Independence Referendums and Nationalist Rhetoric: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Dylan O'Driscoll and Baher Baser

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Dylan O'Driscoll[a] (iD) and Bahar Baser[b] (iD)

[a]Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), LSE Middle East Centre, London, UK; [b]Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University & Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA), Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Using the case study of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and the 2017 independence referendum, this article examines the nexus between independence referendums, nationalism and political power. It argues that the referendum in the KRI was held due to internal political competition and growing rebellion from the population against the poor economic performance and political situation rather than because the time was right for independence referendum. Focusing on the poor political and financial dynamics, as well as the lack of regional and international support for Kurdish independence, the article argues that independence was not a realistic goal and was rather used as a distraction amid internal turmoil. The example of the referendum in the KRI poses questions about the democratic credibility of such referenda, as the population were voting for an unachievable result and the referendum itself became a tool of internal political competition.

Introduction

Many conflicts worldwide are attributed to demands for self-determination. The struggle between different forces that try to maintain or break up multi-national states is a growing phenomenon.[1] Iraqi Kurds are one of those groups that have been struggling for autonomy and subsequent self-determination for decades and in September 2017 they held a referendum for independence. This article is interested in the connections between the independence referendum, power and nationalism, and it is particularly the process that links all these that this article aims to examine. Although it acknowledges people's right to self-determination, it argues that the Kurdish independence referendum, and the rally around the flag rhetoric that came with it, was used by elites to maintain power despite the unlikelihood of independence. Ethnic nationalism was utilised as a tool, in what Breuilly calls state nationalism, for elites to gain more power.[2]

This is not a new phenomenon, elites have long used nationalism for gaining and maintaining power. However, the dual use of referendums and nationalism towards such a gain

slowed down after the downfall of USSR and it can be said that the case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Catalonia demonstrate a re-emergence of this practice.[3] Both referendums led to similar outcomes and became important examples of unsuccessful referendums in contemporary politics. They show that secessionist processes should not be taken for granted as citizen-led initiatives and it can be the political elites themselves who trigger and drive a secessionist process forward.[4] In both cases, referendums were unilaterally declared by the secessionist political elites, the processes were more top-down than bottom-up and the central governments declared them illegal. Moreover, in both cases the economic crises, high polarisation and the eventual collapse of the party system played a big role in perpetuating the independence bid. Similarly to the case of KRI, the independence referendum in Catalonia was not a response to people's demands but an elite-driven initiative which was politically motivated in order to increase political elite's bargaining power against the central government.[5]

On 7 June 2017, the *de facto* president of the KRI, Masoud Barzani, announced that a referendum for the KRI's independence (including Kirkuk and other disputed territories) would take place on 25 September 2017. The result was overwhelmingly in favour of independence with just under 93% voting yes. The voter turnout was 72% and around 7% voted no.[6] However, it is important to note that the referendum was not called for by the parliament, but by Barzani himself.[7] Moreover, initially it had little political support outside the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), as other parties saw it as a move by the KDP and Barzani himself to consolidate power and regain legitimacy in the midst of the political and economic crises. Nonetheless, the parliament, which had been closed since October 2015, reconvened 10 days before the referendum and approved it. The approval was mainly due to the time the KDP had to campaign for the referendum between its announcement and the parliament's reactivation, as the nationalist rhetoric they continuously utilised over that period created a sense that it would be unpatriotic for other parties to reject it. However, Gorran (Change), the Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal) and a small faction within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) boycotted the vote – with the nationalist rhetoric making it difficult to vote against and easier not to vote at all. Although the vote in favour of independence in the referendum was 92.7%, the results outside of the KDP-controlled provinces of Erbil and Duhok tell a different story. In Sulaymaniyah province, 80% voted in favour, but turnout was just over 50%; in Halabja province, turnout was just over 54%.[8] In non-Kurdish neighbourhoods in the disputed city of Kirkuk, 'the vote barely exceeded 30%'.[9]

The Iraqi Prime Minister at the time, Haider al-Abadi, declared the referendum 'unconstitutional' while the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) constantly tried to underline that it was the Kurds' legal and constitutional right to declare their will for independence.[10] Following the referendum, the Iraqi parliament voted in favour of sending troops to the disputed territories, along with a host of sanctions against the KRI.[11] Turkey and Iran widely condemned the referendum, carried out joint military drills on the border with the KRI, and made a number of threats against the KRI – including ceasing the export of oil. The inclusion of the disputed territories, particularly Kirkuk, in the vote was the main concern for Baghdad (and to a certain extent for Iran and Turkey) and prior to the vote the Iraqi parliament voted in favour of removing the Kirkuki Governor. There was a clear escalation of tensions with Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran on the one side, Erbil on the other, and Kirkuk stuck in the middle. As a result of the referendum, the KRI found itself in its weakest position since 1991 and Kurdish dreams of imminent independence vanished.[12] Rather than constituting a united

front, the KDP and the PUK seemed extremely divided and the consequences of the referendum showed that the KRG lacked a 'unified leadership and military command' and according to Jongerden it is the 'the failure to act like a state' that 'caused defeat'.[13] Similar to the case of Catalonia, the referendum process 'ruined the existing autonomy, but it was not able to impose an alternative formula'.[14]

This article aims at better understanding the use of nationalist rhetoric before and after the referendum. It analyses the motivations behind the referendum – underlining the economic and political situation of the KRI and the lack of international recognition. The article argues that the political use of nationalistic rhetoric by the elites is a key to understand the mindset of the Kurdish politicians and the current political fragmentations in the KRI. It will first give a historical understanding of the Kurdish desire for independence in order to connect this to the recent process. It will then examine nationalism, particularly its use to maintain power. Following this, the article will analyse the issues that led to the political need for the referendum in order to demonstrate that it was about power rather than independence. Finally, the article will conclude by connecting all these themes to illustrate how nationalism, independence referendums and power all link together.

