NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS AND THE KURDISTAN REGION IN A NEW MIDDLE EAST: FROM REBELLION TO STATEHOOD

THE INFLUENCES OF POWER, THREAT ENVIORNMENT AND OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES ON THE CHOICE OF BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT STATE

© MOHAMMED GAILAN

DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY, STRATEGY AND LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Under which conditions do some nations and de facto state actors with relative power assert their statehood and independence? What factors should we focus on when we assess such cases? How much can we relate a nation's choice and path to statehood and independence to its national security concerns? The aim of this case study has been to answer the questions asked above and explain why nations during some periods do not choose to declare independence and form their own state and during other periods they aim to do so. The case of the Kurdistan region of Iraq has been selected and studied both due the drastic regional changes in the Middle East since Saddam Hussein's fall and the rise Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. During 2003-2005, the US invaded Iraq, toppled Saddam Hussein and destroyed the Iraqi army. Unlike the expectations that the Kurds would declare independence, they did not do so. However, 14 years after the fall of Saddam Hussein and establishment of the new Iraq, the Kurds aim to declare independence and form their own state. Hence, the puzzle is why not then and 14 years later? Inspired by realism, nationalist movement theory and rational strategic actor, three interrelated hypotheses have been tested and verified, which lay ground for a theoretical and explanatory model for this and similar cases within the fields of security studies and international relations. Process tracing has been used as an additional analytical tool in order to detect critical junctures and the chain of events that have produced the two different outcomes. The empirical material is mainly based on a fieldwork conducted in the Kurdistan region followed up by 12 individual qualitative interviews with a number of highly ranked Kurdish political and military officials including the President of the Kurdistan region, the Foreign Minister of the Kurdistan region, a senior Foreign and Security Advisor, three Peshmerga Generals and six members of both Kurdistan and Iraqi Parliaments. Building on the previous research, the findings of this study suggest that the choice and decision for becoming an independent and sovereign *de jure* state is closely related to a nation's national security concerns and it is the same factors that causes a nation to declare/not declare independence during different periods of time. They are: (1) changes in power relations and access to a certain degree of indirect/direct external support and cooperation, (2) the existence/non-existence of national security threats and threat environments and (3) the rise of opportunity structures, strategic thinking and the ability to mobilize resources. **Keywords: National Security, Power, Threat environment, Strategy, Military, Kurdistan, Independence, Statehood, Opportunity, Cooperation, Resources, Middle East, Terrorism, Iraq.**

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1. Introduction and research problem

The Kurdish people is a distinct one in the Middle East, it is the fourth largest ethnic group with an estimated population of 40-45 million and are divided between Iraq (7 million), Iran, Turkey and Syria. Their history dates before the existence of the Sumerians, Medes, Ayyubids, Safavids and Ottomans. The modern history of the Kurdish people has for the past 100 years been centered on four main themes; betrayal, abuse, war, and the struggle for national liberation.

> The twentieth century was a period of false promises, betrayal, and abuse for Kurds. The Kurds had national aspirations as the Ottoman Empire started to wane. They sought political support and protection from the Great Powers. Promises were made, but Kurds were ultimately abandoned. Hopes dashed, Kurds rebelled and were suppressed, their political rights and cultural identity brutally denied[1].

The impact of the first global military conflict, World War I, (WWI) is central for the Kurdish question. The breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 provided the Kurds an opening and opportunity to have a homeland. However, in secret agreements, particularly, the Asia Minor Agreement (known as Sykes-Picot), the two colonial powers Great Britain and France had already in 1916 drawn the borders of a post-Ottoman Middle East and divided the region into two spheres of influence zones, without any consideration to the Kurds[2].

Before the Allied forces declared victory in the summer 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson, gave a speech in January (called the Fourteen Points) about how the circumstances of the post-War era should be by focusing on self-determination and safety for the nations affected by the War[3]. And in another speech, the president refuted the content of the Sykes-Picot agreement, stating that ‘’Every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as a part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival states’’[4]. The Kurds was finally given a hope of releasing themselves from colonial arrangements and celebrated the thought of self-determination[5].

[1] Phillips, 2015: 3.
[2] Torelli, 2016: 18-44.
[3] Wilson, 1918. The Fourteen Points.
[4] Address to Congress, 1918.
[5] McDowall, 2004: 116-220.

When world leaders gathered at the Paris Peace Conference 1919, the discussions circulated around how to make peace prevail after the war and the formation of the borders of the Middle East. In the absences of the Central Powers and Russia, a number of points were agreed on. The present Kurdish delegations sought for partition and rejected to operate under Turkish rule as well as being divided by France and Britain[6]. However, the lack of strength and international support, especially Western, made the Kurds to have ‘’no good options’’[7] and the hopes of self-determination, autonomy and independence diminished. Britain and France refused the Kurds an alternative pathway than the one settled in the Sykes-Picot agreement[8].

Nevertheless, in the shadows of the atrocities committed against the Armenians by the Ottomans and the future of the Mosul province (today’s Kurdistan region of Iraq and some Sunni Arab areas), the Kurds were once again given the hope of independence as it appeared in the articles 62-64 of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which ‘’was the first international recognition of the Kurds and their right to a homeland’’[9]. The Kurd were promised to be given the right of independence and take their case to the League of Nations and the Mosul Province would through a referendum decide if it wanted to be a part of this new country[10].

Yet, the founder of the post-Ottoman Turkey, Mustafa Atatürk, considered the treaty as invalid and did not allow the Kurds to create a fact on the ground. After threats and rebellion from Turkey, the Allies and Turkey signed the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. In this agreement the republic of Turkey was recognized and the case of Kurdish independence was abandoned by the Western powers. The Kurdish case transformed from being about independence and statehood to being about minority groups in the Middle East. After a request by the installed Saudi King of Iraq, Faysal I, to Britain, that including the Mosul province in Iraq would balance the power struggle and sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and Shiites. Britain agreed and the Kurds become a part of the new artificial state of Iraq. Kurdish national aspirations were eventually brutally suppressed by the King of Iraq and Britain, Atatürk in Turkey, the Shah in Iran and the French in Syria[11].

[6] Bulloch and Morris, 1992: 73-95.
[7] Phillips, 2015: 5.
[8] Helmrich, 1974: 2-38, 201-210.
[9] Durham, 2010: 117.
[10] Natali, 2005.
[11] Gunter, 2011: 4-12. Sheils, 2016: 79-100.

As a result of false promises, international betrayal and regional suppression, the Kurds have learned that the world do not function under ideal circumstances and realized that self-help through independence is the only solution to their cause and survival. For that reason during the Interwar period a number of Kurdish self-proclaimed states came into being.

One example is Sheikh Mahmud's establishment of the Kingdom of Kurdistan 1922-1924. However, due to the lack of legitimacy, international recognition and material capabilities, the Kingdom was demolished after a number of ground and air offensives conducted by the British military resulting in thousands of civilian causalities[12]. After the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion in northern Kurdistan (Turkish-part), Ihsan Pasha and Ibrahim Heski established the Kurdish Republic of Ararat in 1927. The Kurds called for the Great Powers and the League of Nations to interfere and recognize the Republic but without any success and in 1930 the Turkish military regained control over the area[13].

The defeat of Mahmud's kingdom worsened the living conditions for the Kurds in Iraq. However, it is important to mention that earlier attempts for increased rights and establishment of a Kurdish region had been made by the leaders of the Barzan tribe. Sheikh Abdul-Salam Barzani caused an uprising during 1909-1914 but was eventually executed in Mosul 1914. In 1931-1932, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani and Mustafa Barzani, initiated an uprising against Iraq and Britain's authority in the country. Even if the Peshmerga (name of Kurdish fighters meaning: *those who face death or standing in front of death*) at that time were to some degree successful, the uprising was countered and Sheikh Ahmed was arrested after a number of false promises made by Iraq, Turkey and Britain[14].

After participation in Sheikh Mahmud's revolts, Sheikh Ahmed's uprising, and his exile in the Sulaymania area, Mustafa Barzani, started a new phase in the modern history of the Kurdish liberation movement. As a result of years of resistance, fighting and political achievements, Mustafa Barzani has become considered by many Kurds as the national hero of Kurdistan alongside with national figures as Qazi Mohammed, Sheikh Mahmud and other prominent Kurdish leaders[15].

[12]Mella, 2005: 127-130.
[13] Kirisci and Winrow, 1997.
[14] Mella, 2005: 130-145.
[15] Lortz, 2005: 39-51.

In 1945, Barzani, joined his forces with Qazi Mohammed in Eastern Kurdistan (Iranian part) and in 1946, after agreements with the Soviet Union, Qazi Mohammed, declared the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and Barzani become a commanding general of the newly established Republic[16]. However, within short the Soviet Union withdrew its support for the newborn Republic, resulting in an Iranian military invasion, execution of Qazi Mohammed and the Republic was dissolved after 10 months[17].

In 1946, Barzani founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which become the first formal political party supervising the Kurdish liberation movement in Iraq. Nevertheless, as a result of the dissolution of the Republic and the Iraqi army's constant offensives against the Kurds, many Peshmergas including Barzani were forced to settle in Soviet until 1958.

When Abdul-Karim Qasim become the new prime minister of Iraq after the 1958 coup dètat, the Iraqi state found itself in a weak position. Therefore, Qasim sought to establish good ties with the Kurds. However, when Qasim's power grew, he broke the ties and in 1960 the Iraqi air force attacked Kurdistan. The period 1961-1970 was a time of constant clashes between Kurdish and Iraqi military forces and is known as the first Iraq-Kurdish war[18].

The 1963 military coup led by Abdul-Salam Arif and Ahmed Hassan-Bakr marked the end of Qasim's rule in Iraq. The new military administration like its precursors made a set of promises and agreements with the Kurdish liberation movement. But once again, the new leaders of Iraq only used the Kurds for their own interests[19]. After years of struggle and atrocities committed by Iraq against its Kurdish population, many joined Barzani and the Kurdistan region was eventually completely controlled by the Peshmerga and the Kurds started to demanded autonomy, this took place while the government in Bagdad suffered from a political crisis after Arif's death in 1966, the Six-day war and the power struggle between the different parties in Bagdad[20].

The 1968 Baathist coup marked a new era in Iraq. The Baath party soon realized that without preliminary support from the Kurds, they would not be able to remain in power. Therefore, they were quick with communicating their will to resolve the Kurdish question. In March 1970, the

[16] Kamali, 2003: 89-102.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Romano, 2016: 186-192.
[19] McDowall, 2005: 313-320.
[20] Ibid.

Kurds and Iraq reached an agreement, the Kurds would enjoy autonomy. However, the agreement was a short lived one. Saddam Hussein's power had grown and for that reason the Kurds were not needed anymore. The tipping point and critical juncture came when the Iraqi government ordered an assassination attempt on Barzani, taking place in 1971 and none of the points that were agreed on were fulfilled by the Iraqi side. The Kurds were once again forced to seek their way to the mountains and rebelled against Iraq[21].

The Kurds have always been important for calculations of power politics in the Middle East. For example, after years of rivalry and border disputes between Iraq and Iran, and Iran's support for the Kurdish movement against Iraq, the two regional powers made an agreement in Algeria 1975. The Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein agreed that Iran would stop supporting the Kurds against Iraq and in return the geostrategically important river, Shatt al-Arab (Arvand Rud), was given to Iran[22]. This move gave the Baath regime a big opportunity to suppress Kurdish ambitions for autonomy and independence. The increased power led the Iraqi government to start a process of Arabization in Kurdistan. Around 180.000-200.000 Kurds were deported to Arab parts in southern Iraq, many more fled their homes, over 25.000 civilians were killed and over 400 Kurdish villages were destroyed.

In the same year, a branch of the KDP with the leadership of Jalal Talabani separated from the party and created the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). After the death of Mustafa Barzani in 1979, Massoud Barzani was elected as the leader of the KDP. In the early phase of the 1980s the KDP and PUK joined forces and as a result of the destruction of Kurdish cities, villages and death of thousands of civilians, both parties took arms and supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq war[23]. However, the rebellion was short-lived. Saddam Hussein initiated the Anfal-campaign 1986-1989, recognized as genocide against the Kurds. The Iraqi army massacred more than 182.000 Kurdish civilian, 8000 Barzani men, a lot more in the Garmian area, used chemical weapons in the Kurdish city of Halabja resulting in more than 5000 civilian deaths and totally destroyed ca 4700 villages[24].

During the Anfal-Campaign, the international community stood by and only condemned the dictator's act. However, after Iraq's annexation of Kuwait, a strategically important oil country,

[21] Stansfield, 2007: 104-105.
[22] Joint report by the Department of State, DIA and CIA, 1975. Approved for release 2004.
[23] Stansfield, 2007: 68-67.
[24] Human Rights Watch, 1993. Report: GENOCIDE IN IRAQ :The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds.

the US and other Western powers attacked Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration eventually encouraged the Kurds and Shiites in Iraq to rise[25]. The Kurds were delighted over the idea of having Western support. Within short they once again took control of the Kurdistan region including Kirkuk. However, once again history repeated itself, the US abandoned and chose to not support the Kurdish forces in the fear that Iraq would split into three parts[26].

The end product of the American ‘’one-Iraq policy’’ and Western position on the uprisings led the Baath regime to remobilize and launch a series of devastating attacks against the Kurds. One of Saddam Hussein’s top officials had warned the Kurds before the uprisings stating that ‘’If you have forgotten Halabja, I would like to remind you that we are ready to repeat the operation’’[27] Indeed, the operation repeated itself with all different methods, resulting in a humanitarian crisis, more than 1.5 million Kurds fled to the borders of Europe, Iran and Turkey. France and Turkey urged the international community to act and ‘’took the case of the humanitarian tragedy in northern Iraq to the UN, both countries claiming that the situation constituted a threat to international peace and security’’[28]. The most notable support the Kurds got was the international humanitarian assistance effort through *operation provide comfort* initiated by the United Kingdom (UK), US and supported by the UN Security Council’s (UNSC) resolution 688, which also involved the establishment of no-fly zones (NFZ) in Kurdistan and southern Iraq 1991-1996[29]. Meanwhile, the Kurds and their Peshmerga forces continued their fight against the regime and in 1992 the Kurds drove out the Iraqi army from an area bigger than Switzerland and for the first time got their own *de facto* autonomous region by establishing the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and a set of other institutions.

