CASE ANALYSIS

Kurdistan's Struggle for Sovereignty: State, Societal, and Human Security

Hawre Hasan Hama and Megan Connelly| September 2017

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq developed into a quasi-state by the turn of the 21st century, following the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq by the United States and its allies. Today, the Kurdistan Regional Government enjoys all the trappings of an independent state. Its government is independent of Baghdad and retains its own parliament, the elections for which are held separately from the Iraqi general elections. Most importantly, Kurdistan boasts its own military and security forces despite being divided along partisan lines. Nevertheless, the KRG lacks external sovereignty and has been embroiled in a security dilemma with the federal Government of Baghdad. The KRG's top officials link the troubles that their enclave faces to the lack of statehood. This has driven them to hold referendum on independence on 25 September, 2017. This paper will analyze the overlapping roles of state, societal, and human security factors that define Kurdistan's struggle for sovereignty ahead of the planned referendum on statehood.

Introduction

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is due to hold a referendum on the independence of the region under its control on September 25, 2017, three years after acting President Massoud Barzani initially declared his intention to break away from Iraq,[1]. Iraqi Kurdistan has been an autonomous region since 1992. It emerged as a quasi-state after the United States – along with the United Kingdom and France – established the no-fly zone in northern Iraq, allowing Kurdish partisan military leadership to assume a political and administrative role in the regions under international protection[2]. Since that time, the KRG has developed into a *de facto* state that enjoys economic independence, its own security forces, and a democratic government that

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[1]Johnson, Keith; Tankin, Emily. "Kurds Finally Set Date for Independence Referendum." *Foreign Policy* (2017). Published electronically June 7, 2017. http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/07/kurds-finally-set-date-for-independence-referendum/

[2]Hama, Hawre Hasan. "The Consequences of Politicized Forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq." *CSS Blog Network* (2017). Published electronically January 19, 2017. http://isnblog.ethz.ch/government/the-consequences-of-politicized-forces-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq.

provides political guarantees to ethno-religious minorities. The ISIS campaign in Northern Iraq in June 2014 led to the collapse of the Iraqi Army and the emergence of the KRG as a regional power. Since that time Kurdish leaders have been determined in their conviction that statehood is not only a fundamental right and a guarantor of national strength and prosperity, but is also necessary for Kurdistan's survival. Yet, while the KRG's policymakers have concentrated on achieving external sovereignty and strengthening Kurdistan's security forces, they have neglected to build strong central institutions, encourage the development of civil society and invest in the welfare of its citizens. Here, we will analyze the overlapping roles of state, societal and human security that define Kurdistan's struggle for sovereignty statehood ahead of the Kurdistan Region's independence referendum.

Realism and Kurdish Security

The Iraqi constitution gives the KRG significant residual powers to form a government with exclusive jurisdiction in the Region; form its own local security forces; establish overseas consulates and receive foreign dignitaries[3]. Through its constitutional powers alone, the KRG would appear to fulfil most of the criteria for statehood under the Montevideo Convention, which defines a state as an entity with a permanent population, defined territory, a government, and the capability to interact with other states[4]. Since 2005, the region has developed central institutions, established professional military and local security forces, and opened consulates in Europe, Asia and the United States.[5] The development of economic and security partnerships with the United States, Turkey and Russia, independently of the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) has provided the Region with limited external sovereignty.

On the other hand, because the KRG's sovereignty is legally derived from the Iraqi constitution, the international community does not recognize it as a state or explicitly acknowledge its sovereign authority. Furthermore, the IFG, with which the KRG is locked in a decade-long stalemate over the status of Iraq's disputed territories and the KRG's authority to independently export oil, seeks to curtail the Region's sovereignty by placing limits on its autonomy. Since the ISIS invasion, Kurdish leaders have expressed growing impatience with Iraq's federal system. Many argue that this system prevents the KRG from effectively managing threats to its borders. This is due to the IFG's failure (or, some would say, unwillingness) to contain the growth of Al-Qaeda and ISIS; the KRG's inability to request or receive direct military or financial aid without Baghdad's approval; and the presence of Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) in areas disputed

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[3]"The 2006 Iraqi Constitution." Zaid al-Ali, 2006

[4] Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, available at:
https://www.ilsa.org/jessup/jessup15/Montevideo%20Convention.pdf

[5]Jüde, Johannes. "Contesting Borders? The Formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's De Facto State." *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (2017): 847-63.

between the KRG and the rest of Iraq. To prepare against these threats, the KRG is not only seeking short-term military aid, but also long-term political support and diplomatic recognition from the United States and its coalition partners.

