by acknowledging Kurdish strength, however, the United States could be drawn into a complex reconfiguring of the Iraqi state, or even underwriting a new Republic of Kurdistan and being involved in the reordering of a new Middle East state system. For an administration keen to keep the quagmire of the Middle East at arms length, neither option is palatable. Yet ignoring Kurdish realities at this moment may prove to be not only a strategic risk but a missed opportunity at a time when there are few others on the table.

THE KURDISH DILEMMA IN 'POST-MOSUL' IRAQ

Kurdish leaders had been warning both Maliki and western powers for several weeks of the danger that was brewing in Mosul. Maliki seems to have dismissed their fears; western powers simply ignored them, putting them down to the usual Kurdish attempts to work against a cohesive Iraqi political project. But even the Kurds, with their intelligence assets watching Mosul carefully, could not have predicted the swiftness with which IS(IS) and their allies would take Mosul. Sweeping in from the south and west on the morning of June 10, it is now clear that some 5 divisions of the ISF and 2 divisions of police fled the city as quickly as was humanly possible, largely due to the earlier desertion from their posts of their commanding officers.⁴

For the Kurdish leadership, this sudden change required an immediate reaction. The Kurdistan army, known as the *peshmerga*, were deployed to protect the major cities of Dohuk and Erbil, and were also ordered to seize the equipment of the ISF Dijla Operations Command to the west of Kirkuk. This they did, before drawing up a defensive line to the west of the city, incorporating into Kurdistan the center and southern domes of the Kirkuk oil field that, until then, lay beyond the jurisdiction of the KRG. The line of control also moved south into significant parts of Nineveh governorate, bringing firmly under the control of the *peshmerga* the oil concessions of ExxonMobil at Al-Qush and Bashiqa, the strategically important Mosul dam to the west of the city of Mosul, and the territories making the border with the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Cezire (Jazeera). To the east, the Kurds extended their boundary into areas of Diyala governorate, bringing Khanaqin into Kurdistan, and pushing as far south as the town of Jalawla. In the space of a few hours, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq had expanded by some 40 percent, the Kurds had secured control of the one city that they had been unattainable for decades – Kirkuk – with no opposition whatsoever, they had taken control of the largest oil field in the north of Iraq, and they had extended their control into the strategic areas of Nineveh to the north and west of Mosul.

Other issues have also become transformed by the rise of the Islamic State group. The once highly destabilizing issue of the status of the disputed territories has certainly moved on.⁵ An issue that has been a festering sore in the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad since 2003, the status of these territories altered overnight following the Kurds' securing of them before ISIS expanded out of Mosul. For the Kurds, the issue is no more. The Kurds are in full control of all the territories that they demanded before the invasion of Mosul, and they are clearly content to see this *de facto* reality recognized legally by implementing the final stage of the Constitution's Article 140 process – a referendum in these territories that will ask the inhabitants whether they wish to remain governed from Baghdad, or be part of the Kurdistan Region.⁶

The ownership and exploitation of Kirkuk's oil fields has also changed

following the incorporation of Kirkuk into Kurdistan. Even “pre-Mosul,” the Avana dome of the Kirkuk field had already been linked to the northern, Kurdish-controlled, Khormala dome, and then into the KRG-operated pipeline that is now exporting oil directly to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, all with the approval of the Government of Iraq, and which now, theoretically, can move oil north, to Kurdistan.⁷ The KRG Minister for Natural Resources Dr Ashti Hawrami has made clear his intent to apply this theory in practice and export Kirkuk’s oil to Turkey, again making realities on the ground that may prove difficult to challenge in the future.⁸

Longstanding Aspirations

In Kurdistan, the events of the summer of 2014 are not only placed within the context of post-2003 Iraq, but within the context of a century of statelessness. The historical reference of World War I of 1914-18 and the subsequent international agreements that reordered Europe and dismantled the Ottoman Empire, thus giving rise to the current state boundaries of the Middle East that divide the Kurds into Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq constitutes a powerfully emotive narrative of nationalist discourse, presenting an injustice that can only be rectified by securing statehood.

In this broader historical context sits the sorrowful experiences of the Kurds throughout the twentieth century, with regular episodes of marginalization, oppression, and genocidal actions committed by successive Iraqi governments.