Kurdish quest for statehood

At the end of the First World War, the Treaty of Lausanne determined the fate of Kurds in the Middle East.[15] Kurdistan was divided among four different states (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) and Kurdish ethnic identity was suppressed as part of these states' nation building practices. In Iraq, there have been some periods of stability and cold peace between ethnic and religious communities confined within its borders, however there has always been conflict and tension – albeit contingent to alliances – between Arabs and Kurds for hegemony and sovereignty. [16] Since the formation of the state of Iraq in 1920 until 2003, the Kurds have repeatedly rebelled against the central government for freedom and self-determination, with the response often being more oppression and violence from Baghdad in an attempt to prevent Kurdish statehood and the resultant dismantling of the Iraqi state.[17]

The Kurds started fighting the central government of Iraq at the beginning of the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Iraqi government destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians.[18] Around the end of the 1960s, when the Ba'ath party regained power, the central government followed a divide-and-rule strategy and supported Kurdish factions against one another. Similarly, in the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s, both Iran and Iraq played the internal rivalries between Kurdish movements against each other. However, in the end the Kurds found themselves fighting on the Iranian side, which made the Saddam regime all the more adamant to suppress, or if possible exterminate, any Kurdish movement that could pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state.[19]

Post-1991 Iraq and the Kurds

At the end of the First Gulf War, Kurdish political movements unsuccessfully rebelled against the Iraqi state. As a result, many Kurds had to flee the Iraqi Army and more than a million Kurds fled towards Turkey and Iran. In 1991, no fly zones imposed upon the Saddam regime provided safe havens for the Kurds.[20] United under the banner of the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF), the Kurds established the KRG in 1992 after elections in May. Later the two governing

parties, the KDP led by Masoud Barzani and the PUK, led by Jalal Talabani, achieved a *de facto* state by forming a regional government. This autonomous region had territorial control over the borders of KRI, had its own foreign relations agenda with other countries, and since 1992 Iraqi Kurds have managed to develop institutions that embraced legislative, executive and judicial functions. This could be interpreted as the beginning of a substantial state-building process.

Kurdish nationalism before the 1990s was a reaction to policies of oppression, which included Arabisation, assimilation, denial of Kurdishness as a separate identity and ethnic cleansing.[21] However, having a common enemy did not necessarily unite Kurdish factions into a single movement. The KDP and PUK were in conflict since their formal split in 1975, sometimes even turning violent.[22] Between 1994 and 1998, there were clashes between the parties for the control the Kurdish territories, which resulted in a stalemate. France and later the US tried to act as third-party mediators between the two. However, in 1996, the KDP under Barzani's rule united forces with the Saddam regime against the PUK and pushed them towards the Iranian border. The PUK then organised a counter-attack and got back some of the lost territories, but not the capital, Erbil. On a societal level, during the civil war, Kurdish civilians were compelled to declare their loyalty to one or the other party and some were even tortured, kidnapped or killed because of accusations of disloyalty. It is claimed that until the US-brokered peace treaty between the two parties, more than 2000 Kurds were killed in the civil war.[23]

The fighting between the two parties was exacerbated by the interference of Baghdad and neighbouring states, but finally came to an end, largely due to US involvement when Talabani and Barzani signed a peace deal in Washington DC in 1998. Two one-party statelets were formed under the KDP (Erbil and Dohuk) and PUK (Sulaymaniyah and Garmian), with these statelets divided by checkpoints staffed by Peshmerga forces loyal to the KDP and PUK.[24] Both sides created competing sets of government and military institutions, revealing the fragmentation among Kurdish political parties. At the same time, between 1996 and 2003, the KRI enjoyed the benefits of the UN sponsored Oil-For-Food Programme (OFFP) where 13% of Iraq's oil revenue was directed to the KRI.[25] This was a crucial development considering the fact that for the first time an international organisation such as the UN recognised the separate existence of a Kurdish reality.[26] The peace agreement between the Kurdish parties and the OFFP made the post-2003 autonomous KRI possible. The KRI's economy boomed (due to high oil prices) and foreign investments increased significantly after 2003. The international support and the incoming rents brought these parties together and paved the way for a contingent alliance.[27]

The Kurds in post-2003 Iraq

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 completely changed the course of history for the KRI. The KDP and PUK became allies with the US and the UK in overthrowing the regime.[28] The new situation engendered significant political opportunities for the Kurds to rule themselves.[29] The 2005 Iraqi constitution granted autonomy to the KRI, which meant it could enjoy a high degree of international sovereignty and could have its own parliament, armed forces and government.[30] Until very recently, the Kurdish leadership managed to keep the KRI stable and prosperous.[31] This was mostly due to the liberalisation and opening of petroleum fields that had brought new public and private partnerships to the KRI through

production sharing agreements.[32] It helped the KRG to appear as a strong non-state actor that was both politically and economically stable. In other words, the KRI was portrayed as the 'other Iraq'.[33] Many countries opened official representations in the KRI, international flights connected businessmen to investment projects and some even referred to KRI as the 'next Dubai'.[34] The KRG has also invested immensely in paradiplomacy efforts while brokering business deals with big oil companies. It has opened representations all around the world and its economic growth and functioning political system legitimised its presence to the international community.