1.1 Problem formulation

As a reaction of the 2001 September 11 Al Qaeda bombings of the World Trade Center complex in New York and the headquarters of the United States Department of Defence, the Pentagon, the US invaded Iraq in 2003. The fall of Saddam Hussein and the Baath regime provided the Kurdistan region of Iraq and its leadership an opportunity to eliminate all kinds of national security threats that the Kurds throughout the past century been forced to deal with and realize a long standing

[25] Romano, 2006: 204-206.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ministry of Defence, Netherlands Institute of Military History, 2009.
[29] Byman et al., 1998: 127-150.

national dream of liberation and declare independence. Unlike the expectations that the Kurdistan region, its government and leadership would after a century of oppression, struggle and engagement in armed conflicts, call for independence, the Kurds did not do so. In an unofficial referendum that took place in connection to the 2005 Iraqi elections, 98 percent of the Kurdish population voted 'Yes' for independence. In spite of the big support for independence, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its leadership emphasized the importance of a new and united country and choose to remain in a so-called federal democratic Iraq[30].

However, in connection to the drastic regional changes in the Middle East since the Arab Spring, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and more specifically 2014, the KRG and its leaders in political, military and intelligence sectors have adopted a policy that has in different ways become a central part of the Kurdistan region's national security policy, which calls for independence and the establishment of a sovereign Kurdish state in the Middle East.

The President of the Kurdistan region, Massoud Barzani, has clearly stated that this process is in action and independence is only a matter of time[31]. The prime minister of the KRG has also declared that independence is their ultimate goal and there is no possibility for the Kurdistan region to return to the so called pre-ISIS Iraq[32]. In 2017, the Kurds officially announced that a referendum will take place in September 2017 and independence will be declared later on after negotiations with the central government in Bagdad. The Kurdish leadership has started talks with Bagdad and communicated this issue to the United Nations (UN) as well as a number of global and regional powers[33].

There is a clear and critical discrepancy and change between what was done in 2003-2005 and what the Kurdistan region has aimed to do since 2014 and prepared to do after the referendum. Based on the changes that have taken place in the case of the Kurdistan region, it is puzzling and of interest to investigate in under which conditions do nations and de facto state entities likes the KRG assert their statehood and independence. And, more specifically what material factors matter most when explaining why some nations during some circumstances and periods do not choose to declare independence and form a state of their own and why during other periods they aim to do so. To

[30] Stansfield, 2007: 186.
[31] Dailysabah, 2015.
[32] Rubin, 2017.
[33] Adel, 2017.

find out this, I aim to investigate in how (i) changes in power relations and access to external support (ii) the existences/non-existence of national security threats and assessment of threat environments and (iii) the rise of opportunity structures and ability to mobilize resources affects and influences the choices of not declaring/declaring independence.

1.2 Aim and questions

The case-specific aim of this study is to identify the factors that have influenced the two different choices and see if there are support for the tested hypotheses (see below). For that reason, the main and more case-specific questions of this study seeks to answer why did the Kurdistan region not declare independence during 2003-2005 but aims to do so one and a half decade later? What are the two choice a result of? Furthermore, the aim is also to make an empirical contribution to the question of Kurdish independence. Therefore, a large set of data has been collected, including 12 interviews with Kurdish Members of Parliament (MP), national security advisors, Peshmerga generals, Foreign minister of the KRG and the President of the Kurdistan region.

1.3 Disposition

The coming structure of this study is divided into six chapters. In chapter 2, a thematic overview of previous research regarding the Kurdistan region and independence are discussed. In chapter 3, the theoretical framework is talked over and three hypotheses are settled inspired by the theories' core tenets. In chapter 4, the methodological framework is presented and the discussion circulates around single case study research, process tracing, data collection and limitations. Chapter 5, is where the analysis of the two choice are made. In chapter 6-7, focus is on the results and hypotheses. Furthermore, a discussion of the findings is held and conclusions are drawn where further research is also recommended.

2. Previous research

Since this thesis focuses on the Kurdistan region of Iraq, this chapter will shortly deal with previous research regarding the question of Kurdish independence and divides the literature into different categories. Initially, a camp of scholars have suggested that the Kurds find themselves targeted by the governments of the countries they live in[34]. Therefore, all Kurdish attempts and aspirations for

[34] Aziz, 2015.

becoming independent and have a sovereign political body of their own, have historically been a result of the fear of living as minority groups and continue to live under the domination of oppressive and authoritarian regimes[35]. Moreover, others have focused on why the Kurds so far have not become independent and created their own state. They argue that the reason for why the Kurds in Iraq as well as in the other parts of the so-called greater Kurdistan have not had the ability to declare independence is a result of power politics and security factors on a regional level[36]. Those studies dealing with this issue from a regional perspective mostly come to the conclusion that a separation between the Kurdistan region and Iraq will have a snowball effect in Turkey, Iran and Syria where large portions of Kurds live in, ca 40 million, will also declare independence[37]. Hence, the question of Kurdish independence becomes a matter of regional instability and national security for the neighboring states of the Kurdistan region, whom historically have not tolerated such attempts. Therefore, the biggest obstacle for why the Kurds yet to day are not independent and lack a state of their own, they suggest, is primarily related to the oppositional forces coming from neighboring states[38].

Nevertheless, a set of other scholars have dealt with this issue from non-material perspectives and taken consideration to the role of ethnicity, culture, national identity and ideology. They argue that the idea of independence is closely linked to the national identity of the Kurds[39]. As a result of being the world largest ethnic group without a state of their own and the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, the Kurds consider themselves to be different and like the Arabs, Turks and Persians have a homeland of their own. Moreover, as a result of being marginalized by their parent-states and experiencing years of oppression, Kurdish nationalism has evolved as a strong factor for rebellion and the rise of Kurdish armed liberation movements in order to mark and signal the belief of being different culturally as well as ethnically and have the right like all other nations to enjoy the life of political freedom and through statehood safeguard their culture and national identity, where a state of their own will provide them with an endless space for exercising their rituals,

[35] O'leary, et al. 2006; Gunter, 2016.
[36] Abbasi, 2008.
[37] Entessar, 2010.
[38] Rafaat. 2007; Romano, 2006.
[39] Kaya, 2012; Fakhry, 2012.

traditions and speak their language far from the domination and influences of the majority groups they are forced to live with today[40].

Finally, the category of previous works, that are more similar to this one, have dealt with this issue in relation to Kurdish national security and the growing politico-military role of the Kurdistan region in the Middle East since the Iraqi uprisings in 1991 and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The main argument of this camp is that if the regional powers in the Middle East and the neighbors of the Kurdistan region perceive Kurdish independence as a threat to their own power and security, the Kurds too consider the fact of being powerless and not independent as a threat to their own survival and security[41]. Power, material capacity and security are central aspects of these works. They often arrive at the conclusion that when the Kurds have been powerful in terms of material capabilities and have had control over territory, then the parent- and neighboring states have been soft on them, and if the neighboring states have been superior in terms of power, then the Kurds have been hardly suppressed[42]. Additionally, when dealing with why Kurds in Iraq did not declare independence during 2003-2005, these studies identify structural factors and believe that the main reason was, the manner in which the fall of the Baath regime took place in did not bestow the Kurds the preferred political and economic conditions to create a state of their own and that the Kurds lacked the experience of self-governance. Furthermore, scholars like Romano (2006), Gunter (2011), Ahmed (2012), Phillips (2015) and Danilovich et al (2016) in different ways seem to be in agreement that another reason for why the Kurds did not breakout form Iraq was because of their belief in the project of creating a new decentralized federal democratic Iraq, that appeared to be much more attractive and safer than the authoritarian one before it, hence the change of political system, which provided the Kurds with legitimate sources of power was a factor for not declaring independence. However, this camp also do not hide that the choice of remaining in Iraq had long-term strategic purposes. Since the opportunity was limited in different ways and did not allow the Kurds to declare independence, instead they took advantage of this opportunity to build the blocks of a de facto state inside a new Iraqi state[43]. Such as creating more political autonomy through federalism, starting an internal democratization process, adopting a semi-western model of

[40] Natali, 2005.
[41] Phillips, 2015; Danilovich; 2016.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ahmed, 2012; Benigo, 2012.

governance, increasing economic, diplomatic and military cooperation with external actors especially with those in Europe and North America, creating and reorganizing their military power and taking confidence-building measures with former rivals such as Turkey in order to create more operational leverage for future choices and steps toward independence.

In sum, the literature regarding Kurdish independence is in its place and all the different aspects it takes up are of relevance to this study. Nevertheless, the closest part of the literature that is similar to this one, is the last category discussed above and even if this category of studies regarding Kurdish independence do not have the same research aims and questions as the one conducted here, still this case study can be placed within their category. Furthermore, I neither reject nor criticize the content of the previous research, however, it is important to note that these studies lack in two issues. First, they are theoretically weak (except for Romano, 2006) and are mostly informative and repetitive. Secondly, they lack in addressing the factors that have led to the new choice of independence. Hence, the problem and questions this study seeks to answer is understudied. Therefore, in this study I aim to specifically fill the gap around this new quest for independence and why the Kurds did not declare independence in 2003-2005 by more closely and from a theoretical perspective focus on some military, security, economic and political aspects of the issue.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Realism: power, security and threat environment

Initially, it is important to clarify that much of the theoretical framework of this study find itself within the realm of realism, which is an umbrella-theory diligently used by students of international relations and security studies focusing on power, security and survival. I am aware that realism is a relative and mostly state-centric school of thought and mainly focuses on the behavior and interaction between states. However, some of its core assumptions do not exclude the discussion of why nations may opt for independence and create a state of their own. A number of prominent scholars have taken inspiration of realist concepts and applied them to national and sub-state levels of analysis such as John Mearsheimer (2011) Barry Posen (1993) and Zheger Hassan (2015). Furthermore, the purpose with this section is not to make the case for any of the existing realist branches, instead shared assumptions are what I am interested in.

The main claim after that states are the main units in the international system, realists assume that the international system is dominated by an anarchic structure characterized by disorder (implying the non-existence of a supranational global authority managing and controlling the system), it is an organizing principle that differs from domestic systems, where the latter is organized by hierarchy and order[44]. Therefore, power is what the different units compete for in order to safeguard their survival and security. The term power is defined by material characteristics. Power is the relative capabilities that actors in the international system have at their disposal, it includes economic capacity, technological and industrial capacity, size of population, natural resources, territory and military capacity. Since the international system is anarchic and states cannot foresee each other's behavior and actions, they always act based on self-interest in order to survive in an anarchic world where everyone is object for the others' influence and domination. Therefore, the more power an actor possesses, the more will it be able to survive and secure its territory of operation. Consequently, this leads all states to a stage where they take different measures in order to acquire different capabilities for their own power and security. It is here the concept of security dilemma comes in and it can be defined as a ''structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening'' (Herz, 1950: 157). However, power is always relative and proportional, therefore during some periods states may choose to build alliances and cooperate in order to serve common interests or balance against others perceived as a threat or more powerful[45]. Balancing the power of another actor can be done in two ways: internally through individual distribution of power or external and collectively through alliances and cooperation with others. This is the nature of the anarchic system. Despite the fact that the system is anarchic, still cooperation with external actors is an important self-help measure that may be needed in order to get a degree of support for a certain cause or against an adversary, that stimulate the involved parts' needs and interests.

In a paper dealing with the linkage between realism and nationalism, the prominent offensive-realist scholar, John Mearshiemer, proposes a set of explanations for why, even if not always possible to achieve, nations are interested in controlling their own political fate through independence and statehood. He argues that nations have ''good reasons for worry about their

[44] Waltz, 1979.
[45] Mearsheimer, 2014.

survival in a world where nation-states sometimes threaten each other'' and nations also care about survival when they do not have their own state, because there is always the possibility ''that a more powerful nation in their own country might attack them and […] annihilate them. But, even if that does not happen, there is the real danger that the dominant nation will eviscerate their culture by incorporating it into its own culture''[46]. Therefore survival and power to overcome dangers are crucial concerns of nations ''whether they have their own state or not''[47].

Furthermore, since power politics helped to create the modern state system, survival is closely linked to the state, nations want to create and build powerful states in order to ''maximize the prospects of survival'' for not being subject to the domination and influence of other stronger nations or states. In short survival and security depends on ''having a state''[48]. Mearsheimer also argues that even if nations are not ''doomed to disappear'' if they do not have access to their own state and can realize their right of self-determination through autonomy, federalism or con-federalism, still (by quoting Yael Tamir) he writes an independent state ''can ensure the widest possible degree of national autonomy and the maximum range of possibilities for the enjoyment of political life and security''[49].

Nations worry about survival and statehood for several reasons. The first one is related to the intrusive nature of the modern state. Whereas former political forms like the dynastic-states did not interfere in the public life except for tax collection and recruitment of soldiers, the modern state system is deeply involved in the public life. Because it has ''powerful incentives to homogenize the people inside their borders into one single group with a common language and a shared history''[50] and this strategy serves the interests of the state in different way but two of them are of most concern, (i) a strong laboring force and (ii) a strong military whereas in both sectors people are forced to share a common culture, language and only one version of history.