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Since 2003, the Kurds have been part of Iraq – in terms of engagement with the political process in Baghdad, and being dependent upon the Iraqi state for the funding of their government – but in cultural and nationalist terms very much “apart” from Iraq. The reality on the ground in the Kurdistan Region is striking in terms of how disconnected from Iraq it actually is. While a federal region of Iraq in name, in practice the region and its peoples are very far removed from the state of Iraq, or the notion of being Iraqi. Commenting on this point, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani recounted to me how he remonstrates with foreign representatives who attempt to appeal to his sense of Iraqi unity and nationalism, noting to them how he is “obliged” to be an Iraqi by the decisions made by European imperialists a century ago, but that does not mean that he is an Iraqi in his heart – he is Kurdish in ethnicity, nationalism, and outlook.⁹ His comments would be shared by the vast majority of Kurds such is the emotional, intellectual, and nationalist distance that now exists between them and what is now the very foreign concept of Iraq.

The Economic Argument

So what has held the Kurds back? In a word – cash. It is in the economic realm that the Kurdistan Region is most keenly tied into the framework of Iraq, or that is, until recently. With the KRG financially dependent upon Baghdad for the transfer of virtually its entire working budget, to fund salaries and programmes, and to also fund the staffing of the *peshmerga*, the notion of the Kurdistan Region making the transition from federal region of Iraq to the independent, sovereign, Republic of Kurdistan has always been weakened by this stark reality. However, just as Maliki’s policies went a considerable way in marginalizing the Sunni Arab community to the point whereby they saw their collective way forward as being rebellion rather than subservience, his policies towards the Kurds have similarly pushed them into developing economic self reliance by building an expansive oil and gas sector, and a deep mistrust of Baghdad, whoever is in power.


It is the fear of being economically dependent on Baghdad that moved the Kurds to plan for an independent oil and gas sector as early as 2004. It is the reality of Maliki using the economic weapon against them, at various times since 2006, and with there being a limited and then complete embargo since 2011 that has made Kurdish leaders even more determined to wrestle free from the financial stranglehold of Baghdad. The more Baghdad squeezes, the more the Kurds move towards economic independence.

However, Kurdistan faces an immediate problem that was there before the invasion of Mosul. The region needs revenue. For several months, the KRG has endured a withholding of its budget by the Government of Iraq due to Erbil’s moving ahead with signing a bilateral oil and gas export agreement with Turkey in November of last year, and a further 50 year agreement early in June.¹⁰ In theory, the KRG is meant to receive 17 percent of Iraq’s budget, which would equate to \$14.6 billion per year. In practice, before the suspension of payments, KRG officials were of the view that the sums received rarely crept above 10 percent - or some \$8

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billion. However, the KRG seemed to have operated effectively enough on this limited amount, giving a conservative running cost of some \$700 million per month, with the Kurds being of the opinion that they should be in receipt of \$1.2 billion per month. Rolling these sums together, the KRG then places a debt owed by Baghdad to Erbil of a further \$6 billion.¹¹

It is these economic disputes that explain why the Kurdish leadership has been pushing the development of its own oil and gas sector. And it is the concern of where such a development may ultimately lead – of economic independence leading to independence in all its forms – that saw the United States push back



strongly against Kurdistan exporting oil. But the days when the Kurds would blink first in a staring contest with Washington seem to be over. They pushed ahead regardless, seemingly content with their own reading of Iraqi and regional political realities, perhaps in the belief that the U.S. and European governments would come around to Erbil's actions. Even before the fall of Mosul, the indications were that the Kurds were right, having loaded crude into a tanker at Ceyhan in May and subsequently selling it to buyers in Israel, ignoring the threat emanating from Baghdad and the cold counsel of the Americans.

With the new Government of Iraq still not being formed and with the institutions of the state in chaos, the need for the KRG to generate revenue has become even more acute. The financial burden has been increased by the addition of 300,000 internally displaced Iraqis, and a quarter of a million Syrian refugees, and the need to re-supply and re-equip the *peshmerga* and security forces, so they at least have the tools with which to defend the region on an equal basis to the abilities of IS(IS) to attack.

Even if \$700 million is taken as an optimistic guide, the Kurdistan Region can currently export (pre-Mosul) some 120,000 bpd to Turkey, with it then taking 10 days to fill one tanker, generating just short of \$100 million at \$100 per barrel for the coffers of the KRG.