While ascending as an important actor in Middle Eastern politics, the KRG has still suffered from old wounds. The rivalry between the two political parties remained constant; for instance, both parties did not sign the KRG unification agreement until 2006 and only in 2012 were all government ministries united. Moreover, political differences have prevented the KRG draft constitution from being put to a referendum.[35] Most importantly, the two party military forces are far from being united. Although Kurdish nationalism does exist, the lack of collaboration on certain grounds and the fragility of initiatives that have tried to merge military institutions demonstrate that there are competing Kurdish nationalisms due to varying party loyalties.[36]

Since 2003, independence was always on the agenda; a significant level of progress has been achieved with regards to the recognition of the KRI's political and economic legitimacy in the international arena. Kurds, especially those in exile, perceived the post-war period as the time to declare Kurdish independence. By 2004, 1.7 million signatures were gathered through a petition that asked the KRG to declare independence. Pro-independence rallies were organised both in the KRI and in the diaspora.[37] Due to the KRG's reluctance, Kurdish activists staged an unofficial referendum for independence in Iraqi Kurdistan concurrent with the Iraqi National Assembly election in 2005. It was organised by the Kurdistan Referendum Movement (KRM) and the results showed that 98% of the people who voted wanted an independent Kurdistan.[38] Both the KDP and PUK rejected the referendum results and declared their commitment to a unified Iraq.[39] This showed that, at that time, Kurdish authorities cared more about international support than galvanising nationalist feelings.

However, more recently, one of the constant elements of the Kurdish politicians' independence rhetoric is their strained relations with the central government and their view of Iraq as a failed state. The KRG has blamed Baghdad of constantly violating the constitution and the power-sharing system.[40] Their main complaints revolve around budgetary allocations, payment of the Peshmerga and resolving the constitutional status of Kirkuk. These grievances particularly came to the fore under Nouri al-Maliki's second term as Prime Minister in 2010–2014. Maliki did his utmost to limit the power of both Kurds and Sunnis and worked to further centralise governance and amassed greater controls and power. His authoritarian actions – ranging from occupying several important government positions simultaneously to getting rivals arrested – led to both Kurds and Sunnis actively seeking more autonomy in order to protect themselves. The KRG thus began exporting its own oil and developing its own hydrocarbon export infrastructure, which resulted in Baghdad ceasing to pay Kurds their 17% of the national budget. Ironically the failure of Maliki's centralisation campaign actually led to the Kurds gaining more autonomy than they initially had or sought.[41] This is an important factor, as it is often argued that the granting of autonomy leads to the call for more autonomy and even secession.[42] However, in the case of Iraq it can be argued that the centralisation project under Maliki and the denial of constitutionally-granted autonomy has

been instrumental in processes that led to the Kurds gaining more autonomy and seeking secession from Iraq.[43] Despite promises and attempts of improving relations from Haider al-Abadi when he came to power in 2014, tensions brought to the fore by Maliki remained and, to a certain extent, legitimised the 2017 independence referendum, as Kurds could once again demonstrate the unconstitutional actions of the Iraqi state against them. However, certain conditions are needed to take such a huge risk, as few secession cases in political history have been non-violent.

Democratisation, state nationalism and independence

Unrecognised states carry out processes of democratisation in order to gain support and recognition for their independence.[44] However, there is a competition between the democratisation process and the need to maintain unity in order to gain independence. Since 2003 the KRG has carried out a number of democratisation processes, nonetheless, the aim of maintaining unity and the political hegemony of the KDP and PUK has resulted in democratisation stagnating. As a direct result Gorran emerged, through a split in the PUK in 2009, with a manifesto of tackling corruption and the nepotistic political system.[45] Although Gorran poses a challenge the PUK and KDP with regards to seats in the parliament, both the military and governmental institutions remain dominated by the PUK and KDP due to party loyalties in these institutions. Although undemocratic actions, such as shutting out political opposition, were used to maintain unity in the KRI, financial and political pressure grew to the extent that these actions were not enough and the power of the traditional Kurdish elites was threatened. With the growing political turmoil in the KRI and the protests against the KDP, further tools were needed in order to maintain both power and unity. Thus, we argue that one of the reasons behind this 'untimely' referendum was that Barzani and the KDP utilised the Kurdish desire for independence to consolidate power that was under threat – despite, as discussed later, the timing being far from ideal.[46] However, it is important to note that Kurdish aspirations for independence are the accumulation of years of struggle and resistance against the Iraqi state's policies towards Kurds and the Barzani family has fought for Kurdish rights for decades. Nonetheless, the aim behind the utilisation of the nationalist rhetoric before the referendum was to unify Kurdish nationalism behind Barzani and break the system of competing Kurdish nationalisms with the purpose of maintaining power - which alongside an understanding of state nationalism will be discussed next.

As this article speaks to the formation of nations through nationalism, the modernist paradigm, and its argument that nationalism produced nations, is the most relevant. In the modernist paradigm of nationalism, nationalism is seen as a product of modernity that emerged due to sociological changes during the French Revolution. For scholars such as Gellner the transition to an industrial society is important as its need for educated workers led to compulsory schooling, which helped to unify and culturally homogenise the population, changing the human condition and creating nationalism.[47] Although Gellner puts forward why and how nationalism was created, he does not address how it is utilised by elites for power, which is important for this article. Hobsbawm, on the other hand, sees nationalism as being based on invented traditions, which are used by the ruling classes for social control. Thus, nations are socially engineered by elites to control the masses.[48] Whereas Anderson connects nationalism to capitalism and the establishment of the printing press, as this led to a standardisation of language and access to the masses which connected them

in an 'imagined community'.[49] What Hobsbawm and Anderson do not address, however, is how these elites use nationalism to gain and maintain power, which is particularly relevant in contemporary politics. For the Iraqi scholar Kedourie, nationalism is an ideology and a distinctively European concept born through the Enlightenment and based on Kantian ideas of self-determination, which was imported to Iraq (and elsewhere) and turned people who had previously lived peacefully together against each other. Whilst such postcolonial critique has its merits, Kedourie's analysis romanticises the Ottoman Empire (and other empires) and fails to acknowledge the emergence of nationalism within the Ottoman Empire that predates European interference. Although he does connect nationalism to elites and power, his focus on violence to achieve goals is not relevant in many contemporary uses of nationalism by elites, particularly those involving referendums.[50] For Connor, nationalism is a modern phenomenon, which is based on mass consciousness that developed in the late nineteenth century and is based on ethnic identity. However, for him, mass consciousness refers to the entire population and is particularly relevant in times of war. Whilst recognising the role of elites, the mass consciousness and ethnic identity focus of Connor's research detracts from the role they play in utilising nationalism for power, and it is in this regard that the work of Breuilly is particularly useful, as it brings these together.[51]