The KRG accelerated the pace of its diplomatic efforts with the ISIS advance into northern Iraq and coordination with the Global Coalition against ISIS. In 2014, with Iraqi forces fleeing ISIS fighters and the IFG appearing to be on the brink of collapse, the KRG filled the security vacuum and garnered significant international recognition, particularly from the United States, as a reliable partner in the war against ISIS. US interest in the KRG is not only motivated by its mission to eliminate ISIS, but also by its long-term agenda to encourage the development of a strong western-allied KRG. The Kurdistan Region has taken advantage of mounting Pentagon concerns regarding the proliferation of Iranian influence in Iraq via the PMUs. Through vigorous lobbying efforts in Washington, the KRG has used the opportunity to promote itself as a beacon of western values and a faithful ally of the United States. In July 2016, the Ministry of Peshmerga and the US Department of Defense signed a memorandum of understanding that included direct US military aid to the KRG in exchange for its cooperation and participation in the liberation of Mosul[6]. In January 2017, the US Department of State also announced plans to build the United States' second-largest foreign mission in the world in Erbil, demonstrating its willingness to make a long-term commitment to diplomatic relations with the KRG[7]. Yet the United States is also committed to a unified and stable federal Iraq[8] under the leadership of Haider Al-Abadi to curtail Iran's geopolitical ambitions. It also fears the precipitation of violence and instability in Iraq, and particularly within the disputed territories, which could follow the secession of the Kurdish enclave in the north. Therefore, while Washington supports a strong KRG, it does not currently support an independent Kurdistan[9].

Aside from arms, material and training, the KRG's acquisition of sovereignty hinges on its economic independence from Iraq, and to this end, Erbil has actively sought foreign investment in its energy sector. The KRG Ministry of Natural Resources negotiated a fifty-year energy deal with the Turkish government in 2013[10]. More recently, it secured a twenty-year production-

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[6]Malik, Hamdi. "U.S. Continues Buildup of Iraqi Kurdish Forces." *Al Monitor* (2017). Published electronically May 12, 2017. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/iraq-kurdistan-us-peshmerga.html.

[7]"U.S. To Build Biggest Consulate Building in Erbil." *Rudaw* (2017). Published electronically January 16, 2017. http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/160120172.

[8]Saeed, Nawhi. "Disputed Territories Pose Major Challenge to Kurdish Referendum." *Al Monitor* (2017). Published electronically July 30, 2017. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/kurdish-referendum-disputed-areas-iraq.html.

[9]Harris, Bryant. "Congress Threatens to Cut Payments to Iraqi Kurds If They Break with Baghad." *Al Monitor* (2017). Published electronically June 28, 2017. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/06/congress-threat-payments-krg-kurdistan-referendum-iraq.html.

[10]"Matter of National Security? The Turkish-Kurdish 'Secret Agreement'." *Niqash* (2015). Published electronically April 23, 2015. http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/3641/.

sharing agreement (PSA) with Russian state oil company, Rosneft, to export oil from five oil fields, two of which are in disputed territories[11]. The IFG continues to dispute the legality of contracts between international oil companies (IOCs) and the KRG, and has been able to stall these contracts in the Iraqi courts. Moreover, vested commercial interests appear to be insufficient for Turkey, the KRG's primary trading partner, to back Erbil's independence from Iraq. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister, Bekir Bozdag has said that the vote will "contribute to instability in the region."[12]Yet private and state energy firms, through entering into contracts with the KRG to exploit its natural resources, implicitly recognize the KRG's sovereignty and, acknowledge its authority to exploit natural resources in Iraq's disputed territories.