At that rate, the math would suggest that the KRG needs to sell a bare minimum of seven tankers per month to generate the conservative estimate of its expenditures, meaning that it would need to be able to export over 200,000 bpd to achieve this amount. The KRG Natural Resources minister, Ashti Hawrami, has stated his aim to increase the KRG's exports to 400,000 bpd by the end of 2014, which is entirely possible as soon as compressors are installed to move the oil at higher rates more quickly. His next target is then to increase production to 1 million bpd by the end of 2015 – with additional product coming from the newly acquired fields around Kirkuk.¹² Hawrami's calculations are interesting – 400,000 bpd would cover the 17 percent amount that should have come to Kurdistan before from Baghdad. For the Kurds, 1 million bpd starts to repay the debts Baghdad owes them. These are not the words, or actions, of a government wanting to stay in an Iraq as structured “before Mosul” and, arguably, they are not the actions of a government wanting to stay in Iraq “after Mosul.” The Kurds have their economic plans, and they seem set on implementing them at all costs, even if that means having to break with Iraq to do so.

The Alignment of Political Moments

Kurdish aspirations have rarely sat easily alongside realities in Iraq and the wider region. Only twice before has Iraq seemed fragile enough to allow the Kurds from seceding – in 1991 and in 2003 – and on both occasions the demands and expectations of regional states and the international community ensured that the Kurds could never see their dreams made reality. Iraq “after Mosul” has presented the Kurds with an unprecedented political moment – one in which sees their

aspirations to control their own destiny strengthened by Baghdad's weakness and in step with powerful regional forces that would now support their plans. Behind this curve are the U.S. and European states. The question is, now, will they catch up with where the Kurds and their supporters are and embrace the difficulties that will almost certainly arise with new state formation in a troubled region, or engage in an even more fraught endeavor - to resurrect the *status quo ante* of "pre-Mosul" Iraq?

Baghdad cannot oppose

Kurdish leaders are in an enviable position in Iraq – they can succeed by doing nothing. Since making their territorial gains in the disputed territories, the Kurdish leadership has done little else in terms of confronting IS(IS) aside from the

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heavy fighting in Jalawla and at various skirmish points in Nineveh. Meanwhile, the Government of Iraq looked on forlornly. All of the earlier rhetoric concerning the increasing strength of the ISF and the limited capabilities of the *peshmerga* that had begun to be aired in Baghdad in an attempt to cow the Kurdish leadership before the invasion of Mosul has been shown to be hollow. In effect, the collapse of the ISF across northern Iraq created a huge military power shift, with the Kurds now knowing for sure that the ISF would be no match for them in battle.

THE CHANGING REGIONAL OUTLOOK

Whenever the question of the appearance of an independent Kurdish state has been raised in previous years, the opposition of regional states has usually been cited as to why such an eventuality will never come to pass. But national interests have changed in recent years. The outlook of regional powers has been in flux before the invasion of Mosul, and the rise of IS(IS) since then has only served to further crystalize views into a camp that includes several states – namely Turkey, Israel, and some Arab states – that views the Kurdistan Region of Iraq moving towards independence as a positive development, and a camp of one state, Iran, that views Kurdish independence as unacceptable. Interestingly, western powers, and most notably the United States and the United Kingdom, are more in alignment with Iran than with their Turkish, Israeli, and Arab allies.

Nothing illustrates the speed with which established truisms of Middle East politics can very quickly become obsolete as does the courtship of Ankara and Erbil. The notion that Turkey would prevent any semblance of a Kurdish entity

emerging anywhere in the region because of the possibility of such a development being emulated by the Kurds of Turkey is a stock feature of analyses of Turkey's foreign policy towards her neighbors. Yet a change has been occurring since 2007 that can now be seen as being the exact opposite of Turkey's earlier stance. Far from opposing the emergence of either a Kurdistan Region of a confederal Iraq, or a Republic of Kurdistan from the embers of a collapsed Iraq, a strong case can be made that Turkey would at least tacitly, maybe even actively, support such outcomes.