For Breuilly, 'nationalism is best understood as an especially appropriate form of political behavior in the context of the modern state and the modern state system'. Thus, for him, nationalism relates to the 'objectives of obtaining and using state power'.[52] Nationalism is used as a platform by elites to mobilise and coordinate towards their aims and legitimise their goals.[53] This article shares Breuilly's view of nationalism, however, it needs to be developed within the context of the KRI – where the dynamics of gaining and maintaining power exists within the federal region and within the Iraqi state, which is tied to the secessionist movement.

Breuilly mainly discusses nationalism with regards to political opposition to the state, as he sees the nationalist ideology as being 'central to its activity when in opposition' but diminishing when in power.[54] He argues that governmental nationalism is only 'a distinct subject when the links to an earlier nationalist opposition phase are especially evident or when the government conflicts with a national opposition claiming to speak for another nation'.[55] However, in the KRI both of these elements are the norm and nationalism is used both to gain and maintain power. The political rulers within the KRI use nationalism in order to maintain power within the KRI and gain power from Baghdad. Thus, the KDP forms both the ruling party in the KRI (with their own opposition) and the opposition in Baghdad with their desires to achieve independence. Thus, Kurdish nationalism is used to oppose the hegemonic system in Iraq and to maintain the hegemonic system in the KRI simultaneously.

In order to better understand how nationalism is utilised to both gain and maintain power, it is necessary to examine more encompassing definitions of the term, as Breuilly demonstrates the driver of nationalism but not what mobilises its followers. Smith defines nationalism as an 'ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential "nation"'.[56] Barrington defines nationalism as 'the pursuit – through argument or other activity – of a set of rights for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy or sovereignty'.[57] These definitions are useful insomuch as they help to understand the drivers of nationalism and, when paired with the definition of a nation, an understanding of the sentiments that elites draw upon in order to drive their supporters in

an attempt to gain power is created. For Smith, a nation is 'a named human community residing in a perceived homeland, and having common myths and a shared history, a distinct public culture, and common laws and customs for all members'.[58] Therefore, in state nationalism elites rally around these elements – particularly history, homeland and culture – in order to attract support to gain or maintain power within the current state, the formation of a new state, or within some level of territorial autonomy.

In the KRI Kurdish identity, history and the formation of a *Kurdish* state are constantly utilised by elites. Similarly, the campaigning for the referendum very much revolved around a Kurdish identity and the sentiment that Kurds had historically been denied their right to a nation state of their own. Yet, in the KRI nationalism exists on many levels, as elites try to use it to manoeuvre their particular group into a position of power. Rather than being used to promote unity, nationalism has constantly been used to portray who the true Kurd is, which promotes divisions. Thus, political and media discourse is used as a strategy for power, as identities and histories are constructed. If nationalism in the KRI is understood as involving multiple actors trying to gain and maintain power within the region and from Baghdad, having separate military wings – the two branches of the Peshmerga linked separately to the KDP and PUK directly – can aid this process and create distinctive divides amongst the population. When these two separate militaries are paired with the geographic separation of KDP and PUK territory and the competitive discourse of Kurdishness between the two parties, it becomes evident that two different forms of Kurdish nation-building have occurred simultaneously. Moreover, due to the history of civil war between these two parties and their military divisions, their continued separation prevents a unified Kurdish nationalism and enhances the prospects of the military being used to maintain power within the KRI. It also gives rise to internal security threats, instability and weakens the government. Posen closely links nationalist ideology with the mass army, therefore if there are rival military groups the core allegiances will be elsewhere.[59] In short, a significant issue for the Kurds in the KRI is that due to the PUK and KDP battling for power without a recognised state, two competing versions of social engineering towards a unified identity away from Iraq, in what Hobsbawm calls 'invented traditions', have been undertaken.[60] During the civil war particularly, two rival sets of traditions were formed by the elites in their quest for political power and thus unified post 2003 nation-(rather than state-)building has been hindered by these pre-existing competing nationalisms. This competition is further optimised in the geographically defined loyalty to two different military outfits. This has consequences for political priorities and within the Kurdish movement 'strategic organizational interests typically prevail over common ethnic identity'.[61]

Hutchinson argues that 'all nations, to a lesser or greater extent, contain plural ethnic repertoires that in the modern period become systemized into competing cultural and political projects'.[62] In the case of the KRI this has largely been between two main nationalist visions – the KDP with its traditionalist-conservative vision on the one hand and the PUK (including Gorran, which split from the PUK) and its loosely defined leftist-liberal vision on the other. Hutchinson goes on to argue that 'traumatic historical events may appear to "decide" in favour of a particular vision' and so far 'historical events' – also brought about by the particular actions carried out by the elites – have led to the KDP's vision dominating.[63] It is in that context that it can be argued that Barzani saw the referendum as the event that would lead to his vision becoming *the* hegemonic nationalist vision in the KRI, uniting Kurds behind him and delegitimising the vision offered by his political opposition from the PUK and Gorran.