> This impulse to homogenize the culture, which is synonymous with nation building, is a potentially grave danger for any minority group in a multi-national state, simply because the majority is likely to control the assimilation process and ensure that its language and traditions define the new common culture. Minority cultures, on the other hand, are likely to be pushed aside and maybe even disappear in

[46] Mearsheimer, 2011: 10.
[47] Ibid, 11.
[48] Ibid, 16-17.
[49] Ibid, 20.
[50] Ibid, 20

> the process. As Walker Connor points out, states that are engaged in nation building are invariably in the business of nation-breaking as well, and nobody wants their nation to be destroyed. The best way for any culture of nation to avoid that outcome is to have its own state. This basic logic, of course, explains why so many multi-national states have broken apart over the past two centuries[51].

By taking the 1994 civil war in Rwanda and the Hutu genocide against the Tutsis, Mearsheimer argues that ‘’minority nations’’ worry about survival during intra-state conflicts like civil wars, whereas the dominant nations can declare war without reason, therefore it is safer for a nation to have its own state than be ‘’on the short end of the power balance in a fractious multi-national state’’[52]. Furthermore, with a state of their own, nations do not only survive, they also can build large armies, create independent economies and enter the sphere of international politics. In other words, they can become powerful and possibly create access to defensive and offensive capabilities. As a result, nations with access to a state of their own have the potential to affect balance of power structures and may attempt to cooperate with others in order to change the balance in their own favor. Additionally, if nations do not have states of their own they are sometime ‘’willing to fight to gain one’’[53]. By taking the Russian-Chechen conflict, Mearsheimer, also claims that minority groups in multi-national states, if unsatisfied with the status quo or after the collapse of a regime, will likely attempt to create a state of their own. In sum, nations and especially minorities attempt to create a state of their own for the following factors: maximization of the prospects of survival and security but also to become powerful materially, create allies and support and enter the stage of international politics[54].

Furthermore, the notion of the security dilemma mentioned above, has in an article published by Barry Posen, *The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict* been adopted to a national and sub-state level analysis. Posen argues that the security dilemma on a national level arises when minority nations and ethnic groups ‘’suddenly find themselves responsible for their own security’’[55]. When this happens, these groups assess their threat environment and neighboring groups (the parent-state, another country or a linguistically, ethnically or religiously different group) by acting rationally and define possible sources of threats. If the group arrives to the conclusion that it find itself in a

[51] Ibid, 21-22.
[52] Ibid, 22.
[53] Ibid, 30.
[54] Ibid, 31-36.
[55] Posen, 1993: 27.

threat environment, targeted by more powerful actors or receive a high degree of hostility it will find itself in a mode of insecurity and face a security dilemma. And, if the group do not feel safe, then it will take different measures in order to overcome and eliminate threats affecting its survival, well-being and security. Posen states that the security dilemma occurs at different stages and especially (i) when a critical military or political change takes place close the geographical area of the affected group, (ii) when an imperial regime or (particularly multi-national) state collapses, Posen illustrates this by taking the post-Soviet Ukrainian-Russian and Serbian-Croatian conflicts during the 90s (the final solution was that all of them become independent states) or (iii) when other actors and individuals show a high degree of hostility towards the affected group[56]. In sum, minority nations and ethnic groups will take different self-help measures in order to overcome the threats posed to their national security and well-being to an extent that they may attempt to change the status quo of borders and existing geographical circumstances.

3.2 Opportunity and Resource Mobilization

In his *Kurdish Nationalist Movement*, David Romano (2006) presents a theoretical synthesis of the Kurdish nationalist movement by focusing on resource mobilization, opportunity structures and cultural framing (the latter is excluded in this study). Romano adopts a structural approach in order to analyze the behavior, choices and actions of these movements and the framework he presents is to a high degree inspired by a combination of constructivism and rational choice theory[57]. Shortly, opportunity structures is the factors that limit, change or authorize the choice and actions of groups and movements. They can be political as well as economical and movements (in this case ethnic and liberation ones) may mobilize by making rational and strategic choices based on their assessment of how changes in opportunity structures or the rise of new opportunities grant them more leverage and operational space[58]. Furthermore, Romano focuses on resource mobilization and resources are seen both as *material* like natural resources, media, money and military capacity available to certain groups and movements or *non-material* like skills, ideology, legitimacy, a shared commitment to a cause etc. Resource mobilization here includes the resources internal and external to a group or movement, the costs and benefits of different actions, choices and

[56] Ibid, 29-47.
[57] Romano, 2006: 12-17.
[58] Ibid, 19-20.

participation in risky processes. This approach views movements and groups as rational strategic actors, they act and make choices based on the resources they have at their disposal.

Hypothesis 1: If nations without a state of their own feel secure and do not find themselves in a threat environment or perceive their neighboring groups as a threat to their national security, it is likely that they will not consider independence and statehood as a choice. On the other hand, if they find themselves in a threat environment and face hostile actors posing a threat to their national security, they will likely consider independence and statehood as a choice, because they will see it as the ultimate self-help measure.

Hypothesis 2: If nations without a state of their own are weak in terms of power and lack in cooperation and support from external actors, they will likely not consider independence and statehood as a choice, because they cannot survive and stand against others more powerful than them. If nations become powerful and create access to defensive and offensive capabilities and have some support and cooperation with external actors, then they will likely consider independence and statehood as a choice, because they will face less opposition from the outside world and have the power to disobey others and make choices and decisions unilaterally.

Hypothesis 3: Nations without a state of their own may act rationally and strategically. If they face a limited opportunity and have not the ability to mobilize resources, then they will likely not consider independence and statehood as a choice, because the costs and risks will be more than the benefits. However, if nations face a suitable opportunity and have a good ability to mobilize the resources needed for independence and statehood, then they will likely consider it as a choice, because the benefits will be more than the costs and risks.

4. Methodology

This chapter aims to present how the research has been conducted and how the design and methodological issues been dealt with. The aim of this study has been to identify what factors are of most importance when looking at the factors and driving forces behind choices regarding a nation's declaration of independence and becoming forming a state of their own. This has been done through investigation of the case of the Kurdistan region and its two different choice during two different periods. In the coming sections focus is also on the reliability, validity, materials and limitations of the study.

4.1 Case study design

The qualitative case study makes the methodical base for the research conducted in this paper. Since I have aimed to answer *why, what* and *how* questions, this study has mixed a descriptive and explanatory approach in order to describe as well as explain the case. Furthermore, this study has been a theory oriented one and dealt with hypotheses-testing by empirically test three hypotheses[59].

Initially, case studies aim to explore a phenomena in-depth and can be identified as a ''spatially delimited phenomenon observed at a single point in time or over some period of time''[60] Moreover, case study designs can be divided into two main categories, single and multiple with different objectives[61]. Refering to Lijphart and Eckstein, Levy (2008) writes that there are different types of case studies such as atheoretical, hypotheses-testing, hypothesis-generating, theory-confirming/informing, disciplined-configurative and deviant case studies. By having that said, the design of this study is a hypotheses-testing single case study[62].

One of the primary reasons for why this methodological approach has been chosen is because of the lack of deviations between theory and case, the lack of specific theoretical explanations, previous research and empirical investigations regarding why the Kurdistan region aims to declare independence after 14 years and not during 2003-2005. Therefore, it is difficult to investigate,

[59] Yin, 2009.
[60] Gerring, 2009: 19.
[61] Yin, 2009: 46.
[62] Odell, 2001: 161-176, George and Bennett, 2005: 20-21

describe, explain or interpret these two different choices based on a single event, juncture or cause that can determine why this change has taken place. For these reasons, case study research has a set of advantages in complex and unclear cases like this one. Initially, conducting a case study allows the researcher to investigate the case in-depth and use multiple sources of material, where case study research can systematically examine the evidence needed for unfolding the case. Furthermore, it encourages the researcher to make use of additional analytical methods and adopt different data collection strategies. Other advantages of case study research is that it enables the study to discover casual mechanisms and subsequent casual processes, relations and chain of events. Case study research has also a high degree of conceptual validity and enables the researcher for identification of new variables and hypotheses as well as space for a detailed description of the case under investigation in its context[63].

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that there are some disadvantages of case study research. One is the selected case's lack of representing a wider population of cases and another one is generalization of the findings based on one or a small number of cases[64]. It is for that reason I have not used a methodological framework that takes on this task as its primary objective. Because I believe that generalization of certain research outcomes beyond the data requires careful analysis of a large number of cases. However, since all case studies deal with theory development in different ways[65], the hypotheses tested in this study, (if verified by the data), will lay ground for smaller generalized hypothetical propositions that can be used or tested in large-N studies. Furthermore, the reason for why I specifically have chosen a hypotheses-testing case study and not a theory-testing, is because of the belief that theory-testing is a tricky process. One single case alone is not able to challenge the validity, explanatory power or the scope conditions of one or several theories unless the case clearly deviates from theoretical propositions, if that would be the case, then a more theory-developing approach would be of relevance. Based on the theoretical framework, this study aims to test three hypotheses and see if they can be supported and verified by the empirical material. Therefore, it can be claimed that this study can be seen as a case-centric

[63] George and Bennett, 2005: 19-22.
[64] Ibid, 22.
[65] Yin 2009: 19.

one dealing with the first level of theory development by testing three hypotheses which can be studied and tested more comprehensively in other large-N studies[66].

Furthermore, George and Bennett (2005) point out another weakness, which is that case studies may limit the number of variables that can show how much and to what degree one or a number of variables affect another one or produce a certain outcome due to the number of intervening or independent variables one could possibly miss to discover or take account to[67]. Therefore, once again this study can been seen as a preliminary one serving as a beginning for a larger study taking consideration to other cases as well as factors and variables. Finally, the choices of not declaring/declaring independence are analyzed by making an operationalization in (i) changes in power relations and external support and cooperation (ii) the existence of security threats and assessment of threat environment and (iii) the rise of opportunity structures and the ability to mobilize resources.

4.2 Process tracing

An additional method that can assist case study research to reach more adequate outcomes and have a stronger inferential leverage is process tracing[68]. Initially, there is an ongoing debate in the academia of whether process tracing can be used as one single method or if it consists of different variants with different functions. For example George and Bennett (2005) present a number of variants. Beach and Pedersen (2013) argue that there are three different variants such as explaining-outcome, theory-testing and theory-developing and argue that the use of this method should mainly focus on the causal mechanism. At the same time, scholars such as Collier (2011) and Levy (2008) have argued and used this method as one single (flexible) analytical tool for detecting causal mechanisms, critical junctures and/or the chain of events. This study will in line with latter camp use it as one single analytical tool.

To being with, process tracing can be defined as ‘’the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator. Process tracing can contribute decisively both to describing political and social

[66] George and Bennett, 2005: 128-149; See also Levy, 2008; Odel, 2001.
[67] Ibid, 25-27.
[68] Levy 2008: 6, 11-12.

phenomena and to evaluating causal claims''[69]. The process tracing in this study aims to explain how the independent variables clarified in the hypotheses have influenced the dependent variable, this has be done through investigation of the chain of events and ''critical junctures and tipping points'' by analyzing the case through a timeline[70]. A critical juncture is a point in time where the outcomes of some circumstances or of one or several events taking place are not changeable. The criteria for what may count as a critical juncture in this study are those events and circumstances that have not taken place at earlier stages such as the fall of the Baath regime and dictatorship or the new Iraqi state's mobilization of the national army towards Kurdistan in Kirkuk and Khanaqin 2008 and 2012, the economic sanctions imposed by the new Iraqi government against the Kurdistan region during 2014 or ISIS's occupation of ca 33 percent of Iraqi territory and declaration of war against the Kurds.

One could possibly criticize and question the validity as well as the reliability of this method and Gerring writes that process tracing evidence is ''almost by definition, difficult to verify, for it extends to evidence that is nonexperimental and cannot be analyzed in a sample-based format'' however as long as ''sufficient documentation is included in the account, the verification of a process tracing study is eminently achievable"[71]. Moreover, in order to avoid problems with the reliability and validity of the research, a detailed description of the traced process must be present in the analysis and the analysis should be done through a timeline and presented as an explanatory narrative. This is due to the method's function to investigate in chain of events and causality, and if the traced process of events and the mechanisms are not described and explained in a satisfactory manner, the analysis will lack in its descriptive and explanatory power and it may result in not fulfilling the aim of the conducted research[72]. Additionally, research projects like this one are highly complex and sometimes hard to manage especially when studying outcomes where several factors, variables and causes may occur and provide with different and rival explanations that may be hard to exclude or take consideration to. However, with the help of processes tracing a researcher is able to narrow down the list and having specified a small number of variables and factors in

[69] Collier: 2011: 823.
[70] Levy, 2008: 12.
[71] Gerring, 184-185.
[72] Collier, 2011: 823-830.

advance (through hypotheses) make the list even more specific and the researcher will be better equipped to analyze the analytical units[73].

4.3 Material

In order to get a broad range of material, this study has sought to triangulate different sources of material by conducting interviews as well as using different already published/written sources of material in (online) newspaper articles, books, scholarly publications, non/governmental sources and research centers that have dealt with the issue of Kurdish independence. The reason for why material from such a broad spectrum of sources has been collected is because of material from one or a few number of sources may be biased affecting the reliability and to an extent the validity of the study. However, collecting material from different sources as it has been done in this study, I believe, makes a study more transparent and reliable, which in itself will lead to valid and sustainable research outcomes. The newspaper articles used here originate from internationally respected media outlets such as Rudaw, Economist, Al-Jazeera, The guardian, and Reuters etc. The academic articles and books used for this study were mainly borrowed and downloaded from the libraries of Stockholm University and the Anna lindh-Library at the Swedish Defence University.