Turkey: Erdoğan's shift and Barzani's push

From being the singular most important block to Kurdish independence breaking out anywhere – with Prime Minister Erdoğan once famously joking that he would object to Kurdish independence even in Argentina – Turkey is now the strongest supporter of Kurdish self-determination in Iraq.¹³ Rather than being a threat to the integrity of Turkey, an independent Kurdistan (in Iraq) is increasingly seen as essential to Turkey's own security – by allowing for the engaged management of Turkey's own "Kurdish issue" with regard to the PKK, as important for Turkey's energy security – by being a source of much-needed natural gas, and serving as a buffer between Turkey and what is seen as either a jihadist-dominated Sunni Arab region, or a region in the throes of what could well be one of the most devastating sectarian conflicts the Middle East has witnessed.

Both Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Barzani have been key actors in the transformation of the relationship between Erbil and Ankara. For Erdoğan, with a strong support base among Turkey's Kurdish population – illustrative of

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the fact that Turkey's Kurdish population finds it as easy to support the Islamist agenda of the AKP as it does the Kurdish nationalist agenda of the PKK – it was a politically clever move to find a mechanism by which to resolve the Kurdish issue in Turkey once and for all. Erdoğan remains a committed Turkish nationalist, however, and sees a strong security rationale in being in close cooperation with the Kurds of Iraq. Being the Iraqi Kurds' "big brother" at a time when they would be making the sensitive transition from federal region of Iraq to either a state of an unstable confederacy or to being an independent Republic would give Ankara the opportunity to ensure that whatever did emerge on Turkey's south-east border would be something, ultimately, that Turkey could not only live with, but control economically and influence politically.

For President Barzani and his foreign policy team, the choice between being a subservient, cash-starved, threatened region of Iraq, being promised riches but receiving little, or being a sovereign entity under Ankara's *de facto* tutelage was

seen as an obvious one to make. Making a strategic alliance with Ankara, with the rationale being built around the calming of the Kurdish situation in Turkey and the building of an energy linkage between the gas-rich Kurdistan Region and energy-deficient Turkey, has then become a priority for Ankara and Erbil, irrespective of the sacred cows of Iraqi sovereignty and the legality of oil and gas exports that may have been sacrificed on the way.

The transformation of Turkey's position towards the possibility of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq pupating into a "Republic of Kurdistan" has therefore been occurring over several years. The first signs of an improvement in the relationship between Erbil and Ankara could be seen as long ago as 2007, when

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Kurdish leaders made a concerted effort to reach out to elites in Ankara, and Turkish officials were becoming increasingly frustrated at their lack of progress in building strategic alliances with Baghdad. As Ankara and Baghdad each began to view the other as pursuing antipathetic sectarian-focused policies, Turkey quickly found strong economic and security-based linkages with Erbil – linkages that would prove useful in managing the PKK threat and, most importantly, giving an opportunity to Turkey to improve its energy security and, in the future, limit its exposure to Russian and Iranian natural gas imports. With the rise of IS(IS), Turkey now has a clear set of choices – to support an independent Kurdish state to emerge in Iraq, thus securing Turkish access to hydrocarbons at favorable prices and mitigating the threat that would emanate from not having a Kurdish buffer state to the south, or to deal with either an unfriendly Shi'a dominated Iraqi state, or an Iraq in the throes of a brutal sectarian and ethnic-based civil war, or the Islamic State group itself. For Turkey, irrespective of past antipathy toward an independent Kurdistan, the possibility of a Republic of Kurdistan now being their pliant neighbor to the south-east has its distinct attractions.

The question for the Kurdish leadership to ask is, "Will the Erbil-Ankara relationship last"? Some concerns must certainly exist in Erbil, not least because the animosity that exists between prime ministers Erdoğan and Maliki is an important element that prevents closer engagement between Ankara and Baghdad. But what then happens if one of these actors changes? If a more acceptable and engaging figure emerges as the premier in Baghdad, who then makes overtures towards Ankara, how attractive will the relationship with Erbil then be viewed? The Kurdish leadership seems comfortable in the notion that its links into Turkey are multifaceted and span the AKP, other parties, and the political and military establishment of Turkey – making structural ties that bind irrespective of the identities of office holders either in Baghdad or Ankara. But it is this problem of

having a single point of failure – the relationship with Erdoğan – that will keep Kurdish leaders awake at night, if and when Maliki is replaced. For this reason, the Kurds have sought to broaden their portfolio of regional and international supporters, taking advantage of the current Turkish alliance to garner support from Arab states in particular, while also quietly maintaining their long-lasting relationship with Israel.