Importantly, the media plays a crucial role in the construction of nations and spread of nationalisms and can create a distinctive community with its own national ideology amongst its audience. This is even more pronounced in the KRI where the main media outlets are owned by the main political parties, or even certain divisions within the party, and are often used to promote rival nationalisms and create disunity. This was particularly present in the run up to the referendum when the various media outlets became propaganda tools for the political parties' arguments of what was best for the 'nation'.[64] This further acts to demonstrate how nationalisms have been formed down tribal and party lines and thus have created the disunity that makes gaining independence extremely difficult. The next section demonstrates how nationalism has been used as a tool to maintain power.

Politics behind referendum

Qvortrup suggests that the number of referendums on national and ethnic issues have grown during the last couple of decades, especially in times of political upheaval.[65] Research shows that in democratic countries, secessionist referendums are usually unsuccessful while in undemocratic countries, voters tend to endorse independence.[66] Increasingly, referendums are used as a legitimisation tool by political elites and become bargaining chips in negotiations in post-conflict periods. Not all referendums succeed in achieving the favoured result of independence and not all referendums are conducted in a free and fair political environment. Moreover, in some cases, central governments might oppose the idea of holding referendums and they might even result in civil war and conflict.[67] According to Qvortrup, to win an independence referendum, the political elites might be able to appeal to the heartstrings but at the same time they need to show that they can count on the international community for their support to take the necessary steps towards secession. In cases where the central government does not support a referendum and where internal fragmentations are not dealt with, the outcome might exacerbate the conflict.[68] In the case of the KRI, most of the favourable conditions did not exist and the results affected the elite's bid for independence in a negative way.

In connecting the referendum specifically to the process of maintaining power, it is important to understand the politics behind it. Although there is no questioning that the Kurds, and the KDP leadership specifically, want independence, there are a number of issues that complicate the Kurdish referendum and pose questions about the motives behind it. First, the referendum was called by the *de facto* president of the KRI, rather than by the central government itself, or even the KRG parliament, which lays question over its legitimacy. Second, the referendum was not agreed by all parties and became part of the political battle within the KRI. Third, a referendum for independence was already held in 2005 and the population overwhelmingly voted for independence, thus questioning the need for another. Finally, questions can be raised whether the KRI is in a financial position to function as an independent state, or whether statehood is realistic without the support of at least one of its neighbours. Considering how external recognition is vital for statehood and for acceptance by the international society,[69] the KRG took a significant risk by holding the referendum without international support. Put together this suggests that reasons other than giving the Kurdish people a real chance to decide their destiny were central to the calling of the referendum – making it a political tool in internal competition for power. These issues will be addressed in this section to create a better understanding of the KRI independence

referendum and the politics behind it through linking nationalism, the referendum and maintaining power together.

Finances, neighbours and the international community

According to a report prepared by the Ministry of Planning, the KRI's economic situation in the early 2000s was remarkable:

> From the years 2003–2008, National Income increased from 4373 billion IQD to 35,665 billion IQD, an average growth rate of 46.6% at current prices. In the same period, the GDP increased from 2419 billion IQD to 24,725 billion IQD, an average growth rate of 68.9%. GDP per capita income increased from 0.524 million IQD to 4.754, an average growth rate of 64.3%.[70]

However, the KRI's economy experienced a rapid fall due to disputes with the central government over funds and oil exports as well as other developments in the Middle East such as the war against Islamic State (IS). For instance, GDP decelerated from 8% in 2013 to 3% in 2014 following the cut of fiscal transfers by Baghdad; in 2015, the poverty rate more than doubled from 3.5 to 8.1%.[71]

Moreover, the KRG employs 53–65% of the working population with a monthly public wage bill of between US$700–800 million. The economy of the KRI is based on oil selling for over US$100 a barrel, which is something that is unlikely to be achieved again. On top of this the KRI has amassed significant debts, of between US$19[72]–22[73] billion. It can be argued that the political elite is partly to blame for the severity of the financial crisis, as during the times of relative prosperity they did not diversify the economy or encourage the development of the private sector. In addition, corruption has not been adequately tackled and has been a major drain on the public coffers. As a result, the Kurdish population has been receiving significantly reduced salaries and is owed money backdating months. The political elite have attempted to shift blame for the poor state of the economy in the region to the war against IS and the resulting Internally Displaced People (IDPs). Although these have negatively impacted the economy, it is by no means at the level portrayed by the politicians. First, the KRG has received significant aid and financial assistance from the international community for their role in the war against IS, bringing down the total cost. Second, IDPs arrive in the KRI with their own money and still receive pensions and salaries from Baghdad, providing a welcomed influx of cash into the faltering economy. Finally, the war and resulting IDPs have led to a major increase in the operations of international NGOs in the KRI, which is paired with the influx of foreign currency.[74] Thus, the overall impact of these developments cannot account for the general poor performance of the economy.

With the KRG having issues paying salaries since 2014, a large section of the population has been under financial strain for some time. This strain eventually began to lead to some members of the population questioning the political establishment, especially as the perception was that the crisis was not affecting the rich. Thus, for the first time since the establishment of the KRI, grassroots members of the KDP were questioning the leadership and, with the precarious political position that Masoud Barzani was in, action was needed. As the financial crisis was not one that could be solved without capitulating to Baghdad on multiple issues in order to receive the 17% of the national budget, gaining support through rallying around the flag and a vision of independence, however unviable at this point in time, was chosen.