4.4 Field study and Interviews

Since this case is a complex one with many different actors and causes involved, I decided that other sources of data collection were needed in order to achieve the best possible research outcomes. Therefore, most of the empirical work is based on a fieldwork conducted in the Kurdistan region followed up by 12 interviews with members of both the Iraqi parliament and Kurdistan parliament, three Peshmerga army generals, the Foreign Minister of the Kurdistan region and a senior foreign and security adviser to the president. Furthermore, an interview with the President of the Kurdistan region that I carried out in 2015 has been included. All the interviews made for this study were face-to-face qualitative unstructured ones, meaning that I adopted a flexible interview style and did not arrange any predetermined questions. Instead, the first step I did in every interview was to explain the aim of my study and its main questions. The second step was to let the participants answer the question freely and from time to time more relevant open-ended questions were asked. The main weakness of this interview strategy is that it takes time and

[73] George and Bennett, 2005: 213-222.

the discussions during the interviews may fall off topic where the interviewee may take up different issues not relevant to the research aim. However, unlike structured interviews, this strategy implies a high level of flexibility where the researcher are allowed to detect patterns of themes throughout the interviews and the interviewees reveal more information than in an interview seeking for the answers of a number of predetermined questions[74]. A final note is that all ethical issues that arises from doing interviews have been carefully dealt with. Transcripts of individual interviews have been sent back to the participants who requested it and some of them preferred to check their interviews before they were transcribed. Some of the interviews have been corrected by the interviewees themselves. Finally, the participants have given their permission to publish their names and occupation (see interviews in appendix I).

4.5 Limitations

Initially, this study is not about internal political differences in Kurdistan regarding independence and it also is not an argumentative study taking sides between policy and decision-makers in Erbil or Bagdad. This study has been carried out with a high degree of scientific objectivity partly because of my own background as a Kurd but also to not lose its scientific value for upcoming projects.

By having that said, this study mainly focuses on the periods of 2003-2005 and 2014-2017. The periodization is considered as relevant due to that the choices regarding independence have been made during these periods. However, this does not imply that the analysis will not take consideration to events or circumstances before or after 2003-2005, such as the Iraqi army-Khanaqin and Kirkuk incidents. Furthermore, the analysis is limited to investigation of the material, security and structural factors mentioned above (see section 3.2 and 4.1). The main reason for why this limitation has been made is related to the hypotheses and what should be consider as most relevant when analyzing a nation's choice of declaring/not declaring independence and path to statehood during different periods. However, another reason has been shortages in time. Because, this thesis was a 10 week project, which did not allow much space for investigation in other factors and variables. Therefore, I found it relevant to narrow down the study and focus on the aspects relevant to the aim and hypotheses. However, it does not mean that this study can fully represent

[74] Edward and Holland, 2013: 30

all the factors involved, further research will be needed especially when it comes to the role of non-material/ideational factors and a deeper level of analysis regarding the relation between independence and development of internal politico-military and socio-economic processes.

5. Analysis

5.1 Why did the Kurdistan region not declare independence in 2003-2005?

As a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and accused Saddam Hussein for developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and supporting terrorism in line with other countries in the so-called axis of evil. The process of de-Baathification of Iraq and regime change started. Within few months, Iraq was completely controlled and in December 2003 the dictator that had ruled the country for three decades was captured[75]. However, when Saddam Hussein was captured and the Iraqi army destroyed, long-term enemies of the Kurds, the Kurdistan region of Iraq suddenly found itself in a dilemma and complicated situation, meaningful for its future. According to one of the interviewed generals for this study, the first thing Kurds did was to assess the situation and surrounding environment ‘’since both the regime and the Iraqi army were in ruins and no other serious security threats existed in the nearby areas around us, except for some insurgents and minor terrorist networks, we concluded that it was better to wait and see and consult with each other, before making any drastic choices’’[76].

In 2004, before becoming presidents of the Kurdistan region and Iraq, the leaders for the main Kurdish parties, KDP and PUK, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, started talks with other Iraqi Arab political actors in order to see if there were any guarantees for the security and safety of the Kurdistan region. The purpose of the talks was to find out how friendly and cooperative the Iraqis would be if the Kurdistan region chose to remain within the framework of a new Iraq[77]. And, according to the PUK politburo member and commanding general for the unit-70 Peshmerga forces, Sheikh Jafar, that even if the Kurds to some degree were safe from internal military threats in Iraq, they were not safe politically. Therefore, before making any choices, the Kurds needed guarantees and evidence from Iraq for their future in the country.

[75] Stansfield, 2007.
[76] Interview with General. Jabar Gardi, 2017.
[77] Interview with foreign minister Falah Mustafa, 2017.

> Our leadership talked with other Iraqis and we were promised full status and as equals in Iraq. And, our leadership found out that if constitutionalism, decentralization, federalism were accepted by other Iraqis and that our region would be protected by our own armed forces and the new [Iraqi national] army by law would be obliged to not have the ability to enter our region, then a new Iraq would be a safer and better place for us. The Iraqis promised us partnership, security and safety, and they eventually accepted federalism. At that time we got the guarantees we needed for making our choice, which later was formally recognized and protected by the Iraqi constitution[78].

Due to the disappearance of the security and military threats that had existed in decades against the Kurdistan region, such as the Arabization process during the 70s-80s which led to the deportation of ca 200.000 Kurds from their lands to southern parts of Iraq, the Iraqi army's destruction of over 4500 Kurdish villages and the Anfal-campaign 1986-1989 leading to the death of more than 180.000 Kurdish civilians, 8000 Barzani men, thousands more in the Germian area and the chemical attacks in Halabja resulting in the death of 5000 civilians. Furthermore, the 1991 the humanitarian and refugee crisis that led to a mass exodus was another event that took place where the Iraqi army retaliated for uprisings that had taken place the same year, where more than 1.5 million Kurds fled to the borders of Iran, Turkey and Europe. In 2004, the new Iraqi political actors especially the Shiites (majority in Iraq) guaranteed the Kurds that these events would not take place in a new Iraq and promised the Kurdish leaders ''[…] safety and security for the people of Kurdistan. They guaranteed that history would not repeat itself in a new Iraq. It was decided that the reformation the new Iraqi state would be built on the principles of partnership and power-sharing''[79]. For that reason the Kurds concluded that a new Iraq would be a safe place to live in and that there were not any needs to make risky choices. Instead, remaining within Iraq would be safer if the requirements presented by the Kurdish political leadership about the region's security, military autonomy, power sharing and partnership were accepted by the Iraqis and the US[80]. Which later were accepted and written in the new federal constitution of 2005.

Furthermore, an important theme that was discovered throughout the interviews was the importance of a new ''federal democratic'' political system for the Kurds and its relation to the choice of not declaring independence. This seems to be one of the fundamental reasons for why this choice was made. The Kurds have historically faced different kinds of governments in Iraq and

[78] Interview with General. Sheikh Jafar, 2017.
[79] Interview with MP Tahsin Dolamari, 2017.
[80] Interview with General. Sirwan Barzani, 2017.

operated under monarchial, military, one-party and totalitarian systems. These systems have throughout history not given the Kurds space to exercise their rights and their ambitions for self-determination. Moreover, the Kurds have not been protected by the regimes generated by these types of systems[81] and according to a Kurdish member of the Iraqi parliament, federalism was one of the main reasons for why the Kurds chose to remain within Iraq. It was due to the belief that a post-Saddam Iraq would be a secure place to live in where it ‘’would be governed by the principles of democracy, power-sharing, pluralism, federalism, decentralization and the rule of law […] Therefore, our choice to remain within Iraq, we thought, would guarantee the prosperity and national security of both the Iraqi people in general and the Kurdish people in the new Iraq’’[82]. Furthermore, Hemin Hawrami a senior adviser to the President stated that the Kurdistan region had the hope that through this choice ‘’the national security of Kurdistan would be preserved in a new post-Saddam era that would be based on federalism, consensus, constitution and a democratic country’’ where Kurds would be looked upon as partners[83]. This was confirmed in an interview with the President of the Kurdistan region claiming that ‘’after the fall of the Baath regime, the Kurds wanted to open a new page with Iraq and had the hope that through a new constitution and a new system safeguard their security and rights’’[84].

After agreements with Bagdad, the Kurds remained within Iraq. The 2005 Iraqi constitution, recognized the Kurdistan region of Iraq as a federal region, with the right to have its own flag flying next to the Iraqi flag, Kurdish become Iraq’s second official language, the Kurds could exploit their natural resources, have their own government and presidency, the Peshmerga was recognized as the *guardians* of the Kurdistan region and they would be an independent part of the Iraqi defence system and Iraq would pay their salaries and 17 percent of the Iraqi budget was assigned to the KRG[85] and the borders of the Kurdistan region was settled in article-140. However, there were Kurdish majority areas (known as the disputed areas in article-140) that formally remained under the federal government’s administration such as the governorate of Kirkuk, the districts of Aqrah, Sheykan, Sinjar, Tall’kayf, Qara Qush, Zummar, Bashik, Kalak as well as Khanaqin and Mandali around the Nineveh and Dyala governorates. The Iraqis promised that through the constitution,

[81] Interview with MP Amina Zkri, 2017.
[82] Interview with MP Tariq Rashid, 2017.
[83] Interview with National Security Advisor (NSA) Hemin Hawrami, 2017
[84] Interview with President Massoud Barzani, 2015.
[85] Gunter, 2011.

specified in article-140, a referendum would be held before December 31 2007, where the people in those areas themselves could determine their future and vote if they wanted to fall under Iraq or KRG's administration. And, in their own preliminary regional constitution, article 6-8, the Kurds put forward a number of important points and made clear that

> The people of Iraqi Kurdistan have the right to self-determination, and under this right they are free to determine their politics and free to achieve their economic, social, and cultural development. They have chosen the free union with Iraq, as people, territory, and sovereignty as long as it is committed to the federal constitution and the parliamentary federal democratic pluralistic system respectful of the human rights of the individual and the society. It will consider its view on the determination of the future political delineation and political position in the following cases: First – Violation of the sanctity of the federal constitution, including a retreat form the commitment to the federal system, or the basic principles of democracy and constitutional rights […] Second – A policy of ethnic discrimination and change of demographic reality in Kurdistan, or work to maintain previous implications and consequences thus retreating from the constitutional obligations contained in Article 140 of the federal constitution[86].

Nevertheless, when looking at the empirical material, it appears that this choice has not solely been influenced by the security factors mentioned above. It seems to also be strongly related to other material factors and the way the opportunity structures that arose with the fall of the old regime was dealt with. The material indicates that the Kurdistan region at that time acted strategically and made a rational choice of not declaring independence. For example, A Turkman member of the Kurdistan parliament argued that,

> […] after the fall of Saddam Hussein, it was a good opportunity for the Kurds to declare independence and establish a Kurdish state. Because Iraq was dead then, the situation was off balance and chaotic […] But, the opportunity could not be exploited fully, because the Kurdistan region had not the economic resources, like now, to uphold a strong independent Kurdistan. The Peshmerga was strong, but unlike now, they lacked in weapons and military education, and it would not be able to stand against others more superior in terms of power or the armies of the neighboring countries in north and east[87].

Therefore, it seems that the Kurds had the opportunity, but could not exploit it to the extent that could stimulate the requirements of an independent Kurdistan. For that reason the Kurds had not and was not able to mobilize the resources needed for making this choice. This was also mentioned by another MP, whom is a member of the parliament's interior and national security committee.

[86] Phillips, 2015: 107-108.
[87] Interview with MP Cawdat Jarjis, 2017.

Nazim Herki, meant that the Kurdistan region's security policy has always been based on three main issues (i) real security, i.e. the manner in which Kurdistan can protect and defend itself, secure its territory of operation and the stability of the Kurdish society. (ii) A strong economy, which can make the Kurdistan region to act freely without being dependent on others and (iii) political power, diplomacy and a high degree of external support through diplomacy and cooperation. During this period, Herki states, the Kurds did not ''have a strong and independent economy'' and ''the military capabilities'' as they have now[88]. Moreover, the Kurds had also not the 60 oil and gas fields as they have in 2017 with estimated proven ''reserves of 45 billion barrels (as well as 25 billion barrels of potential reserves) and 100-200 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of natural gas reserves''[89] or as a 2015 report by the DOR organization has found out that the Kurdistan region has after 2013 become one of the top 15 global energy actors in terms of oil and gas reserves and ''will be the last place in the world to run out of natural resources''[90].

Furthermore, even if the opportunity was there, the Kurdistan region was weak in mobilizing internal resources and was weak in terms of self-governance, institutions and suffered from internal political instability[91]. During the 80s-00s the Kurds experienced a set of political conflicts amongst themselves. For example, a civil-war broke out during 1994-1998 between the KDP and PUK, and the risks of this or a similar juncture to repeat itself, within an independent Kurdistan at that time, is something that could not have been excluded[92]. Moreover, the KRG lacked the experience needed for self-governance, because the KRG was established in 1992 and was dominated by internal conflicts in 6 years without any seriously functioning institutions, meaning that the KRG only had 5 years of experience in handling its own affairs internally. Therefore an independent Kurdish state, without some experience in terms of sustainable governance, could have become a failed, weak and/or chaotic state at that time as it has appeared in the cases of South Sudan and a post-Saddam Iraq[93].

Nevertheless, even if the Kurdistan region could have taken the opportunity, however, it appears that the Kurds recognized and calculated the risks and benefits of this choice. Given the

[88] Interview with MP Nazim Herki, 2017.
[89] Investingroup, 2013.
[90] Peakoil, 2015.
[91] Interview with NSA Hemin Hawarmi, 2017. Interview with Tahsin Dolamri, MP, 2017.
[92] Danilovich, 2016.
[93] Phillips, 2015. Ahmed, 2012.

circumstances during 2003-2005 and the things the Kurds have achieved after 2005 such internal political reconciliation through the strategic deal for partnership between the KDP and PUK for eliminating political conflicts, the increment of the region's economic and military capacities, enhancement of ''state'' institutions, forming alliances with rival neighbors, establishing strong political and diplomatic ties with powerful external actors, it seems that the choice of not declaring independence have had strategic purposes as the previous research has pointed such as preparing and building the pillars of a de facto state within Iraq (more about this is discussed in section 5.2).