Israel: The Unmentionable Friend

For Israel, with a long-standing relationship with the Kurdish leadership and particularly with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that stems back some 50 years to the days when Mulla Mustafa Barzani proved to be a well-placed ally for Tel Aviv, it is second nature to support initiatives that serve to break the integrity of Arab states – even those that no longer have the ability to challenge Israel’s right to exist. Keen to have “official” friends in the region and also having been the recipient of Kurdistan’s first shipment of oil from Ceyhan, it was perhaps unsurprising that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voiced his strong support for Kurdish statehood at the end of June.¹⁴ It is, however, telling that the Kurdish leadership has remained quiet about this support. Exposed already to accusations of being in partnership with Israel, Erbil remains deeply sensitive to any advertising of the link with Israel – not least because the Iraqi Kurds’ future relationships with Arab states will be critically important, and Iran will always remain as a powerful neighbor next door, rather than an influential friend several hundred kilometers away.

Sunni Arab States: Political and Economic Opportunism

Little love has been in evidence either way between the Kurds and Arab Gulf states since the emergence of the Kurdistan Region in 1991. Indeed, if there was a relationship between Erbil and the Arab Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, then it was one of distinct coolness. Syria would at times allow Iraqi Kurdish parties to operate freely in its territory, mainly to antagonize Saddam’s regime, but beyond

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this dallying, Arab states were ideologically opposed to any notion of any sort of threat to Iraq’s territorial integrity, and the Kurds were seen by all as intent on dividing Iraq from the inside out.

But a thawing in relationships, particularly with Arab Gulf states, began to happen soon after regime change in Iraq and developed as the Kurdistan Region’s economy grew in the post-2003 period. Serving both as an important market in its own right, and as a gateway to the rest of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region has proved to be an interesting proposition for those investors who were willing to put up with the perception of higher risk for higher returns. The relationship is not only

economic, however. For the Kurdish leadership, the unfolding political picture is one that is moving quickly, with old enmities turning into alliances, and old partnerships faltering. More by accident than design, it seems, Erbil could be falling into the “Sunni” side of the Middle East political divide, a camp that includes Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the states of the Gulf, and moving away from its one time allies Iran. For a region that has always had to find a balance between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the thought of antagonizing perhaps the most influential of all of these parties – Iran – as part of the process of moving Kurdistan from dependent region to independent state must be one that causes significant concern.

Iran

The mood in Tehran towards the unfolding plans of Erbil is dark. In keeping with the stated policies of the United States and the United Kingdom, Iran extended its full support for Iraq’s independence, national solidarity, and territorial integrity and, in so doing, criticized the Kurdish leadership in Iraq concerning the occupation of Kirkuk and the plans to hold a referendum there, and going as far as to refer to the exporting of oil as illegal.¹⁵

As ever, the positions of Iran are complex and multifaceted, but the concerns of Tehran are only partially about the ramifications of Kurdish independence in Iraq, achieved with the strong support of Turkey and Israel, would have on their own restive minority populations. Clearly, such an outcome would present a challenge to the national security of Iran that would be deemed problematic due to the precedent Kurdish independence would set for Iran’s own 5 million Kurds, and other ethnic minorities too, including Baluchis, Arabs, and Azeris. As Iranian Kurdistan was the setting for the first Republic of Kurdistan to form, in Mahabad in 1946, the sensitivity towards the Third Kurdistan Republic forming there, after the likely Second Republic in Erbil, must be high.¹⁶ But it is the threat that such a move would have on the maintaining of the status quo in Iraq as a whole – of the keeping of a weakened country dominated by a Shi’a government that has been both controllable by Tehran and unthreatening towards it – that has energized Tehran to employ such strong rhetoric against their perennial Kurdish allies in the north of Iraq. Without the Kurds in the game, then Iraq would the likelihood of Iraq falling into a catastrophic sectarian civil war between the Islamic State group and Shi’a Iraq would be much greater, and this would be a war that Iran, still economically weakened and militarily stretched, would not welcome at this moment in time.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE KURDS OF IRAQ

Traditional U.S. policy towards Iraq has been to support fully and unconditionally the territorial integrity of the country. While U.S. policy has, since 2003, been

mindful of satisfying the Kurds' federal demands and in keeping the Kurds engaged as fully as possible in the political process in Baghdad, there has never been any notion whatsoever of the U.S. supporting any form of restructuring the Iraqi state into a confederal system in which sovereignty is held by the regions and voluntarily delegated to the confederal state, and has been resolutely opposed to any notion of an independent Kurdish state.