While the KRG seems to meet the Montevideo criteria for statehood, it lacks centralized control over the legitimate use of violence as required by the Weberian definition. Consequently, threats to the KRG's security may also arise from its internally divided political institutions. Until 2014, the KRG Parliament, Council of Ministers and Presidency were split 50-50 between the Region's two primary political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PUK). As such, these institutions have functioned as little more than window dressing for a "unification agreement" between their politburos which, while providing for 50-50 power sharing within the KRG's central institutions and a corresponding portion of the budget, allowed the parties to retain exclusive control over their respective territorial/administrative zones.

Jüdehas argued that the agreement follows a model of consociational governments in other developing nations whereby statehood is consolidated through coalitions rather than through centuries of warfare, as in the western European model[13]. Nonetheless, while the agreement laid the groundwork for bipartisan consensus building a decade after the collapse of the first KRG during the Kurdish Civil War, both politburos have resisted nationalizing their separate Peshmerga, Asayish, and intelligence units. These units acknowledge little (if any) accountability to KRG central institutions. The parties' inability to surrender control of these militias weakens the KRG's internal sovereignty. In many respects, this style of governance is closer to resembling a security dilemma than a consociation. Despite the parties' observance of a truce for nearly twenty years, the situation along the civil war ceasefire line—which still acts as the unofficial barrier between the KDP and PUK areas – remains tense. This is particularly

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[11]"Rosneft in Talks to Develop Disputed Oil Fields with Iraqi Kurdistan." *Financial Times* (2017). Published electronically June 29, 2017. https://www.ft.com/content/032819fe-5cd1-11e7-9bc8-8055f264aa8b.

[12]"Iraqi Kurdish Independence Referendum Will Fuel Instability, Turkey Says." *Reuters* (2017). Published electronically August 15, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-turkey-idUSKCN1AV1YD.

[13]Jüde, Johannes. "Contesting Borders? The Formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's De Facto State." *International Affairs* 93, no. 4 (2017): 847-63.

evident in Kirkuk where KDP-aligned forces seized oil fields within the PUK's territory in 2014, and the PUK occasionally mobilizes its forces along the ceasefire line to prevent further incursions[14].

The KRG's security institutions are the primary channels for its interactions with the international community. The lack of centralization within them has thus placed severe limitations on the KRG's capacity to interact as a cohesive, unified actor with other states. It is common for the PUK or KDP politburos, rather than appointed officials from the KRG's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to receive delegations or lobby in foreign capitals. Such practices make the KRG vulnerable to foreign intervention in its domestic politics. Regional actors Iran and Turkey have exploited, and continue to exploit, the rivalry between the KDP and PUK to advance their own geostrategic positions in Iraq and the wider region. Since the civil war, the KDP has hosted Turkish military and intelligence personnel within its zone while the PUK has attempted to balance its counterpart's partnership with Ankara through diplomatic channels in Tehran. The PUK tolerates the presence of Iranian military and intelligence cadres within its territory, and under certain circumstances, cooperates with the PMUs along its forward line in Diyala province. The PUK also tacitly approves the presence of PKK and YPG guerrillas—hostile to Turkey—in its territory and openly (but not officially) supports their presence in the KDP areas as well where PKK affiliates seek to compete with, and destabilize, the KDP administration and maintain bases for cross-border operations into Turkey[15].

As the KRG emerges as a regional power, foreign governments increasingly interact with KRG central institutions rather than party delegations. However, through a series of political upheavals in 2014 and 2015, the KDP effectively consolidated control over the KRG's economic, defense and diplomatic channels. This included the refusal of President Massoud Barzani, a KDP strongman, to hand over power after the conclusion of his legal term in 2015 and KDP Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's dissolution of parliament several months later. With the KRG's coalition partners, particularly the United States, prioritizing the war on ISIS ahead of maintaining a balance of power between various factions in the KRG, they have conferred *de facto* recognition on the KDP domination of the region's government, making the party the main beneficiary of increasing international recognition of Iraq's Kurds. Since much of this recognition is granted in the form of military aid, the KDP has been able to allocate this assistance for the recruitment, training, and equipment of Peshmerga, Asayish and Zerivani

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[14]Connelly, Megan. "Information, Insecurity and Escalation in Kirkuk." *NRT English* (2017). Published electronically March 19, 2017. http://www.nrttv.com/EN/birura-details.aspx?Jimare=5362.