Creating an independent state is not an easy process, as it needs strong and stable financial, military and security grounds. It is equally dependent on the level of power a political body possesses and the level of support and cooperation with the surrounding environment and other external actors. This is particularly true for groups like the Kurds, whom historically have lived among hostile and rival countries. A state without legitimacy and formal recognition may fall quickly, therefore challenging the status quo without any relations to external actors and without assessment of the regional as well as international balance of power structures can have devastating consequences as it has appeared in the cases of the self-proclaimed Kurdish states during the interwar period such as the Kingdom of Kurdistan (1922-1924), the Ararat republic (1927-1930) and later on the Mahabad republic (1945-1946), where the Kurds lacked in power capabilities and did not have the support needed from the outside world. They mostly relied on weakly trained tribal and internal forces and often placed themselves at the wrong end of the balancing order and sought for support from ''wrong'' allies such as the Soviet Union[94].

Thus, during 2003-2005, the Kurdistan region of Iraq, lacked in power and sustainable relations and cooperation with the outside world and was strongly opposed by Turkey, Iran and Syria, whom also were allies against the Kurds in Iraq as well as in their respective countries. Furthermore, the Western powers, particularly the US, opposed Kurdish ambitions for self-determination. For example, in the interview with Massoud Barzani, the President claimed that the US made clear that an independent Kurdish state would not come into being at any cost, and that they also rejected federalism for Iraq, ''after the fall of the Baath regime, the US framed itself as a conqueror and installed a civil ruler [Paul Bremer] for the country. The US strongly opposed Kurdish

[94] Charountaki, 2013. McDowall, 2004: 116-220.

independence and was also against federalism and wanted to form a strong central government''[95]. In some ways this looks the scenario that took place during the 1991 Kurdish uprisings. The (senior) Bush administration encouraged the Kurds and Shiites in Iraq to rise. The Kurds rose but the US abandoned its ''encouragement policy'' and chose to not support the Kurdish forces in the fear that Iraq would split into different parts. Similarly, during 2003-2005, the US encouraged the Kurds to help them in the fight against the Baathists and called the Kurdistan region of Iraq a ''strategic ally'' and benefited from the Kurds and Peshmerga forces in defeating the Baath regime and the Iraqi army, but later on opposed Kurdish ambitions for becoming independent. Instead they sought for real cooperation with Bagdad than with Erbil[96].

Therefore, it is clear that the choice of declaring independence could not be done unilaterally at that time due to the relative and small amount of power the Kurds had during 2003-2005 for convincing/opposing the critical actors involved. For example, according to General Sirwan Barzani, when:

> The Americans wanted to establish military bases in Turkey and enter Iraq through the mainland, the Turks did not allow them. We offered the Americans to establish bases in Kurdistan. While American soldiers were killed in other parts of Iraq, they were safe in Kurdistan and guarded by our Peshmerga forces. And, still they had a bad attitude towards us. They came to us and indirectly told us to not think about anything drastic, they wanted us to only have an advisory and balancing role in the new Iraq […] You see, in world politics if you have power, others will comprise and listen to you, if you do not have it, everyone will try to dominate you. Everything depends two things. Power and Interests. If people do not have interests in you, they will ignore you. But today things are different[97].

This clearly shows that the Kurds had limited sources of power that were not sufficient for making a choice about independence and lacked the support from their main ''strategic ally''. Furthermore, Turkey was another main actor standing against the Kurds. Turkey feared that a federal system and a rapprochement between the Kurds and US would empower the KRG and that if the Kurds in Iraq would become more independent, its own Kurdish population (ca 18-20 million) would follow their path[98]. After Turkey's refusal to line up with another NATO-member, the US, against Saddam Hussein, the 2003 Sulaimaniya incident took place, which has been considered as the ''worst crisis

[95] Interview with President Massoud Barzani, 2015.
[96] Gunter, 2016. Charountaki, 2014.
[97] Interview with General. Sirwan Barzani, 2017.
[98] Charountaki, 2012.

of confidence''[99] between the KRG and Turkey, where the Americans detained 11 Turkish soldiers in the Kurdish city of Sulaymaniya and Turkey initiated a military operation at the borders of the Kurdistan region. The incident came as a result of Turkey's fear that the oil rich Kurdish majority city Kirkuk as well as Mosul and nearby areas (containing portions of Turkmens loyal to Turkey) would permanently be controlled by the KRG and that the Kurdistan region would become a base for the anti-Turkey PKK fighters[100]. The leaders in Ankara clearly communicated their resolve and warned the Kurds to be cautious in how they acted[101]. This was a critical juncture, where the country become a noticeable rival of the Kurdistan region and the relations continued to suffer until May 2008[102].

At the same time, the two close allies, Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, stood against the Kurds and feared that any Kurdish move for independence or increased politico-military autonomy would affect them too. Both countries, like Turkey, have large portions of Kurdish nationals (together around 10-12 million) and if the Kurds would declare independence, their own Kurdish populations could take the same pathway. For that reason, like Turkey and the US, both countries showed no sign of comprise to the Kurds regarding the sovereignty and territorial unity of Iraq[103]. Furthermore, Iran and Syria, were/are anti-Western states, and they feared that the birth of a pro-western state between them, in the form of a geostrategically important Kurdistan region supported by Israel, would pose a serious threat to their own political influence and military reach in the Middle East. Since 2005, Syria and Iran have opposed the Kurds in different ways and several times warned them to not challenge the geographical status quo in Iraq[104].

To sum up, it appears that the Kurds did not declare independence due to the fall of the Baath regime, Iraqi army and the non-existence of real security threats. This led the Kurds to find themselves in a friendlier environment than before through increased and legitimate political, economic and military autonomy guaranteed by a new political system determined in the federal constitution. Even if the opportunity was there, still it was a limited one and not appropriate for a possible declaration of independence due to internal and external factors. Furthermore, the Kurds

[99] Ibid.
[100] Peuch, 2003.
[101] Interview with MP Cawdat Jarjis, 2017.
[102] Charountaki, 2012.
[103] Nader et al, 2016.
[104] Mustafa, 2016.

lacked in mobilizing the resources needed for independence especially internal resources in terms of national unity as well as material resources. Moreover, the Kurds also lacked the power needed for convincing/opposing other critical actors involved in the issue. Therefore, the Kurds seem to have concluded that costs of an independent Kurdistan at that time would have been more than the benefits. On the contrary, the choice of remaining within Iraq, at that time, had more benefits than costs and risks.

5.2 Why do the Kurdistan region aim to declare independence 14 years later?

When the US troops started to withdraw from Iraq in 2007, the Kurds become concerned about the future of Iraq. They requested the Americans to remain passive on the issue and argued that the country was in a recovery-mode and the changes that had taken place could not be handled by the new Iraqi state, they feared that the *status quo ante* of the pre-2003 Iraq would be reestablished and the situation would become much more unstable than before[105]. The Americans ignored the request and in 2011 the withdrawal was completed. This was one of the first tipping points creating a chain of event leading to a Kurdish choice to declare independence and see statehood as the ‘’ultimate goal’’[106].

As soon as the Americans issued the withdrawal, things went wrong and a serious chain of events took place such as the non-implementation of articles in the constitution guaranteeing the political and economic autonomy and security of the Kurds, including article-140, Bagdad’s military attacks towards Kurdistan and attempts to change the demographics of Kurdish areas and the removal of almost every Kurdish member of the Iraqi armed forces, whom had made up 46 percent of the country’s military manpower[107]. The Iraqi government started to impose a series of permanent sanctions against the Kurds including the cutting of salaries of Kurdish public servants, Kurdistan’s share of the Iraqi budget, medical supplies and etc. On the top of that, ISIS’s rise and the dissertation of more than 30.000 soldiers of the Iraqi national army and more than 5 army divisions outside Kurdistan led ISIS to undisturbedly march towards Kurdish areas and declare war against the Kurds, the Iraqi state did not interfere and ‘’ left the Kurds alone’’[108]. The Kurds have since then found themselves in a security dilemma and an environment threatening their survival and

[105] Interview with foreign minister Falah Mustafa, 2017.
[106] Interview with General. Sheikh Jafar, 2017.
[107] Interview, with President Massoud Barzani, 2017. Interview with Hemin Hawrami, 2017.
[108] Interview with MP Nazim Herki, 2017.

security. For example, in an interview with the assistant professor in international law and Member of Kurdistan Parliament, Tariq Rashid, stated that:

> The new Iraq turned out to be the opposite of what we have wished it to be […] the constitution and its articles have never been fully implemented. For example, we have article 140, according to the constitution a referendum should have been held […] but the political elite in Bagdad has been hostile and created many obstacles to make sure that this would not happen. The Peshmerga soldiers, are officially recognized by the constitution […] However, Bagdad has never paid the salaries of our Peshmerga soldiers. They have not provided our soldiers with weapons, resources or any other assistance whether in peace or war time. We were the first ones who formed the Iraqi army and we sent our Peshmerga soldiers and tried to integrate them but they were discriminated, externalized and bullied by Iraq. This discrimination, externalization and bullying has not only been targeted to members of our armed forces, it has also been directed to Kurdish civilians, and especially those who live in the Kurdistani [disputed] areas as in Kirkuk and areas around[109].

When the Kurds supported the Shiite Prime Minister, Nouri Maliki (2006-2014), to take power, the Iran-affiliated prime minister promised the Kurds ‘’to not worry about their future’’ and that he would make sure the implementation of article-140 before 2008[110]. However, the article was never implemented and became the first dispute between the Kurdistan region and its parent-state that fueled a new choice about independence. According to President Barzani, the Kurds did everything they could to be an active part of the new Iraq but the response from Bagdad have been the opposite to expectations and the points that were agreed on in 2003-2005, and therefore the Kurds cannot wait for an uncertain future anymore,

> The Iraqi state publicly broke the constitution. They did not give the Peshmerga their rightful shares. And they [Iraq] without even hiding it worked in all different ways to make Kurdistan weaker. They went so far that they cut the Region’s budget and people’s salaries. When ISIS attacked Kurdistan, Iraq did not defend us and the other ethnic and religious groups, Kurdistan was forced to defend itself and them, alone. We have a dark history with the Iraqi state. After 2003, the political course in Iraq went wrong and a number of crises took place. The Kurds are not the cause for the prevailing crises in Iraq and we also do not want to be part of the conflicts. We cannot wait for an uncertain future anymore therefore we work for independence now[111].

[109] Interview with MP Tariq Rashid, 2017.
[110] Sullivan, 2013.
[111] Interview with President Massoud Barzani, 2015.

The Khanaqin area is one of the disputed areas and part of article-140, historical accords show that like Kirkuk, Khanaqin is a Kurdish city, however because of the process of Arabization of Kurdish areas during the 70-80s, many Iraqi Arabs were settled in these territories. Nevertheless, since many of these areas are still Kurdish majority areas, the Kurds still kept their forces operative there and since 2003 the city of Khanaqin has been directly but unofficially under Kurdish control. In 2008, the first military assault against the Kurds took place in the new Iraq, it was a critical juncture that through time to present day have led to increased Kurdish voice for independence and statehood.

Maliki formed the Tigris Operation Command (TOC) around Khanaqin, attempting to monopolize the power in Iraq and create several intelligence and military patronage networks in the country for protecting his position as prime minister and with the TOC, Hemin Hawrami said ‘’Maliki launched and attacked and deployed tanks against Kurdistan in Khanaqin’’[112]. The government's aim was to regain authority over the geostrategically important city bordering Iran. Iraq threatened the Kurds to withdraw from the area and demanded the 34th Peshmerga brigade to leave, the Kurds refused. The attempts of forcing the Kurds out, resulted in a deadlock, the Peshmerga raising the Kurdistani flag on one side and the Iraqi army on the other, leading to the death of a Peshmerga soldier. The Kurds started to see Maliki as the new Saddam Hussein and the incident led to a serious dispute between President Barzani and Maliki[113]. The US military eventually interfered and solved the issue, however, the relations between Bagdad and Erbil deteriorated significantly leading to a number of clashes and a serious military build-up by the Kurds[114].

A similar incident that completely created a serious debate about independence took place in 2012. This time, the Iraqi government with Maliki at the front ordered the TOC troops to attack the Kurdish district of Tuz Khurmatu outside the city of Kirkuk, and the Kurds, as a Kurdish MP in Bagdad stated ‘’could not believe that this was happening in the new Iraq. This is the same thing Saddam Hussein and his army did to us. Who can live in a country where the state tries to attack you?’’[115]. As a result and the defiance of the Kurds, fierce clashes took place between the Peshmerga and Iraqi army resulting in a number of casualties on both sides. Kurdish military

[112] Interview with NSA Hemin Hawrami, 2017.
[113] Lawrance, 2009.
[114] Interview with MP Tahsin Dolamari, 2017.
[115] Interview with MP Tariq Rashid, 2017.

leaders and Barzani warned Maliki and the government to not provoke them without reason and not act ‘’unconstitutionally’’, otherwise serious defensive and offensive measures would be taken[116]. Maliki did not stop and ordered other TOC troops to mobilize towards Kirkuk (considered by the Kurds as the Jerusalem of Kurdistan). This time the Kurdish commander-in-chief himself went out to the frontlines outside Kirkuk and told the Peshmerga ‘’you assume today a sacred task that impose on you to defend the future of Kurdistan people’’[117]. Since then, the Kurds have found themselves in a mode of self-defense and in a question about how the attacks have influence the choice of independence, Tahsin Dolamari, a member of the Kurdistan parliament answered, the two attacks indicate Iraq want to be ‘’our enemy’’ and

> They want to be our rivals without reason. Iraq wants us to live under its dominance and fear. First, they attacked Khanaqin, then they attacked Kirkuk. After that they cut the budget, and some months after the salaries of people, how can a state cut its own civil population’s income […] After a while they cut medical supplies, blocked the air space, imposed sanctions and taxation against us. Then they let ISIS come and attack us. While we fight ISIS, they take our weapons sent to us from the international coalition and impose sanctions against us at the same time they have every month sent $125 million to Mosul. Why would someone send money to Mosul, a place that has become the capital of those terrorizing the people of Iraq and Kurdistan, but not to us, in a time where we have given shelter and protected almost 2 million refugees and IDPs from Syria and Iraq. These actions are alarming and how can we be a part of this country while we are not secure and constantly worried for what might come next. It is for that security reason we aim to declare independence now[118].