This position is rapidly becoming obsolete. Even before the rise of IS(IS), the political machinery of the Iraq had been broken by the failure of Iraq's sectarian and ethnically defined elites to find common ground and compromises, the strategy of Prime Minister Maliki to not only exclude Sunni Arabs from key decision-making posts but to also target their leaders for arrest and trial, and the Kurds' purposefully consolidating their own *de facto* state by assembling the economic trappings – with regard to their oil and gas sector – to provide the financial wherewithal to secede. All of these developments – lack of compromise, Maliki's strategies, the Kurds' plotting – were all merely symptoms, however, of

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the cause of Iraq's post-2003 malaise: the existence of a political structure and process which Iraq's elites only paid lip service to, and which did little, if anything, to satisfy the demands and expectations of any one of the three principle communal groups. The rise of IS(IS) has served to clarify agendas in Iraq and to expose the motivating forces that dictate the actions of Iraq's political players. For the Sunni Arabs and the Shi'ite, now on the cusp of either partitioning Arab Iraq into two or engaging in a devastating sectarian war over Baghdad, the future seems bleak; for the Kurds, choosing to stay out of what they see as an Arab civil war, the situation presents opportunities to push for their own advancement, to protect what they have built and to further their cause for self-determination.

Even though the Kurds can, and are, moving ahead without the endorsement of the United States, the efforts their senior politicians have put into trying to win over U.S. decision-makers to their cause suggests that they would much have the support of Washington rather than its opposition. But from the perspective of Kurdish leaders, the U.S. government is infuriating to deal with – at once supportive and protective, yet dismissive to the point of being patronizing of their aims, aspirations, and views. The Kurds have also had to exercise extreme patience with the United States, believing that successive administrations have got their policy towards the Kurds woefully wrong certainly since 2003, but also at regular intervals since the 1970s. The latest episode for them is Secretary Kerry's

appeal, mirrored by U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague, to build a government of national unity at a time when the Kurds are openly dismissive about any notion of unity in post-Mosul Iraq.¹⁷ Such a request is placed within the broader context of successive U.S. government actions since 1991 that have left the Kurds exposed to Saddam's wrath (in 1991, following the Kurdish uprising in response to what was seen as U.S. encouragement), threatened the Kurds with direct military assault (in March 2003, following the Kurds' taking of Kirkuk), and sought to dis-establish what they had spent over a decade putting into place - in terms of their *de facto* state - since 1991, or could have left the Kurds at the mercy of forces such as IS(IS) in the post-2003 period. It is this history that makes Kurdish leaders even more determined today to do what they believe to be in the interests of Kurdistan, rather than what western leaders, including Secretary Kerry and Minister Hague, may be pushing with regard to maintaining Iraq's integrity.

RECONSIDERING KURDISTAN: THE PROS AND CONS OF KURDISH INDEPENDENCE

The post-Mosul situation presents a very different world for the Kurds and for Iraq, and it is a world that western governments need to quickly come to terms with. Realities in Iraq are increasingly making the focus upon territorial integrity somewhat irrelevant, particularly with reference to the Kurds, who have made ever stronger realities on the ground, and also with regard to the Arabs, who are more divided than ever into sectarian camps.

U.S. and western leaders, in the weeks following the fall of Mosul, the expansion of IS(IS), the paralysis of the Government of Iraq, the remobilization of the Shi'a militias, and the rise of Kurdistan have remained committed to pursuing policies aimed at the shoring up of the unified Iraqi state. This is understandable - the collapse of states and the emergence of new ones presents scenarios that are inherently complex, demanding, and potentially dangerous with unintended and unknown consequences. Indeed, it may be the case that U.S. and other western powers are now pursuing a theoretical ideal that no longer exists on the ground in Iraq, and which important powers in the region no longer rarefy as they used to do. Yet, right now, the position of the U.S. government has been to pressure the Kurds to lead the way in finding a solution to Iraq's problems, rather than implementing ways forward for their own self-determination. This pressure, it seems, has been ignored by the Kurdish leadership who now seem to be on the verge of taking matters into their own hands, irrespective of what Washington wishes to see. Thus the United States risks losing the strongest and most natural ally it has ever had in Iraq. So what would be balance sheet of the pros and cons of supporting the Kurds in the quest for independence, from the perspective of Washington, D.C.?