[15] Connelly, Megan. "Until the Last Drop of Our Blood: Shingal and the Future of Kurdistan." *Kurdish Question* (2017). Published electronically March 9, 2017. http://kurdishquestion.com/article/3870-until-the-last-drop-of-our-blood-shingal-and-the-future-of-kurdistan.

forces in its zone. The PUK officials on the other hand claim that they receive little assistance[16], particularly for their Peshmerga along the Diyala and Kirkuk fronts[17].

The PUK fears that the legitimization of KDP rule from abroad will not only marginalize its politburo politically, but will also result in asymmetries in relative capability between the KDP and PUK and eventually monopolize the legitimate use of force in the KRG. Furthermore, there is concern that the KDP is using the proposed independence referendum as an instrument to achieve these goals. A favorable outcome for independence, whether or not it is actually declared, will be interpreted at home and abroad as a mandate for KDP rule and the Presidency as the source of sovereignty.

Societal Security

The Copenhagen School considers "communities and… individuals identifying themselves as members of a community"[18], rather than states, as object of security. Barry Buzan, writing with others, regarded societal security as "the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats"[19]. Another dimension of societal security is the conflict between "state security" and "societal security": the security of subnational communities may threaten state security[20]. Societal security is often in conflict with state security, as well as the security of other subnational groups. In other words, societies may increase their relative security at the expense of state security, as well as at the expense of other societal groups. Kurdistan's society encompasses multiple intersecting, and competing identities including family, tribal, religious and ethnic identities. However, the identities that we will analyze as objects of societal security are: Kurdish identity or *kurdayeti;* the national civic identity or *kurdistaniyeti*; and partisanship or *jamawer.*

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[16]Deqi Wtekany Lahur Shekh Jengi Le Parlamani Europa." *Millet Press* (2016). Published electronically May 3, 2016. http://www.milletpress.com/Detail.aspx?Jiamre=19148&T=%D8%AF%DB%95%D9%82%DB%8C%20%D9%88%D8%AA%DB%95%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%20%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%20%D8%B4%DB%8E%D8%AE%20%D8%AC%DB%95%D9%86%DA%AF%DB%8C%20%D9%84%DB%95%20%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%

[17]"Mahmoud Sengawi Bas Le Hokari Rasteqinei Konebunewei Wefde Ermykyeke Dekat Legel Yekêti." *Voice of America Kurdish* (2016). Published electronically September 18, 2016. https://www.dengiamerika.com/a/3514115.html.

[18]Buzan, Barry, and Ole Wæver. "Slippery? Contradictory? Sociologically Untenable? The Copenhagen School Replies." *Review of international studies* 23, no. 2 (1997): 241-50.

[19] Ibid.

[20]Wæver, Ole, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup, and Pierre Lemaitre. "Identity Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe." (1993), 23.

Since 1991, the Kurdish language, culture, and values have been dominant in the KRG proper (Duhok, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah provinces), and *kurdayeti,* as expressed by the Kurdish nationalist parties, the KDP and the PUK, became the defining identity of Kurdistan as a political entity. *Kurdayeti* is not only linked with culture and language, but land. In addition to the governorates that currently comprise the KRG proper, Kurds consider the disputed territories of Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah ad Din and Ninewa provinces territories to be integral to Kurdish national identity[21]. The "return" of these lands to Kurdistan and the reversal of the demographic changes caused by Arabization, and the influx of Arab internally displaced persons is viewed by many Kurds as a sacred duty.