In 2013, another factor that led the Kurds to make plans for the choice of independence was when the Iraqi government cut the KRG’s share of the annual budget (17 percent) and everything else that had been guaranteed by law including weapons and medical supplies. In February 2014, Bagdad stepped up its sanctions and cut the salaries of Kurdish public servants and welfare benefits to the Kurds in Iraq[119]. Iraq accused the KRG to have acted unconstitutionally for exporting oil via Turkey, according to Maliki this was a ‘’constitutional violation’’ which they would ‘’never allow, not for the region nor for the Turkish government […] Turkey must not interfere in an issue that harms Iraqi sovereignty’’[120]. The sanctions caused an economic crisis in Kurdistan. In a meeting

[116] Interview with General. Sirwan Barzani, 2017.
[117] Ekurd, 2012.
[118] Interview with MP Tahsin Dolamari, 2017.
[119] Coles, 2014.
[120] Aljazeera, 2014.

with Amina Zikri, the Kurdistan MP argued that when they asked the government why they had done so, Bagdad's answer was two folded.

> The first one was ''this is ordered by the prime minister'' and the second was ''this has also been ordered by the commander-in-chief for of armed forces of Iraq''. Do you know what this signals? They made both a political and military threat by using and mentioning the prime minister and the commander-in-chief for the armed forces of Iraq […] their excuse at that time was that Kurdistan sold and exported oil independently. But in fact, this was not true. Because they cut the budget in 2013, and in the second month of 2014, they cut the salaries and everything else. And we had not even thought to produce, export or sale the oil. However, when they cut the budget and everything else, in May 2014, the government of Kurdistan was forced to do so in order to survive[121].

It appears that the KRG after Bagdad's military offensives and intentions to stir in the demographics of the disputed areas, the non-implementation of the federal constitution and the sanctions has adopted a more independent foreign and economic policy by taking different measures to protect themselves and prepare to separate from Iraq[122]. It is here Turkey, the former rival of the Kurdistan region, enters the picture. The regional balance of power changed drastically in 2006 when the Shiites back by Iran rose to power in Iraq. Turkey, a Sunni majority country, has long been a main rival of Iran and when the Shiites took control over Iraq, Turkish influence in the country decreased significantly and Iran (a rival of the Kurds) has since then completely dominated the decision-making centers all over the country. Therefore, the Turks concluded that an alliance with the KRG would balance Iraq and Iran as well as a way to increase their own influence in the country[123]. One of the interviewed MPs argued that the establishment of strong relations with Turkey has become ''a support for declaring independence''[124].

The Kurds have acted strategically when it comes to Turkey and since 2014 created the incentives needed for making Turkey to a close ally and taken advantage of Turkey's rivalry with Iran and the Iraqi government but also the country's strategic location as an insulator between the Middle East and Europe by establishing a compact energy and security cooperation through a 50 years agreement for providing Turkey with natural resources and export it via Turkish soil (in Ceyhan)

[121] Interview with MP Amina Zkri, 2017.
[122] Interview with MP Nazim Herki, 2017.
[123] Charountaki, 2012.
[124] Interview with MP Cawdat Jarjis, 2017.

to the global market[125]. In a conference 2012, the Turkish energy minister stated that Turkey's future is in need of natural resources and that their ''neighbor'' (Kurdistan region) has an important role in fulfilling Turkey's future needs and demands regarding oil and gas. He also confirmed that it is with the regional government of Kurdistan they want to make business with and they [Turkey] will stand by Kurdistan region ''when they face problems''[126]. The Kurds suddenly succeeded to make a rival to an ally and start a long-term relationship with NATO's second largest military member (more about this is discussed below).

During 2014-2015, Bagdad almost completely cut its relations with Erbil. The new Iraqi state become a fierce opponent of the Kurds warning them to remain passive about challenging Iraq's unity but the Kurds started to argue that Iraq was no ''longer the secure place'' they had ''thought before''[127]. From 2005 to present day, Iraq, after the Baath regime's collapse, has been dominated by instability, civil war, corruption, anarchy, sectarian and armed intra-state conflicts and terrorism. The central government, despite constant American and Western aid and consult, been surprisingly weak in dealing with these issues because it has self been a part of the conflicts between the different sects and groups. The Kurds argue that they do not ''wish to be part of the chaos in Iraq anymore''.

> We have succeeded to protect and secure Kurdistan to some degree from the ongoing instability in Iraq, but if we do not become independent, it will only be a matter of time until we also collapse and become a part of this chaos and anarchy''[128].

During the start of 2014, the KRG together with some elements of Kurdistan's intelligence and security community (Asayish) issued a warning to Bagdad that ISIS had plans for making a large operation in Iraq that ''would pose a threat to both Kurdistan and Iraq'', but Bagdad ignored the warnings[129]. In the summer of 2014, ISIS entered and occupied more than 33 percent of Iraq including some Kurdish majority (disputed) areas and more than 30.000 Iraqi soldiers deserted and left arms, including several military warehouses intended for 4 Iraqi army divisions and 1 federal police division as well as more than 2300 military vehicles and the organization after a short period

[125] Hurriyet Dailynews, 2014.
[126] KRG – Ministry of natural resources, 2012.
[127] Interview with MP Muna Khaveci, 2017.
[128] Interview with MP Amina Zkri, 2017.
[129] Rudaw(a), 2014.

headed towards the Kurdish capital, Erbil, they shortly took control of Mahkmour, Gwer, Gulala and other Kurdish areas. The caliphate declared war against the Kurds[130]. The war against ISIS have had a serious impact on the Kurdistan region in various ways. Many Kurds today blame Iraq's retreat and inability to protect them as the main cause for their war against ISIS. In an interview with General. Jabar Gardi, whom is one of the COOs for Peshmerga operations against ISIS, Gardi stated that they see:

> Maliki's Iraq as responsible for our war against ISIS. They made room for ISIS to attack Kurdistan. ISIS entered Iraq from the territories controlled by the Iraqi army. I do not know why the Iraqi army fled, they left all the advanced weapons and military warehouses full of American made equipment and weapons behind them to ISIS. Yet to this moment, no one in Iraq has asked Maliki, as the then commander-in-chief and responsible for the country's security, why and how ISIS entered in to Iraq. We have asked them, they do not answer. What do you think this silence signals to us?[131]

After pressure from the Kurds on the political elite in Bagdad and the US, Maliki stepped down from his position as prime minister to only become vice-president of Iraq. Haider Al-Abadi, a fellow party member of Maliki's Dawa party, become the new prime minister, promising the Kurds normalization of relations and lifting the large-scale sanctions, but in reality, as the presidential advisor Hemin Hawarami said ''Maliki's policies have continued in the Abadi era''[132]. Under Abadi's time the rhetoric of the prime minister's office softened but in reality things have worsened for the Kurds and it seems that Bagdad has not only continued to impose more sanctions against the Kurds, they have also according to decision-makers in Erbil ''created problems'' for the Kurds to defeat ISIS[133]. Even if the Peshmerga was the most effective ground force in the war against ISIS and become internationally known for its extensive effort and military success, still the war has been one of bloodiest and most costly wars in Kurdish military history with over 11.000 causalities including the loss of ca 2000 Peshmerga soldiers in only three years and the Kurdistan region has fought and spent billions without ''receiving anything from the Iraq''[134]. When President Barzani asked the international community to interfere and protect the Kurdistan region, the US and 65 other countries created a coalition to through airstrikes support the ground forces

[130] Spesia, 2014.
[131] Interview with General. Jabar Gardi, 2017.
[132] Interview with NSA Hemin Hawrami, 2017.
[133] Interwith with MP Muna Kahveci, 2017. Frantzman, 2016.
[134] Interview with MP Tariq Rashid, 2017.

against ISIS. Despite the fact that members of the international community have sent military equipment including heavy amours and weapons to the Peshmerga but since the Kurdistan region is not a sovereign entity, the transfers have been forced to go through Bagdad. However, according to the Kurds, Bagdad has not let the transfers to take place, instead they have seized much of the weapons and given them to others especially the Iran-backed PMU militias that often have threatened and expressed a deep hostility towards the Kurds. Therefore, the Kurds have not only felt that Bagdad has been unhelpful but also become an enemy taking and blocking their share of resources for overcoming terrorism and giving them to other hostile groups supported by the rivals of the Kurds[135]. Therefore, when I interviewed the Foreign Minister, Falah Mustafa, was much concerned about the existing situation and relations between Bagdad and Erbil. He also claimed that the choice of independence is mainly related the existing national security threats posed by Bagdad and other hostile actors operating in Iraq whether in the form of ISIS or other Iraqi forces. He went on and claimed that many external forces think that Kurds have arrived to destination, which is independence, based on a simple decision and lacks legitimate political, security and military ground for this case. But his response was that this is not true. Instead it is related to the constant threats and hostile actions coming from Bagdad and other parts of Iraq as well as a constant feeling of ''insecurity'' and endless deliberations about an ''uncertain future''. He also stated that:

> We cannot buy weapons and ammunition because we are not a sovereign independent state […] We cannot borrow money from World Bank and IMF because we are not independent. We are handcuffed, we are handtied and we end up being in a situation which is very awkward. We are neither fully integrated as part of Iraq to benefit from being Iraqi nor are we fully independent and sovereign so we can act […] Therefore, the time has come for us to act and end this[136].

Another point is the economic crisis that has been existent in Kurdistan in relation to the sanctions, fall of oil prices during 2015-2016 (the prices fell from ca $110 per barrel to $27), the war against ISIS and the refugee crisis. Erbil argues that the sanctions have been used by Bagdad as a way to stop the Kurds to become more independent, their energy and military cooperation with the outside world and increased power capabilities[137]. The economic situation worsened especially during the 2014-2016 refugee crisis where almost 1.8 million refugees from Syria and internal displaced

[135] Interview with General. Sirwan Barzani, 2017. Interview with General Sheikh Jafar, 2017.
[136] Interview with foreign minister Falah Mustafa, 2017.
[137] Economist, 2016.

people (IDP) in Iraq fled to Kurdistan[138]. For the last 3 years the region's population has increased with ca 32 percent, putting a significant pressure on the KRG to produce more oil and spend more resources for providing the refugees with basic needs, protection and household[139]. The KRG has several time requested Bagdad to put aside ''disputes'' and help them with the refugees, but Bagdad has chosen to not do so, because Bagdad, according to the Kurds see it as a way ''limiting the [independence] referendum and choice of declaring independence''[140].

The refugees increased significantly in Kurdistan when the religious leader of the Iraqi Shiites, Al-Sistani, in coordination with Iran and support from Maliki called for the creation of the umbrella organization, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) consisting of a number of sectarian militias protecting Shiite practitioners from ISIS. Worth mentioning is that when the Shiite Arabs took power in Iraq in the mid-2000s, they retaliated against the Sunni Arabs for having been supporters of Saddam and since then Iraq has become the locus of sectarian intra-state conflicts in the Middle East[141]. It was for that reason many Sunnis in Mosul and areas around choose to not fight ISIS when the organization occupied their territories, because many of them saw ''ISIS as a better alternative than the Iraqi government''[142]. Several international human rights organizations, amongst them Amnesty international, have reported that PMU has for that reason at several occasions committed war crimes against Sunni locals in those areas the PMU have liberated from ISIS and that the PMU ''poses a big threat'' to the region's stability[143].

The sectarian fight in Iraq has been something that the Kurds have tried to remain neutral in, but since the formation of the PMU, the militias during 2015-2017 have at a dozen of occasions attacked Kurdish areas, killed Peshmerga soldiers and tried to take control of Kurdish territories especially around Sinjar, Kirkuk Tuz Khurmatu and other disputed areas[144]. The Kurds argue that the Popular Mobilization Units are political militias serving the interests of certain individuals like Maliki, Iran and the Shiites in Iraq, rather than forces created for fighting against ISIS[145]. The Kurds see the anti-Kurdish Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as the main sponsoror of the

[138] KRG, 2017.
[139] Worldbank, 2015.
[140] Interview with MP Nazim Herki, 2017.
[141] Stansfield, 2007.
[142] Fahim et al, 2014.
[143] Amnesty International, 2017.
[144] Kurdistan24, 2016.
[145] Alamuddin, 2016.

PMU, for example one of the interviewed generals stated that ‘’Bagdad lets IRGC leaders and other hostile groups to do what they want in Iraq, they create sectarian militias designed to take territory and fight us in the future, this is the signals we have received from the new Iraq’’[146]. In 2016, the PMU by law become a part of Iraq’s armed forces and they have since then received $1 billion annually, making the Kurds feel treated unfairly[147]. In an interview with Sirwan Barzani, the Peshmerga general stated that the PMU has in a short time formally become a part of the Iraqi armed forces and during this short time the PMU has annually

> […] received around $0.7-1 billion. Why have the Peshmerga then not received its part of the budget? It was the founder of the Iraqi army. We are not a political army, we protect Kurds as well as Arabs and other [ethnic and religious] groups, why then have the Peshmerga not been paid, supplied and assisted since 2005. Nothing has worked out with Iraq, they constantly threaten us and they deploy sectarian forces and attack us […] The attacks from ISIS are just the beginning if we do not act quickly and do something about our future then other more formal opponents may take the next fight against us[148].