To consider the negative points first, supporting Kurdish independence would be a venture into the unknown in a volatile region that the Obama

administration is keen to manage at arm's length. To be sure, which seems fairly clear is that a consequence of Kurdish independence would be a further complicating of Arab politics in Iraq – as the Sunnis and Shi'ite would need to find

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a direct accommodation rather than having one side rely on the Kurds to secure a governing majority over the other. Across the wider region, most states would find it relatively easy to support an independent Kurdistan – apart from, it seems, Egypt and Iran, and so U.S. support for Erbil could come at the cost of further antagonizing Tehran, and losing leverage in Cairo at what is a sensitive moment. There are also international legal niceties that the U.S. government would be acting against, including the principle of the territorial integrity of states and the inviolability of existing state borders – making it problematic for the United States to publicly support a secessionist movement beyond acknowledging that there exists a right to self-determination.¹⁸ Lastly, the United States would be wary of the precedent Kurdish independence in Iraq could set to other possible secessionist-minded peoples across the region, including the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, and also, perhaps, Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, and maybe even a Basra secessionist movement in the south of Iraq.

The positive points, though, at least match if not outweigh the cons. Firstly, within Iraq, the removal of the debilitating “Kurdish problem,” which has been a source of internal and external conflict since the 1960s if not before, would then leave Arab Iraq to work out its differences without the complicating factor of dealing with the Kurds either as enemies or allies. In regional terms, bringing the Republic of Kurdistan into a closer embrace with the United States may further serve to limit Iran's options to foment difficulties in either Kurdistan or what remains of Iraq. From a U.S. perspective, the Kurds would be a staunch and loyal ally in a region that remains of critical importance to Washington, irrespective of any refocusing of U.S. strategic efforts elsewhere. By having a close relationship with a nascent Republic of Kurdistan, the United States would also enhance its ability to promote stability in the rest of Iraq and to counter the very real threat of radical Islamism in the expanding swathe of land controlled by the Islamic State group and its partners. Lastly, in terms of how this plays in the U.S. heartland, the Kurds are a nation deserving of a state. The narrative of the Kurdish drive for statehood is one that would ring loudly in the ears of many Americans, and the embracing of Kurdish independence may be seen as a positive policy action in a region that is currently in the throes of many terrible conflicts.

So what could the United States do differently? It would of course be a very significant move to suddenly announce a policy of embracing Iraq's collapse, and one that would be seen as imposing a new model on Iraqis in a neo-imperialist

fashion. As such, this would correctly be viewed as politically unwise and would bring the Obama administration into the current fracas not as a moderating force, as it may yet be, but as an architect of a new state system – something that is perhaps President Obama’s worst nightmare. But acknowledging the unraveling of

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Iraq, and the consequences of the chaotic collapse of the country into civil war, does not only have to be an academic exercise supporting a policy of either hoping for the best, or “wait and see.” In the setting of the current Middle East, two powers seem to have a strategy – the Islamic State group (which seems to be exceptionally in terms of its strategic planning) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (which consistently works on timeframes that would make western policy-makers twitch nervously) – and in the absence of counter-strategies from western powers, it should be of no surprise if the Middle East continues to develop in ways that are inimical, or even antipathetic, to western interests.

What would a proactive U.S. approach to Kurdish self-determination look like? In the short term, the Kurds need revenue to overcome the deficits caused by the budgetary suspension by Baghdad, but they could overcome this themselves if their oil exports were not only accepted but encouraged by western governments – even if in some form of temporary arrangement that recognizes the emergency they face in terms of defense procurement and humanitarian provision. The Kurdistan Region would also need support to ensure that the *peshmerga* of today match the legendary status earned by their predecessors, and they are equipped, armed, and guided in terms of defending Kurdistan’s long border. If and when the time comes too, perhaps when the Battle of Baghdad has started, or Abu Bakr al-Baghdad has managed to destroy the Askariyya Shrine in Samarra for a second time, or even hit the holy cities of Kerbala and Najaf, thus starting in earnest the Sunni-Shi’i War he craves, western powers led by the United States should be brave enough to be at the forefront of world opinion, acknowledging and recognizing the collapse of the twentieth century Middle East state system and the emergence of the Republic of Kurdistan, rather than ignoring the facts when the region itself has moved on.