Closely linked to the financial crisis and the constraints this puts on potential independence is the lack of support from neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey and Iran. The KRI is landlocked, surrounded by Turkey, Iran, Syria and the rest of Iraq. The KRI is also far from self-sufficient and depends significantly on imports from Turkey and Iran in order to sustain its basic needs.[75] Moreover, the economy is extremely reliant on exporting oil through Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran. Therefore, the KRI needs at least one of its neighbours – preferably Turkey with the existing infrastructure to export the KRI's oil – to support its independence. However, prior to (and following) the referendum, Iran and Turkey made it very clear that they did not support the independence referendum and made countless threats, some which have been carried out, with regards to isolating the KRI if they conducted the referendum.[76]

The KRI did not have support for its push for independence from the international community. Its most trusted ally, the US, was not in favour of the referendum and tried to broker deals between the central government and the Kurdish government before the referendum took place. Another option would be gaining support from Baghdad and creating a strategic partnership in the case of independence; this would have given the referendum more legitimacy, similar to the referendum in Scotland, but would have meant that the Kurds would have to make serious concessions with regards to the disputed territories, mainly Kirkuk. However, due to the nationalist rhetoric surrounding independence, which often centred around Kirkuk, and the financial dependence that the KRI has on Kirkuk's oil exports, this was not a viable option for the elites behind the referendum project. In sum, the lack of finances and backing from neighbours means that the Kurds *currently* lack the capacity to form an independent state, however, following Moore's principles of self-determination, they have the capacity for collective self-determination within Iraq.[77] Again, this questions the feasibility of the referendum actually being able to deliver independence, and thus whether it was motivated by political goals of maintaining power rather than the goal of achieving independence.

Authors such as Kaplan also acknowledge that the decision to escalate Kurdish aspirations in 2017 was based on multiple factors that included the individual ambitions of the elites besides national and party level motivations.[78] However, Kaplan argues that one of the main reasons why the referendum was held despite the warning signs was that Barzani and the supporters of the independence referendum miscalculated the forthcoming foreign support and acted without foreseeing that the international community would not protect the status quo. In his words, 'even if groups [separatists] have perfect information on potential gains in foreign support, miscalculations over potential losses can also lead to risky gambles'.[79] External recognition is vital for statehood, and this is something the Kurds simply did not have.[80]

Political battle

Qvortrup argues that to:

> win a referendum, it is necessary to have a good and convincing rhetoric and a charismatic leader. But, as other referendums show, it is also necessary to be ruthless and use dirty tricks to win. Referendums are not exercises in civic engagement only, they are also bare-knuckle political battles.[81]

Indeed, the KRI's September 2017 referendum was a political battle, as much as it was a risky gamble that did not pay off.

Barzani's second term as President ended in 2013, however the parliament granted a two-year extension. Nonetheless, when this ended in 2015, the KDP once again tried to extend his term to the objection of Gorran.[82] As negotiations on the presidency faltered, sporadic protests calling for Barzani to resign ensued in Sulaymaniyah where KDP offices were attacked and five people were killed. The KDP blamed Gorran for these attacks and as a result they prevented the Speaker of the Parliament (Gorran) from entering Erbil, thus essentially leading to the suspension of the parliament. The KDP also excluded the five Gorran ministers in the cabinet. Since October 2015, Barzani has acted as President, despite his term having ended, and the KRI was governed without a parliament creating an unstable political situation.[83]

Political stalemate suited the KDP, as the status quo favoured them the most. However, in May 2016, Gorran and the PUK threatened the KDP's political dominance and the political order by reaching an agreement of partnership, which would likely result in them forming a joint list in elections. With their combined 42 seats (out of 111) as opposed to the KDP's 38, the alliance seriously jeopardised KDP's hegemony, which has existed since the 1990s.[84] Thus, with the dominant political position and nationalist vision of the KDP threatened by the alliance between Gorran and the PUK, and KDP's power base growing weary due to the strains of the financial crisis, action was needed to prevent the loss of power. In that sense, the referendum became a distraction and a project that would unite the people behind the KDP elite, helping the latter overcome the difficult situation in which it found itself.

Through launching the independence referendum themselves and not putting it to parliament till right at the end, Barzani and the KDP played their hand very well. The increased nationalist rhetoric, paired with the Kurdish history of oppression and desire for statehood, made it impossible for the KDP's political opposition to try to halt the referendum, as doing so would be seen as going against Kurdish nationalism which was in a heightened state. At the same time, they could not actively campaign for it, as this would only act to further legitimise Barzani as the leader of the Kurdish people and the architect of the Kurdish nationalist vision, so instead they were left doing much of nothing and were largely bystanders in the process. After Barzani declared that a referendum for independence would be held, other political parties such as Gorran and the Komal did not agree and protested. Gorran, for instance, boycotted the parliamentary meeting in September 2017, which was specifically convened to approve the decision to go for a referendum. Moreover, only around 60% of the MPs joined the meeting.[85] The PUK waivered in their support for or against the referendum and only one PUK faction, led by Kosrat Rasul, participated in the KDP referendum campaigns. Additionally, on 23 September 2017 a PUK delegation visited Barzani and requested he postpone the scheduled referendum and accept an alternative route to independence.[86]

That the referendum was called by Barzani, and not the parliament, is telling. This further takes away from the legitimacy of the referendum and makes it more about power than the cause of independence. If independence was truly the goal, and September 2017 was the perfect opportunity for it, then going through parliament would be the best way to achieve it. However, as parliament, or lack thereof, was where political power was being competed for, the populist route of gaining support through the KDP-aligned, and notoriously biased, media was chosen.

Rallying around the flag

With a catastrophic financial position, supporters becoming anxious and the KDP beginning to become politically isolated, for the first time real pressure was put on Barzani's leadership. Moreover, with the defeat of IS looming near, the distraction of war that had led to the avoidance of real inward scrutiny would no longer be there. More importantly, Barzani and the KDP had enjoyed a period of significant importance to the international community in the fight against IS and with IS' impending defeat this significance was likely to wane, as would their influence. Thus, Barzani began to talk seriously of a referendum on independence in early 2016. The Kurds' long held desire for independence has already been established, as has the fact that independence was unlikely to succeed under the current dynamics. Yet, by framing himself as the only person who could deliver independence, Barzani created a new distraction from the political and financial situation and pulled at the Kurdish population's heartstrings. Moreover, he attempted to break the two competing nationalist visions and unite Kurds behind him. As Barzani and the KDP increased the independence rhetoric, many of the population began to believe that independence was finally achievable and the strains of the financial and political situation were lightened.