The choice of independence appears to mostly been affected by the rise of new security threats and a hostile threat environment where Bagdad has also tried to limit the economic capacity of Kurdistan. However, there are other aspects of why nations may aim to create an independent and formal sovereign state of their own. That is, the rise of new opportunities and the availability of new resources to mobilize. For the Kurds, one of these opportunities has been the alliance and energy cooperation between the KRG-Turkey. Even if the Turks have not officially announced support for the Kurds and opposed them, like Iran, in their choice of holding the referendum and independency process, however, the tone in Ankara against the Kurds in Iraq has changed significantly and become very friendly to an extent that is paradoxal to Turkey-KRG relations from a historical perspective. For example, the Turkish Foreign Minister said in a statement that the Kurdistan region’s referendum for independence will not stop the energy, economic and security cooperation between them and that they would not ‘’consider war as an option’’ for stopping the referendum or after referendum.

Through the oil agreement with Turkey, the Kurdistan region has become economically independent from Bagdad and on an average produced 650.000 barrels per day and with a short-

[146] Interview with General. Jabar Gardi, 2017.
[147] Mansour, 2015.
[148] Interview with General. Sirwan Barzani, 2017.

term objective to increase the production to 1.4-1.8 million barrels in 2021 and are building two further gas-pipelines[149]. This has led the KRG to rebuild the region and increase its economic capacity. It has also been a major factor for the Kurds to an extent taming the economic crisis, the financing of the war against ISIS and the supervising of the 1.8 million refugees[150]. At the same time, Turkey has benefited extremely from the oil deal where the current oil and the planned gas pipelines streams through the country, leading to more income and energy guarantees for the country in the future. Furthermore, the alliance has also given Turkey a stakeholding position in Kurdistan obliging Ankara to interfere in every issue and conflict involving the Kurdistan region[151]. The KRG has also made space for Turkish companies to have a leading role in infrastructure and building projects and the KRG's strategic business sectors[152]. Moreover, the Kurdistan region has also become one of Turkey's top-3 export markets after Germany and the United Kingdom, for example, when relations with the KRG were bad in 2007, Turkish export in Kurdistan netted around $1.4 billion. In 2013, Turkish export to KRG had reached over $8 billion and in 2014-2015 around $12 billion[153]. Consequently, the KRG-Turkey alliance have led to a close military and security cooperation especially when it comes to common security threats such Iran, PMU and ISIS[154]. In 2015, the Turkish military, through the Kurdistan region established a military base outside Mosul and attacked the Sinjar area in 2017 leading to a number of disputes and political crises between Turkey and Iraq. At the end of 2014, Turkey officially and for the first time in history approved Peshmerga soldiers with flying Kurdish flags to mobilize and cross Turkish borders to fight ISIS in Kobane in Rojava (Western Kurdistan Syrian part). The Kurds have sided up with Turkey both to balance Bagdad and Iran but also become more independent and through Turkey reach out to the outside world[155]. An official spokesman of the ruling part in Turkey, AKP, stated in 2014 that "In Turkey, even the word 'Kurdistan' makes people nervous, but their name is Kurdistan […] If Iraq is divided and it is inevitable, they are our brothers'' and a diplomat stated that Turkey ''don't want to encourage independence and caution against hasty moves, but if it happens they will live with it[156]. Thus, Ankara is in a position, if opposing the Kurds and their

[149] Rudaw(b), 2016.
[150] Wilkin, 2017.
[151] Pusane. 2016.
[152] Cagaptay et al, 2015.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Interview with MP Nazim Herki, 2017.
[155] Kurdistan24, 2016.
[156] Dombey, 2014.

ambitions, to lose and forfeit an its only ally and lessen its influence in the Middle East economically as well as politically. Such moves by Turkey would likely drive decision-makers in Erbil to close themselves to other alternatives as well as to interfere in domestic affairs of Turkey and enhance relations with the PKK and HDP and in Rojava with PYD and YPG, which for Turkey are ‘’red-lines’’. This shows that the Kurdistan region have acted strategically in order to create more power and external support.

Another example is the transformation of Kurdish low-level diplomacy from 2006 to high-table diplomacy in 2017. Since 2007, the political and diplomatic relations of the Kurdistan region have grown in an unusual way and the Kurdistan region has since 2012 been treated like an independent country by the outside world[157]. In 2017, the number of formal diplomatic foreign representatives in Kurdistan numbered 43 including US, UK, South Korea, Japan, Brazil, Britain, Russia, France, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, more than 10 EU-member states and etc.[158] In 2016, the US started to build its largest diplomatic complex in Erbil replacing the one in Mexico City[159]. These things have had important implications for an independence seeking Kurdistan. This can be traced back to the KRG’s market economy policies, strategic framing and the prevailing security and stability inside the Kurdistan region. During 2010-2014 the economy of the Kurdistan region grew significantly and flourished, much due to the expansion of its oil and gas sectors leading to an economic boom, where the Kurdish cities has become one of the main centers for regional businesses and trade, tourism started to flourish. In 2012, the number of tourists outside Kurdistan reached 2.2 million[160] and in 2013 compared with 2008 the number of tourists had increased with 70 percent[161]. In 2014, Erbil was appointed as the Arab-world’s Tourism Capital, heading before Beirut, Dubai, Riyadh and Sharjah[162]. These things have led the KRG to attract more than 27000 foreign companies amongst them Chevron, Total, Gazprom, Rosneft, DNO, ExxonMobil and other multinational and state-owned companies. This number is three times more than the number of foreign companies registered in the rest of Iraq[163]. The sum effect of all these developments have

[157] Benigo, 2012.
[158] KRG department of foreign relations.
[159] Rudaw(c), 2017.
[160] Rudaw(d), 2013.
[161] KRG, Board of Tourism.
[162] Mohammed, 2012.
[163] Rudaw(e), 2013

led to increased opportunities for Kurds, which have led them to become more confident in taking steps toward statehood and independence.

At the same time, the Kurdish military and security forces have effectively protected the region. Despite the fact that the Kurds find themselves in a warzone with armed conflicts and terrorism at their doorsteps, only 4 minor attacks have been carried out inside Kurdistan for the last 5 years with a death toll scoring under 6 individuals[164]. This has led foreigners to feel safe, visit and invest in the region and see Kurdistan as different compared to the rest of Iraq which is dominated by a somewhat civil war and high degree of anarchy. Moreover, the Kurds have also framed themselves in a way that have attracted the outside world to the region. For example since 2005, the KRG has become more cohesive than before, by eliminating most of the internal political conflicts especially between the main and most important parties KDP and PUK (some still exist between KDP and the Change-movement) and starting a democratization process where they have been quite successful compared to others in the region. Moreover, while many Kurds are dominated by a civic nationalist world view, many of them have adopted a semi-western liberal and secular way of life. This has led the outside world to look upon the Kurds as a different and as the Israeli prime minister stated the most ‘’moderate nation’’ compared to the ones existing in Iraq and Middle East dominated by ethno-cultural nationalism, religious extremism and sectarianism[165].

The increased economic capacity, the Peshmerga’s military success and effectiveness against ISIS, the alliance between the KRG-Turkey and Western states have also given the international community stake holding positions and critical interests in Kurdistan worth defending. This has led the Kurds to become assertive and more powerful but also to tightly connect themselves to the sphere of international politics. An humorous but interesting note that appeared in an interview with Hemin Hawrami, the presidential adviser stated that during the past the Kurdistan region and Kurds generally ‘’were a part of the menu ordered and served to those sitting at the table, but today we have a seat at the table’’[166] and another general said,

> Now we have space and opportunity to form a Kurdish state and declare independence. Today we are powerful and have the support we need, behind closed doors a large number of countries have

[164] OSEC, 2016.
[165] Phillips, 2016.
[166] Interview with NSA Hemin Hawrami, 2017.

> encouraged us to declare independence. Why should we wait and accept inferiority, uncertainty and insecurity while we have an excellent opportunity […] The worst thing that can happen with an independent Kurdistan is that it will remain to operate under the same conditions as it does now but with one difference, which is that we will be the rulers of our own country and act in whatever way we wish. Our hands will be unlocked[167].

This confidence indicates that the Kurds have become more powerful much due the rise of new opportunity structures through trade, oil sales and their demonstration of a military might consisting of ca 250.000 skillful soldier defeating ''the myth of ISIS'' and a ''terrorist state nobody has been able to face so on the ground so far''[168]. Furthermore, the oil sales and discovery of the huge amount of gas and oil reserves have led the KRG to act more independently, because it knows that an independent Kurdistan will last with these material resources available at its disposal. Moreover, the Kurds have created a strong ability to stand on their own and mobilized the resources needed for an independent state. For example, when the Iraqi army in 2014 fled from ISIS militants in the disputed areas including Kirkuk, the Kurds argued that the Iraqi army left a ''security vacuum'' which according to President Barzani needed ''immediate actions'' and within 72 hours the Peshmerga took control of much of the disputed areas and has since then controlled them[169]. This has led to a territorial growth with 30 percent. Iraq has several times warned the KRG and Peshmerga to leave the article-140 areas, but the Kurds have rejected the warnings and believe that since Bagdad did not implement it in the first beginning and also left the areas for ISIS, they consider the article with Peshmerga's presence there as ''implemented'' because they have liberated and defended these areas with ''their own blood'' and ''resources''[170]. Even if the presence of Kurdish military forces in these areas and the participation of the people in article-140 areas in the independence referendum may be a possible source of future conflicts between Erbil and Bagdad. Still, the Kurds have discovered that Iraq has become a failed and weak state with a fragmented army and is dominated by sectarian conflicts, the government suffers from economic, military, political crises, tearing the country apart[171]**.** Therefore, it would be a difficult task for Bagdad to regain authority in these areas even after Kurdish independence. Many Arabs have feared that a civil war in a post-ISIS Iraq especially between Sunnis and Shiites will definitely take

[167] Interview with General. Sirwan Barzani, 2017.
[168] Interview with General. Sheikh Jafar, 2017.
[169] Interview with President Massoud Barzani, 2015.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Kampfner, 2014.

place. For that reason, many Sunni Arabs especially around Tikrit and Mosul have planned to create their own federal region like the Kurdistan region in order to ‘’survive’’ and many Arab tribes amongst them the Shamar, Tamim and other major tribes have expressed their support for Kurdish independence and by will accepted to become future citizens of a future independent Kurdistan. This has led the Kurds to take advantage of the existing conditions in Iraq and the conflicts between the Iraqi Arabs by taking a different path, which is towards independence and statehood.

Another issue that has been discovered in the empirical material is that the Kurds have more external support (directly as well as indirectly as discussed above) than before, they have become close allies with a set of strong regional and global powers. For example, when ISIS attacked Kurdistan, an international coalition with the US on the front within a short period of time interfered and assisted the Kurds[172]. Furthermore, the international coalition against ISIS has since 2015 on a daily basis assisted the Peshmerga with air attacks and equipped and trained them in a very significant way. It has been an opportunity for the Kurdistan region to make the Peshmerga more effective and better trained as well as to prepare them for future threats. In 2016, the US signed a historic first military memorandum with ministry of Peshmerga, involving American support in peace and war time as well as a first delivery of $415 million and more transfers have been promised[173]. In 2017, Germany, US and UK signed an agreement with the KRG to rebuild the organizational structure of the Peshmerga army and making it to a modern ‘’professional army’’ and specialize them in counter-terrorism and land warfare[174]. Bagdad and Iran have at different occasions protested against the military support the Kurdistan region have received since 2014, fearing that there is an international intention to create an independent Kurdish state[175]. When the Kurdish leadership announced the date of the independence referendum none of the great powers were against it except for Iran. Some expressed concerns about the timing due to the fight of terrorism but none of them opposed it this includes the US as well as Germany, UK, Brazil, Japan, and a number of other powerful international players. Russia, through its foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, has told that this is an issue concerning the Kurds themselves and Moscow will ‘’respect the wishes of the people of Kurdistan’’ and according to the deputy speaker of the Kurdistan

[172] Robert and Akerman, 2014.
[173] ARA news, 2016.
[174] Rudaw(f), 2017.
[175] Zaman, 2016.

parliament, Jafar Ibrahim Eminki, 28 countries have expressed support for ‘’a Kurdish state’’[176]. Furthermore, Hungry, Kosovo, France, Czech Republic and Saudi Arabia have in different ways expressed support for a Kurdish state and Israel has been the first country urging the international community to support an independent Kurdistan[177]. All this issue are important and positive indicators for an independence seeking Kurdistan and shows how the attitude and reactions of the international community has changed compared to earlier stages. In the coming sections below the hypotheses will be in focus and results are presented in relation to the discussion held so far.

6. Hypotheses

In this chapter focus will be on the hypotheses and I aim to find out if they can be verified based on the empirical material and discussion so far.

6.1 Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis was that *if nations feel secure and do not find themselves in a threat environment or perceive their neighboring groups as a threat to their national security, it is likely that they will not consider independence and statehood as a choice. However, if they find themselves in a threat environment and face hostile actors posing a threat to their security, they will likely consider independence and statehood as a choice, because they will see it as a self-help measure.* Based on the case of the Kurdistan region, this hypothesis can be verified and evidence for this assumption is that as a result of the US invasion leading to the fall of the Baath regime and Iraqi army, the Kurds found themselves in safer and friendlier environment far from threats affecting their national security. Furthermore, the Kurds did not need to face any serious security dilemmas because the new Iraq through a federal political system based on the principle of power-sharing and the 2005 constitution guaranteed the Kurds safety as well as their political, economic and military autonomy in a formalized way. Therefore, the Kurds did not declare independence. However, 14 years later, the Kurds find themselves in a threat environment, surrounded by hostile

[176] Rudaw(g), 2015.
[177]Interview with Foreign Minister Falah Mustafa, 2017; Frantzman, 2016; The guardian, 2014; Sputnik, 2015; Basnews, 2015.

actors like the new Iraqi state, Iran, ISIS and PMU posing threats to their national security, which have led the Kurds to face a security dilemma. Therefore, after 14 years, the Kurds see independence a defensive self-help measure for survival.