¹ Throughout this paper, I refer to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, as it was up until June 29, 2014, and then the “Islamic State group” as it became after the proclamation of the Caliphate in Mosul as IS(IS).

² For an early mention of Iraq “post-Mosul,” see the BBC interview with KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, “Iraq conflict: Iraqi Kurd PM Nechirvan Barzani,” *BBC News: Middle East*, 17 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27881778>; also see Gareth Stansfield, “Briefing – the new rules of the game in Iraq,” *RUSI Analysis*, 18 June 2014, <https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C53A1ADAD87078/#.U7LnnBa0bfM>

³ For earlier iterations of arguments supporting closer U.S. engagement with the Kurds of Iraq, see Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq: Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division?* 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Peter Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Brendan O’Leary, *How to Get Out of Iraq with Integrity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009)

⁴ Interview with Lieutenant General Jabbar Yawer, Secretary General of the Ministry of Peshmerga, Kurdistan Regional Government, Erbil, 18 June 2014.

⁵ For further details concerning the disputed territories, see Stefan Wolff, “Governing (in) Kirkuk: resolving the status of a disputed territory.” *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (November), 2010, pp. 1361-1380.

⁶ Khalid al-Ansary and Nayla Razzouk, “Iraqs Kurds vow to keep Kirkuk oil fields until referendum.” *Bloomberg News*, 1 July 2014.

⁷ Interview with Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of the KRG, Erbil, 23 June 2014.

⁸ Julia Payne and Lin Noueihed, “Update 2 – Iraqi Kurds link Kirkuk to own oil pipeline, plan more exports.” *Reuters*, 17 June 2014.

⁹ Interview with Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and Safeen Dizayee. Spokesman of the KRG, Erbil, 23 June 2014.

¹⁰ Mohamed Zangeneh, “Turkish sources confirm oil export deal with Kurdistan region.” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 1 December 2013, <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/12/article55324145>.

¹¹ Judit Neurink, “Baghdad owes Kurdistan \$6b, international conference told.” *Rudaw*, 10 June 2014, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/100620141> .

¹² David Sheppard, “With new grip on oil fields, Iraq Kurds unveil plan to ramp up exports.” *Reuters*, 26 June 2014. <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/06/26/iraq-security-kurds-oil-idINKBN0F102M20140626?rpc=401&feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&rpc=401>.

¹³ Başık İnce, *Citizenship and Identity in Turkey: From Atatürk’s Republic to the Present Day*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2012, p. 172.

¹⁴ “Netanyahu endorses Kurdish independence.” *Al-Jazeera*, 29 June 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/netanyahu-endorses-kurdish-independence-2014629174546263489.html> .

¹⁵ “Iran reiterates support for Iraq”s territorial integrity.” *FARS News Agency*, 30 June 2014, <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930409000408>.

¹⁶ For an account of Kurdish nationalism in Iran, and the Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad, see Gareth Stansfield, “Kurds, Persian Nationalism, and Shi”i Rule: Surviving Dominant Nationhood in Iran,” in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses, (eds.) *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, in press).

¹⁷ Geoff Dyer, “Kerry tours Middle East seeking support for new Iraq government.” *The Financial Times*, 22 June 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6a993d0a-fa25-11e3-a328-00144feab7de.html#axzz36ElxnUY6>; Patrick Cockburn, “Iraq crisis: William Hague flies to Baghdad with an appeal for unity – but it”s a bit late for that.” *The Independent*, 26 June 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-crisis-william-hague-flies-in-with-an-appeal-for-unity--but-its-a-bit-late-for-that-9566339.html> .

¹⁸ For an excellent analysis of the problem of self-determination of peoples in international law, see Patricia Carley, “Self-Determination: Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and the Right to Secession,” *Report from a Roundtable Held in Conjunction with the U.S. Department of State”s Policy Planning Staff*. United States Institute of Peace, 1996.