Returning the disputed territories to the Kurdistan Region has not only brought *kurdayeti* into conflict with the IFG, but with other competing ethno-religious identities such as Sunni Arabs, Turkmans, Yazidis, Shabaks, Chaldeans and Assyrians. These groups also link the occupation of this territory with their own national identities. To mitigate this conflict, the KRG has attempted to construct a Kurdistani civic identity alongside *kurdayeti* in order to accommodate these minorities. However, the KRG unofficially but actively pursues a policy of forcibly evicting non-Kurdish inhabitants from their homes and villages in the disputed territories[22], or refusing to grant IDPs access to their homes after liberation from ISIS[23]. Therefore, while KRG elites insist that the upcoming vote on independence will be a *Kurdistani* as opposed to a Kurdish—meaning, based on the administrative borders and not the ethnic group—vote, the chauvinistic and patronizing tone of Kurdish nationalist attitudes toward minorities, which has hit a crescendo since the announcement of the referendum,[24] has led many to oppose the vote. Moreover, some minority groups have rejected *kurdistaniyeti* in itself as disingenuous, and as a pretense for the "Kurdification" of the disputed territories. To preserve and defend their

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[21]Ferris, Elizabeth, and Kimberly Stoltz. "The Future of Kirkuk: The Referendum and Its Potential Impact on Displacement." *The Brookings Institution* 3 (2008). https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0303_iraq_ferris.pdf

[22]"Banished and Dispossessed: Forced Displacement and Deliberate Destruction in Northern Iraq." London: Amnesty International, 2016.

[23]IOM-Iraq. "Obstacles to Return in Retaken Areas of Iraq." Baghdad: International Organization for Migration, 2017.

[24]Connelly, Megan, and Matthew Barber. "Resolving Article 140: Settling the Issue of Iraq's Disputed Territories Ahead of an Independence Referendum on Kurdistan." *Syria Comment* (2017). Published electronically July 13, 2017. http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/resolving-article-140-settling-issue-iraqs-disputed-territories-ahead-independence-referendum-kurdistan/.

communities against assimilation or forced expulsion, members of Turkman[25], Yazidi, Sunni Arab and Christian communities have joined the PMUs or established their own militias[26].

Even within the Kurdish community, there is conflict between national and partisan identities and *kurdayeti* is often secondary to partisanship. Both the KDP and PUK claim to espouse *kurdayeti* and a mandate to govern derived from their participation in the armed struggle for national liberation from the Ba'ath regime. Yet, while there remains no discernible ideological difference between the KDP and the PUK, and they have, in the past ten years, benefitted from sharing political power in the Region, they also resist the "nationalization", or integration of their *jamawer.* The development of a cohesive Kurdish civic identity buttressed by unified, consolidated central institutions would require the KDP and PUK to relinquish exclusive control over the administrative and security apparatuses within their territorial zones, but neither one trusts the other not to defect.

Thus, both the KDP and PUK link their security to a reinforcement of divisions between their *jamawer.* These divisions are reinforced by

1) preserving the civil war-era geographical divisions
2) sanctifying party leaders and martyrs
3) inducing loyalty through patronage, or
4) inducing loyalty through coercion,
5) the dehumanization of their counterpart's *jamawer*, and
6) ritualizing the remembrance of alleged crimes committed by the other party against their *jamawer* and the Kurdish liberation movement.

In other words, the parties deepen the cleavage by incentivizing and glorifying fidelity while securitizing their political counterparts and coalition partners. Yet, by fortifying these partisan cleavages, the KDP and PUK defend their power-sharing arrangement as the only way to ensure that civil war will not recur and that neither party will again threaten the existence of the other.

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[25]"NRT Prchekkrdni 400 Kes Le Layen Turkiyawe Berei Turkman Le Kerkuk Ashkradekat." *NRT* (2017). http://www.nrttv.com/Details.aspx?Jimare=77793.

[26]Barber, Matthew. "The End of the PKK in Sinjar? How the Hashd Al-Sha'bi Can Help Resolve the Yazidi Genocide." *Syria Comment* (2017). Published electronically May 30, 2017. http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/end-pkk-sinjar-hashd-al-shabi-can-help-resolve-yazidi-genocide/.