6.2 Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis was, *if nations without a state of their own are weak in terms of power and lack in cooperation and support from external actors, they will likely not consider independence and statehood as a choice, because they cannot survive and stand against others more powerful than them. However, if nations become powerful and create access to defensive and offensive capabilities and have support and cooperation with external actors, then they will likely consider independence and statehood as a choice, because they will face less opposition from the outside world and have the power to disobey others*. Based on the case of the Kurdistan region this hypothesis can also be verified. The evidence is that, during 2003-2005, the Kurds did not have the power and external support needed for declaring independence. Neither did the Western states, particularly the US, support the Kurds nor did the regional states support it. The outside world did not have any interests or stakes in the Kurdistan region in order to defend or support the rise of a new state. Furthermore, the Kurds did not have the power capabilities to convince/oppose the external actors involved and also not the military power to stand against others or the economic power to use in case something would have happened. However, 14 years later, the Kurds have to a high degree created important sources of power and the support needed for independence (though not formally expressed). The Kurdistan region has through expanded oil and gas sectors, a wise high-table diplomacy and a successful demonstration of military effectiveness proven its capacity to become an independent state and increased its power capabilities. The Kurdistan region has created the interests and incentives needed for the outside world to act in case the Kurdistan region find itself in danger as well as the support needed especially among the domestic public in European and North American countries for declaring independence.

6.3 Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis was that *nations without a state of their own may act rationally and strategically. If they face a limited opportunity and have not the ability to mobilize resources, then they will likely not consider independence and statehood as a choice, because the costs and risks will be more than the benefits. However, if nations face a suitable opportunity and have a good*

ability to mobilize the resources needed for independence and statehood, then they will likely consider it as a choice, because the benefits will be more than the costs. Based on the case of the Kurdistan region this hypothesis can be verified as well. The evidence is that during 2003-2005, the Kurds had an opportunity to declare independence due to the fall of the Baath regime but they did not have the ability to mobilize the internal and material resources needed for independence because they lacked in the experience of self-governance, had internal conflicts, an underdeveloped army and not access to material resources needed for an independent state. The opportunity was there, but the risks of jeopardizing a ‘’brighter and safer’’ future had more costs than benefits. Therefore, the choice of declaring independence was a rational and strategic choice where the Kurds instead of declaring independence started to build the blocks of a de facto state. 14 years later, the Kurds have the opportunity to declare independence and form a state of their own and the ability to mobilize the resources needed for statehood. The new choice of declaring independence is both rational and strategic. ISIS and other militant extremist organizations have put a challenge to the existing borders of the region, their transnational activities can be seen all over the region from Algiers to Mosul. The Iraqi state has become a failed one. It is weak and dominated by sectarian spirits and a set of serious internal conflicts, dividing the country into pieces. The Middle East is changing, Syria is off balance and the Assad government weaker than ever. Turkey is in conflict with Shiites in Iraq as well as the alawitee government in Syria. Ankara has through time become an ally of the Kurdistan region. Iran is in deep conflicts with the West and Saudi Arabia especially in Syria and Yemen and Tehran faces fierce opposition in sunni-dominated areas of region (except for Qatar). Russia is a new global player in regional politics with a soft tone against the Kurds. Moreover, for the Kurds, even if the instability in Iraq and region in general has been dangerous, still it has given the Kurds an opportunity to mobilize the resources needed for independence. Examples, are the oil sales to the global market via Turkey, the unilateral implementation of article-140, the control over areas missing in the 2003 borders including the oil rich Kirkuk. Which has led the Kurdistan region to retake territory and make a territorial expansion with ca 33 percent, where all the disputed Kurdish areas are back on the map of Kurdistan. The war against ISIS have had a negative impact on the Kurds but it has also been an opportunity for the Kurds make use of in order to demonstrate their military skills, political resolve and frame themselves as a moderate nation fighting a terrorism for ‘’humanity’’ and deserving a state of their own in front of the international public.

7. Discussion and conclusion

From the investigation of the case of the Kurdistan region and its different choices, the evidence presented above appears to verify all the three hypotheses. This case has been a highly complex one where different factors have interacted on different level local, national, regional as well as international. The choice of not declaring independence during 2003-2005 can be traced back to the following factors. A friendly security environment but lack of resources and power capabilities. Both the regional and global powers strongly opposed the idea of an independent Kurdish state in the Middle East during 2003-2005. Therefore, the opportunity that arose from the fall of the Baath regime did not provide the Kurds the right conditions to realize their dream of forming an independent nation-state. Instead the Kurds, as noted above, took the opportunity in a different way, which was to build the blocks of a de facto state.

Nevertheless, after 2005 a number of structural changes have taken place that have led the Kurds in 2017 arriving to a destination where a referendum will be the last step and the mechanism for a highly expected declaration of independence and the rise of a Kurdish state in the Middle East. The factors that have led the Kurds are the same factors that did not allow the Kurds to declare independence during 2003-2005 but this time with reverse effects. This explains much about choices regarding independence and gaining sovereignty, especially in the Middle East. 14 years after the US invasion and fall of Saddam Hussein, the Kurds face a security dilemma where several hostile actors, where many of them possess a wide range of military and economic capabilities, such as ISIS, PMU, Iran and the Iraqi state itself pose serious threats to the national security of the Kurdish nation in Iraq and created a threat environment for them. Therefore, statehood according to the Kurds is the way out from chaos and anarchy and to survive in a war dominated Iraq and Middle East.

Furthermore, the new Iraq has not succeeded to make the Kurds feeling safe or as a part of the new federal system and integrated them in a post-Saddam Iraqi society. Instead the constant attacks and sanctions imposed by the Kurdistan region's parent-state are other factors that have pushed the Kurds towards a choice of independence. Nevertheless, for the Kurds this has also been a legitimatizing factor. Unlike earlier stages, the Kurds can now face the international community and claim they have done everything they could to preserve and uphold the unity of Iraq but the

new Iraq has become a hostile and failed sectarian state and do not want to deal with them as agreed in the constitution.

From another point of view, the internal changes made by the KRG and its oil and (future) gas sales, have transformed the Kurdistan region from a war dominated society to a modern one, which have had symbolical features for the Kurds in front of the international community, where the Kurds have demonstrated their capacity to become a place where others can trade and invest in. It also highlights the degree of internal stability and order, despite the presence of 1.8 million refugees and war against ISIS compared to the rest of Iraq or its neighbors such as Syria, Iran and parts of Turkey. The Kurds have simply framed themselves and used their achievements as tools for becoming one of the main actors meaningful to the regional security and stability in the Middle East. These issues has led the outside world to start cooperate with them. Which in itself been a factor for the increased international support for the Kurds.

However, the mobilization of resources seems to have been made with the purpose to create new opportunities (to not mention other spontaneous opportunities that have occurred in connection to the occurrence of new and drastic structural changes in the region) by taking advantage of the ones needed for an independent state. The mobilization of resources have been intended to two main areas (i) the creation and reorganization of military power and (ii) the creation of economic power. With the help of the two, the Kurds have succeeded to make former rivals to allies, defeat ISIS, overcome sanctions and refugee crisis, regain control of ca 33 percent of territory including the oil rich city of Kirkuk and creating the incentives needed for the outside world to support and protect them. For example, before and during 2003-2005 the Kurds were not connected to the outside world in any possible way. But 14 years later it is seen that a great number of Western and regional powers have approached them much due their material resources leading to the creation of a set of important political, military and economic bonds between the Kurdistan region and the external actors. Hence, interests and power can be identified as the determining factors for the development of relations. A question that arises is that why did no one line up with the Kurds during the 1991 uprisings or the fall of the regime in 2003? The answer is that there were no critical interests to protect obliging the outside world to get along with the Kurds. 14 years later, more than 65 countries provide the Kurds with economic and military support in the war against ISIS, much due to their economic interests in the region but also to make sure that actors like Russia, Iran, ISIS

militants and others not enter the political and geographical sphere of the Kurdistan region and establish an influence zone in that area. These factor have obliged Turkey, US and European states, willingly or not, to stand behind the Kurds against internal and external threats. This has in a natural way led to an (indirect) international acceptance for Kurdish independence and the number of countries that have supported them both formally and informally says much about this issue. What is important for the involved actors is that they must be cautious in this equation. The Kurds seem to have learned a number of lessons from history. The Kurds have become realists and standing against them in their choice for statehood and independence may not be fruitful and positive, because the Kurds in 2017 have a pivotal position in changing and affecting regional circumstances.

7.1 Lessons learned

The more general lessons that can be learned from the hypotheses and the case of the Kurdistan region is that nations especially those having access to some form of a de facto state or regional government are not too complex, they act, behave and make choices just like formal and sovereign states do. Regarding choice of independence and gaining sovereignty through statehood, these actors make rational and strategic choices based on a number of factors. First, if these actors feel secure, find themselves in a friendly environment and do not face any threats from hostile actors, they will not make any hasty or risky choices and will not separate from their parent-states. However, if they suddenly find themselves responsible for their own security in a threat environment affecting their security, they will take different measures to eliminate the threats and overcome other difficulties, and such measures will include a possible declaration of independence where they can through statehood protect themselves and to an extent reach out to allies and the outside world. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these actors also make choices based on calculations of the power they have at their disposal and the degree of support they can receive from neighbors and other external actors. Regarding independence they will not declare independence when they know that they have not the capabilities needed for such choices or when a large number of more powerful actors oppose them in their aspirations. Therefore, they may over time attempt to acquire the capabilities needed for making a choice about independence as well as attract others to deal with them and support them through mobilizing resources in a way that makes more powerful actors to stakeholders in their area of operation. Finally, these actors may sometimes be seen as opportunists and sometimes not. The fact is that, these actors do not take

consideration to opportunities based on the opportunities' external appearance. Instead, through the rise of suitable opportunities serving their interests, these actors will first see how much an opportunity benefits them and to what degree they will be able to mobilize resources that can serve the opportunity and their objectives. They simply calculate the costs and benefits. If they are not able to mobilize the resources needed for fulfilling a goal like independence, they may use the opportunity for taking only some first steps toward the settled goal. However, when they have the ability to mobilize resources and there is a suitable opportunity for them to fulfill a goal, they will take advantage of the opportunity and in this case try to declare independence and form a sovereign state of their own.

7.2 Final notes

This case study has aimed to investigate in the factors that are of importance when explaining why nations during some periods do not declare independence and form a state of their own while during other periods they aim to do so. In order to fulfill the aim, the case of the Kurdistan region of Iraq has been analyzed and thee hypotheses inspired by the theoretical framework have been empirically tested. The method of process tracing was used in order to detect critical junctures and the chain of events crucial for the two choices about independence and statehood. The material used for this study has consisted of 12 interviews made by the researcher in a field study and a set of different already written/published material in forms of newspaper articles, non/governmental sources and scholarly publications. The tested hypotheses were verified by the empirical material and each of them has been discussed. The findings are in accordance with the previous literature, however unlike the previous literature this study has contributed empirically to the case of Kurdish independent and also made clear what the new choice is a result of by more closely investigating in security, economic, military and political factors. This study has built an explanatory model for this and similar cases and this study has developed new, important knowledge on the internal policy process of the Iraqi Kurdistan and it brings that knowledge to bear on the central decision to declare independence and statehood. Further research is highly recommended. The findings of this study are recommended for further test in a comparative study, for example between Kosovo and South Sudan and to see if it was the same factors that led them to declare independence and form their own states before becoming independent. When it comes to the case of the Kurdistan region, more research is definitely needed especially in its increased military, economic and political power in

the region. Further research is also needed when it comes to understanding and explaining this issue from non-material perspectives where factors related to ethnicity, ideology and culture can be studied more closely. More research on independence and statehood is needed in general because there are still a large number of nations and ethnic groups around the world requiring and fighting for independence around the world. People do not require independence and statehood just like that or because of dreams of liberation. Instead and in many cases a set of important factors especially economic, political, security and military ones have important roles in influencing these choices.

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Appendix I

List of Interviews

All transcripts of individual interviews are available and stored, they can be requested via contact with the Swedish Defence University and approval from the author.

- President Massoud Barzani (PB). President of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Erbil, Kurdistan region. 2015.
- Foreign minister Falah Mustafa (FM). Head for Kurdistan Regional Government's department of foreign relations. 2017-04-11. Erbil, Kurdistan region.
- Hemin Hawrami (HH). Senior Advisor to President Barzani. 2017-03-29. Pirmam, Kurdistan region.
- Sirwan Barzani (SB). KDP leadership member, Peshmerga General and commander for the defense line in Makhmour and Gwer against ISIS. 2017-03-26. Makhmour, Kurdistan region.
- General. Sheikh Jafar Sheikh Mustafa (SJ). Peshmerga General, highest commander for Unit 70 Peshmerga forces and member of PUK politburo. Sulyimania, Kurdistan region.
- Tariq Rashid (TR), Kurdish Member of Iraqi Parliament, 2017-03-18, Erbil, Kurdistan Region.
- General. Jabar Gardi (JG), Head for Peshmerga operations against ISIS. 2017-03-24. Erbil, Kurdistan region.
- Nazim Herki (NH). Member of Kurdistan Parliament (committee for the security and internal affairs of the Kurdistan region). 2017-03-27. Erbil, Kurdistan region.
- Cawdat Jarjis Latif Naccar (CJ). Turkman Member of Kurdistan Parliament. 2017-03-27. Erbil, Kurdistan region.
- Amina Zikri (AZ). Member of Kurdistan Parliament. 2017-03-27. Erbil, Kurdistan region.
- Muna Kahveci (MK). Turkman member of Kurdistan Parliament. 2017-03-27. Erbil, Kurdistan region.
- Tahsin Ismael Dolamari (TD). Member of Kurdistan Parliament and expert on political affairs of Iraq. 2017-04-10. Erbil, Kurdistan region.