Thus, Barzani used nationalism as a tool to maintain his power. He drew on the Kurds desire for an independent state and increased the rhetoric around shared suffering, historical grievances, the 'failed Iraqi state' and the right to form a nation-state. Despite the actual state of affairs, Barzani painted a picture for the population that now was the time they had been waiting for and only he could deliver independence. Nationalism was used to not only blind the population to their poor circumstances at the time, but also to cloud the fact that the dynamics were unfavourable for independence. The population largely followed and, even for those who did not support the KDP, the idea of statehood was capturing.

Returning to Qvortrup's argument on a successful independence referendum, although the KDP succeeded in appealing to the population's heartstrings, it failed in gaining the international community's support to take the necessary steps towards secession.[87] This failure comes despite the KRG being a key ally to the US, UK and EU, which can be explained by the recent trend highlighted by Caspersen that the international community values stability over democratisation.[88] Nonetheless, the referendum rhetoric increased and the population's expectations increased with it. Thus, Barzani's use of nationalist rhetoric became so successful that it no longer became possible to halt the referendum. Therefore, when the US offered a favourable deal to back UN-sanctioned one-year negotiations between the Kurds and Baghdad over outstanding issues and with the acceptance of a referendum for independence if these negotiations were not successful, it was impossible for Barzani to halt the referendum.[89] Moreover, open nationalism reached the stage where it became impossible for other parties not to back the referendum when it was clear it would go ahead, particularly with elections due, with some backings coming as late as the night before. The success of the nationalist rhetoric surrounding the referendum can be explained by Hutchinson's argument that conflicts over nationalist doctrines actually reinforce the nation by constantly reiterating that the nation does exist, thus although there were rival nationalisms in the KRI, the concept of the Kurdish nation remained strong and the idea of the referendum functioned as a glue that brought them together, even if only for the purpose of Barzani's political gains.[90] Consequently, Barzani successfully used nationalism to reverse the political tide and maintain power. Although he and the KDP did not manage to

successfully construct one single version of Kurdish nationalism, they have succeeded in forming the dominant one and thus amassing more power.

Conclusion

Referendums are seen as acts of democracy, however when the results are not actionable, and when they allow for other undemocratic actions to be implemented, their connection to democracy has to be questioned. This article has argued that the referendum for Kurdish independence in Iraq was not about gaining independence, but rather about power. Due to economic and political threats to the hegemonic political position, Barzani made a calculated risk to use ethnic nationalism and the long-held desire for independence as a political tool to maintain his power and gain more power from Baghdad. Despite the multiple factors going against independence at the time, Barzani gambled on it to avoid losing power due to rising political unrest and growing opposition. The use of state nationalism worked, in the short-term, but it is still too soon to understand the long-term repercussions of the referendum. Early signs point to a consolidation of power for the KDP, with simultaneously a loss of the *extent* of this power, as Baghdad has attempted to reinstate their control over the territory. Therefore, the referendum was not quite on the scale of Hutchinson's 'traumatic historic event' that would lead to the KDP's vision completely dominating, but it has furthered the KDP's dominance.

This article has demonstrated how referendums can be used in conjunction with nationalism in the process of gaining and maintaining power. The Kurdish case questions the democratic nature of the independence referendum, as democratic decision-making was not at the centre of the process: political power was. This produces a certain paradox: whilst the people who voted for independence were exercising their democratic rights, the very call for the referendum was motivated by undemocratic tendencies of the ruling faction that used the vote as a way to reinstate their hegemony. This puts forward interesting questions for motives of other independence referendums, with the most recent case being that of Catalonia. Although Barzani and the KDP have managed to consolidate power through the referendum and the parliamentary elections that followed, the Kurds are now further away from independence than they have been for some time, which brings into question the motives behind the referendum. Independence aside, one cannot deny the success of pairing the referendum with nationalist rhetoric in order to maintain and gain power, and it is in this that the KDP has succeeded.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Dylan O'Driscoll is a Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). He was previously a researcher at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI), University of Manchester. He has a PhD in Ethnopolitics from the University of Exeter, where his thesis examined the status of Kirkuk within the wider issues of conflict and governance in Iraq. O'Driscoll's research focuses on the links between nationalism and conflict at both an institutional and a local level. He has spent over two years living and conducting fieldwork in Iraq, with a particular focus on the disputed territories. He is currently a Conflict Research Fellow for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), as well as Associate at the LSE Middle East Centre.

Dr Bahar Baser is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Peace, Trust and Social Relations (Coventry University, UK). She is also an associate research fellow at the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA), Stellenbosch University, South Africa. She completed a PhD in Social and Political Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Prior to her PhD, Baser worked at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University in Sweden as a Junior Researcher on the 'Diasporas and Their Involvement in Peace Processes' project funded by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her book *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective* was published by Routledge in 2015. She also edited two volumes published by IB Tauris: *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey* (co-edited with Ahmet Erdi Ozturk) and *Migration from Turkey to Sweden: Integration, Belonging and Transnational Community* (co-edited with Paul Levin). She is the series editor for *Kurdish Societies, Politics and International Relations* published by Lexington Books.