Human Security

Within the human security paradigm of security studies, it is the individual rather than the state or the group which is the referent object of "security". Definitions of human security vary, but it can generally be understood as the wellbeing of individuals, which may encompass an individual's economic, food, health, environmental, personal and political security[27]. KRG representatives abroad have been successful in disseminating the impression that their government provides a high standard of living, security and freedom for its citizens and promotes gender and religious equality. However, despite the rapid development of the KRG's capacity to engage diplomatically with the international community, its security apparatuses, and the KDP and PUK's patronage networks in the past decade, human security has been neglected, coming second to state or party security. This has resulted in a lack of confidence in the political leadership and created the conditions under which the political opposition to the KDP-PUK duopoly has been able to mobilize supporters behind the banner of individual participation, economic reform and wage security.

Kurdish political elites use patronage and the provision of benefits such as salaries and pensions to ideologically homogenize and control their *jamawer* rather than to provide social welfare. Together, the KDP and PUK spend approximately 50% of the KRG budget on pensions and transfer payments, but only 20% of poor KRG citizens receive pensions while 85% of pension recipients are non-poor[28]. Corruption and patronage fed on a steady diet of oil rents has led to systemic political and financial instability, as well as infrastructural weakness. The failure of the KRG to invest in the expansion and maintenance of infrastructure and services has meant that power plants, refineries, dams, schools and hospitals have deteriorated and/or they have not had the capacity to meet the demands of the Region's rapidly growing urban centers. The Region's major cities receive an average of eight hours of electricity per day and face drinking water shortages. The KRG healthcare system is inaccessible to many due to the high costs of treatment and the poor quality of care is infamous.

Regional inequality concerning wages, food, and general economic security is prolific and the impact of the recent financial crises has been most pronounced in Sulaimaniyah. Sulaimaniyah receives less public investment than the KDP-controlled governorates of Erbil and Duhok. The average household income in the governorate is approximately 20% below Duhok and Erbil's, and 45% of Sulaimaniyah residents rely on government assistance for food, compared with only

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[27]Gee, David, Judith Large, and Celia McKeon. "Rethinking Security: A Discussion Paper." Ammerdown Group, 2016.
    https://rethinkingsecurityorguk.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/rethinking-security-a-discussion-paper.pdf
[28]Kulaksiz, Sibel; Goonesekere, Rapti, et al. . "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq - Reforming the Economy for Shared
    Prosperity and Potecting the Vulnerable (Vol. 2) : Main Report." The World Bank, 2016.

20% in Erbil[29]. Furthermore, Erbil and Duhok together receive 99% of the KRG's total foreign investment[30]. Meanwhile Sulaimaniyah suffers from low access to employment in support industries, entrepreneurial opportunities, and infrastructure improvement projects that accompany foreign investment. Because the geographic areas of economic insecurity closely correspond with PUK party dominance, regional inequality supports the PUK's securitization of the KDP, which it accuses of hoarding the region's oil wealth and designing economic policies to penalize Sulaimaniyah. However, many Sulaimaniyah residents also blame the PUK for being complicit in squandering public revenues. It is no surprise, therefore, that Gorran, a reform party that prioritized social welfare, was able to halve PUK support in Sulaimaniyah in 2009, and, in 2014, threatened to alter the balance of power in the government by becoming a partner in the governing coalition through an agreement with the KDP.

The emergence of Gorran signified not only a political change, but also a societal change, rejecting the prioritization of ethnic or partisan identity over the development of a "nationalized" civil society based on individual agency and participation. The vehicles of this transformation would be central institutions and a liberal democratic system in which the Parliament represented the source of sovereignty rather than the Presidency or the politburos. In 2014, Gorran acquired key posts in the KRG's governing coalition, including the Parliament Speakership, and became the second largest bloc in Parliament.

In late 2014, policies designed to make Kurdistan economically self-sufficient by exporting oil independently and granting investor-friendly contracts to international energy firms failed in conjunction with the collapse in oil prices and the flight of investors. This resulted in a government inability to distribute salaries and pensions for months, casuing widespread panic, deprivation and unrest, which included deadly riots in the Sulaimaniyah province in October 2015. The KDP condemned Gorran as the source of the unrest and as an existential threat to Kurdish societal and national security. In October 2015, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani dissolved Parliament and expelled the Gorran Ministers on the pretext that, according to Masoud Barzani, Gorran was planning a *coup d'état* against the Presidency[31]. With the KRG purged of the only leaders that could be held directly accountable to the citizens of Kurdistan, the KDP and PUK politburos were free to jointly implement austerity measures to reduce the budget short fall. They cut salaries between 15% to 75% across the board, leaving many without enough income for sustenance. Particularly in Sulaimaniyah, popular disillusionment with the KRG's political elites has dampened enthusiasm for independence. Many regard the

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[29]UNDP. "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Hosting Communities across the Kurdistan Region." UNDP, 2015.https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/document/multi-sector-needs-assessment-hosting-communities-across-kurdistan-region

[30]Abdalla, Bayar Omer. *Na'adaleti Jugrafi U Çaraserkrdni Leser Asti Siasi U Aburi Le Herêmi Kurdistan*. Sulaimaniyah: Gorran zhuri twezhinewei siyasi, 2016.

[31]NRT. "Barzani: Peyami Khelki Kurdistanman Geyande Dostekanman Le Beljika." 2017.

parties' (particularly the KDP's) obsession with increasing the KRG's autonomy and achieving independence as a distraction from deeper economic and human security issues.

In the disputed territories, human security is even more volatile for ethno-religious minorities, many of whom are internally displaced from other parts of Iraq, or have fled from Syria. The KRG and IFG both shirk their responsibilities to provide services to the disputed areas of Diyala, Kirkuk and Ninewa provinces, each waiting for the other to pick up the tab[32]. Due to security concerns, minorities in these areas have been placed under particular scrutiny. They face additional hardships in accessing services and sustenance. KDP-controlled areas in Shingal faced a blockade that severely restricted the transportation of food, medical supplies and building materials into the area[33]. Yazidi families in Shingal are subject to forced eviction from their homes because of connections to the PMUs. The United Nations[34], Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch have also documented the PUK's policy of destroying Arab homes or refusing the return of Arab IDPs into liberated areas of Diyala and Kirkuk provinces.

Synthesizing State, Societal, and Human Security

Ahead of the independence referendum, Kurdistan's current political discourse has been shaped by the symbiotic interaction between state, societal and human security dimensions. The KRG's leadership regards state security as linked to the acquisition of external sovereignty and independence from the IFG. However, in pursuit of external sovereignty, the KRG has forsaken the development of centralized institutions, the accommodation of minority ethno-religious groups, the provision of goods and services for its citizens, and the reconciliation of intersecting Kurdish national, partisan and civic identities.

The KRG's pursuit of sovereignty is obstructed not only by its status as a subnational region of the IFG, but also by the KRG's lack of centralized institutions holding the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. There are many examples of polarized, consociational states that have acquired legitimacy by accommodating multiple cultural, ethnic, religious and partisan identities through power-sharing or federal schemes like in Switzerland, or states in in which such arrangements laid the foundation for the development of a more cohesive civic nationalism as is the case of the Netherlands and Austria. However, unlike in other examples of regimes

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[32] "Not Our Problem: Iraq's Officials Deny Responsibility in Disputed Areas." *Niqash* (2017). Published electronically June 8, 2017. http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5592/.
[33]"Iraq: Krg Restrictions Harm Yezidi Recovery." Beirut: Human Rights Watch, 2016.
https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/04/iraq-krg-restrictions-harm-yezidi-recovery
[34]IOM-Iraq. "Obstacles to Return in Retaken Areas of Iraq." Baghdad: International Organization for Migration, 2017.

that institutionalized the "self-conscious union of oppositions"[35] the KDP and the PUK, not the KRG, each exclusively control the legitimate use of violence within their territorial enclaves. This has obstructed the KRG's institutional and social integration, and rendered it almost impossible because the parties have effectively institutionalized a security dilemma. 24% of KRG citizens are employed by either the KDP or PUK security forces[36]. This indicates that militarization is not only a state security issue, but is also deeply entrenched in society, and linked with wage security. Moreover, the security dilemma and clientelism, rather than good governance, justify the parties' claims to legitimacy. The KDP and PUK must thus perpetuate these factors in order to cling to power in the KRG. The parties' default on their patronage obligations to their *jamawer* has created an aperture for individual agency to develop out of popular cynicism toward the political system. However, the parties' deployment of force to quell dissent has so far prevented the organization of a viable alternative to the KDP and PUK.