Notes

1. Jeong, *Peace Building in Identity Driven Ethnopolitical Conflicts.*
2. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State.*
3. There is an overlap in the consequences of both these referenda, such as sanctions, lack of support from the international community and loss of already existing levels of autonomy.
4. Barrio and Field, "The Push for Independence."
5. Colomer, "The Venturous Bid," 950.
6. Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction," 46.
7. Strategic Comments Editorial Team. "Repercussions of the Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum."
8. Watts, "Most Kurds in Iraq Support Independence."
9. Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction," 46–7.
10. Hama and Jasim, "The Loss of Disputed Territories."
11. Following the referendum, arrest warrants were issued for the organisers and Baghdad took control of a significant amount of territory. Additionally, the central government imposed international flight bans on KRG controlled airports and took control of border posts, whilst banking and other economic sanctions were imposed and the KRG's federal budget was reduced; Strategic Comments Editorial Team. "Repercussions of the Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum."
12. Strategic Comments Editorial Team. "Repercussions of the Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum."
13. Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan," 68.
14. Colomer, "The Venturous Bid," 950.
15. Fawaz, *Opportunity, Identity, and Resources.*
16. Ibid.
17. Irwani, *Clientelism and Implementing Social Security*.
18. Berwari and Ambrosio, "The Kurdistan Referendum Movement."
19. Irwani, *Clientelism and Implementing Social Security.*
20. Fawaz, *Opportunity, Identity, and Resources.*
21. Ibid.

22. Jüde, "Contesting Borders?"
23. Irwani, *Clientelism and Implementing Social Security,* 5.
24. Leezenberg, "Iraqi Kurdistan."
25. Ibid., 631.
26. Irwani, *Clientelism and Implementing Social Security.*
27. Jüde, "Contesting Borders?"
28. Berwari and Ambrosio, "The Kurdistan Referendum Movement."
29. Natali, *Kürtler ve Devlet.*
30. Jüde, "Contesting Borders?"
31. Fawaz, *Opportunity, Identity, and Resources.*
32. Kuruuzum, "In Search of Futures."
33. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/03/kurds-northern-iraq-kurdistan-peshmerga-isis/
34. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/may/05/kurdistan-next-dubai-iraq
35. Jüde, "Contesting Borders?" 853.
36. Gunter, "Erdogan's Backsliding."
37. Berwari and Ambrosio, "The Kurdistan Referendum Movement," 896
38. In total, 1,998,061 people cast their vote and, in all provinces including Kirkuk, the 'yes' vote was more than 98%. Only 1.12% voted to stay in Iraq. In the 2017 independence referendum, 3,305,925 voters cast their vote. Therefore, the voter turnout was much higher compared to 2005.
39. Berwari and Ambrosio, "The Kurdistan Referendum Movement."
40. Hama and Jasim, "The Loss of Disputed Territories."
41. O'Driscoll, "Autonomy Impaired."
42. Roeder, "Where Nation-States Come from Institutional Change."
43. O'Driscoll, "Autonomy Impaired."
44. Voller, "Contested Sovereignty as an Opportunity."
45. Hama and Jasim, "The Loss of Disputed Territories."
46. Bengio argues that, since in 2017, certain conditions have changed and the KRG interpreted it as the right time to make such a move. Bengio asserts that these conditions are: the federal government fell apart, the central government appeared weakened by civil war and fighting against IS, and Trump became the President of the US. According to her, these new developments changed the balance of power in the Middle East in favour of the Kurds; Bengio, "Contextualizing the Kurdish National Project," 14.
47. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism.*
48. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions."
49. Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*
50. Kedourie, *Nationalism.*
51. Connor, "The Timelessness of Nations."
52. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 1.
53. Smith, *Nationalism.*
54. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 9.
55. Ibid., 9.
56. Smith, *Nationalism, 9.*
57. Barrington, "'Nation' and 'Nationalism,'" 714.
58. Smith, *Nationalism, 13.*
59. Posen, "Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power."
60. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions."
61. Tezcür, "A Century of the Kurdish Question," 5.
62. Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict*, 193.
63. Ibid., 109.
64. Chmaytelli, "Kurdish Parties opposed to Barzani."
65. Qvortrup, "The History of Ethno-National Referendums 1791–2011," 148.
66. Qvortrup, "Referendums on Independence," 63.

67.   Ibid., 64.
68.   Ibid., 60.
69.   Crawford, " Criteria for Statehood in International Law."
70.   http://www.mop.gov.krd/resources/MoP%20Files/PDF%20Files/gd_ps/regional_ development_strategy.pdf
71.   Manis, "Averting an Economic Meltdown in the KRI: Aligning Political Objectives with Economic Necessities."
72.   O'Driscoll, "The Day After."
73.   Natali, "The Kurdish Quasi-State," 153.
74.   O'Driscoll, "The Day After."
75.   Kirisci, "Turkey's 'Demonstrative Effect.'"
76.   Park, "Explaining Turkey's Reaction."
77.   Moore, *A Political Theory of Territory*.
78.   Kaplan, "Foreign Support," 35.
79.   Ibid., 30.
80.   Crawford, " Criteria for Statehood in International Law."
81.   Qvortrup, "New Development," 156.
82.   Strategic Comments Editorial Team. "Repercussions of the Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum."
83.   O'Driscoll, "The Day After."
84.   Salih, "Will Unity Deal Deepen Rivalries in Iraqi Kurdistan?"
85.   Park et al., "Field Notes," 202.
86.   Hama and Jasim, "The Loss of Disputed Territories," 59
87.   Qvortrup, "Referendums on Independence."
88.   Caspersen, "Democracy, Nationalism and (lack of) Sovereignty."
89.   Lake, "Tillerson Letters."
90.   Hutchinson, *Nations as Zones of Conflict*.

ORCID

Dylan O'Driscoll 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5938-3809
Bahar Baser 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8583-5909

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