The KRG has not only proven unable to forge a cohesive vision of *kurdayeti* backed by cohesive institutions, but has also failed to credibly communicate an interest in accommodating non-Kurdish ethnic groups as equal participants in Kurdistani society. This has resulted in feelings of insecurity, for both ethnic minority groups and Kurds in the disputed territories. The KRG's aggressive campaign to galvanize Kurdish support for the referendum provokes the escalation of ethno-nationalist disputes between Kurds and Turkman, Sunni Arabs and Yazidis, and the securitization of *kurdayeti* by these groups.

Kurdish authorities have perceived the attainment of sovereignty and independence as the only way to ensure the Kurds', and the KRG's, security from external threats. Yet the prioritization of external sovereignty over central institution building, infrastructure development, and economic reform have adversely affected human security in the Kurdistan Region and the disputed territories claimed by the KRG. At the very least, the referendum on independence will distract lawmakers from the urgent work of formulating legislative and economic solutions to the KRG's severe economic crisis. In the worst-case scenario, it will exacerbate the pain of a population already suffering from wage austerity if the Iraqi federal government, Iran, or Turkey retaliate through sanctions or military action.

Nevertheless, President Masoud Barzani neatly summarized the idea that KRG elites have scheduled the referendum through his cavalier assertion to Foreign Policy that the Kurds would

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[35]Dahl, Robert Alan. "Political Opposition in Western Democracies." In *Comparative Government*, 149-151: Springer, 1969.

[36]Kulaksiz, Sibel; Goonesekere, Rapti, et al. . "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq - Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Potecting the Vulnerable (Vol. 2) : Main Report." The World Bank, 2016.

"prefer to die of starvation than live under the occupation of others"[37]. This is probably unlikely, however. According to a poll cited by Hemin Hawrami, Chief Advisor to the acting KRG President, the referendum was projected to receive only 67% approval, far below the 98% that voted "yes" in the 2005 poll[38]. This indicates that a growing population of KRG citizens prioritizes human security over state and societal security. The effects of human insecurity, such as civil unrest and insurrection, have the potential to become more destabilizing and could potentially lead to the erosion of state security as well. Therefore, while the vast majority of Kurds still agree that Kurdistan should be independent, many now agree that territorial and societal security, guaranteed by independence, will require more than internal or external legitimacy. A willingness on the part of political elites to serve human security through good governance is also required[39].

Finally, the KRG's coalition partners and investors, particularly the United States, must acknowledge that the KRG's internal instability is at least partly a consequence of investment and aid policies that incentivize militarization and rent seeking. This has discouraged institution building and policies that improve government efficiency and human security. Military aid to the KRG, while necessary to sustain a robust effort to defeat ISIS, should be conditioned upon the development of central institutions in the KRG, the peaceful transfer of executive power, the reactivation of the KRG Parliament, and the full integration of KRG security forces. While the coalition has prioritized short-term expediency over long-term stability, a divided KRG is at risk of exploitation by Tehran and Ankara.

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[37]MacDiarmaid, Campbell. "Masoud Barzani: Why It's Time for Kurdish Independence." *Foreign Policy* (2017). Published electronically June 15, 2017. http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/15/masoud-barzani-why-its-time-for-kurdish-independence/.

[38]Peymangay Nawin Enjami Raprsi Le Barei Gsht Prsi Herêmi Kurdistan Rageyand." (2017). Published electronically August 3, 2017. http://nawen.org/ku/2017/08/03/nawen-raprsi/

[39]Yasin, Burhan; Aziz, Sardar. *Dewleti Sebexoi Kurdistan: Le Nawewe Bunyadnan, Le Derewe Danpyanan*. Sulaimaniyah: Chapkhanei Dler, 2017, 123.