



# THE KURDS IN IRAQ, THE EU, AND THE U.S. WHAT FUTURE?

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Who are the Kurds of Iraq? This study tries to answer to this question by identifying the characteristics of the Kurdish people to understand how they became such an asset for the United States and Europe. To do so, it will examine the Kurds of Iraq through a historical *excursus* and conclude by analyzing their past, present, and (hypothetical) future relations with the United States and Europe. Nowadays, the Kurds are surrounded by those who fear them because of their influence, by those who despise them, and by those who ignore them. Though just recently, they have had more possibilities to express their cause and, for this reason, this study wishes to bring a new light on these chances and layout a series of unanswered and inevitable questions true to our time.



### *The Kurds of Iraq: An Historical Excursus*

During the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the 'Kurdish Question', as many describe it today, did not exist. However, during World War I, this 'question' started to rise and attract the international community's attention, especially of the United Kingdom (UK). Soon, Kurdish leaders began falling under British influences, who were ready to promise anything to the Kurds as long as the result would fall in their interest sphere.<sup>i</sup> The British had discovered the presence of hydro-carbon reserves near Kirkuk and Mosul - Kurdish inhabited territories -, and for this reason grew strongly interested in tying relations with the Kurds, consequently becoming the first European country to contract with them.<sup>ii</sup>

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, its division began with the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920.<sup>iii</sup> In this treaty, for the first time in history (and last), a geographical map was designed that also outlined the borders of the state of Kurdistan. The United States (US) was in favor of the decision to create an independent state of Kurdistan but backed the British's choice to keep Mosul inside of the Iraqi borders to gain control of the reserves, as Iraq fell under British mandate. However, the Treaty of Sèvres was hard to implement. The Kurds had to demonstrate to the international community that they were capable of self-government and Washington and the League of Nations, who defended the Kurdish ideal of self-determination, at the same time knew the Treaty was purposely signed with harsh guidelines for the creation of a state of Kurdistan.<sup>iv</sup>



However, soon after the Treaty was signed, many disputes with the Kurds and the former Ottoman Empire began. After three years of conflict, the Turks re-conquered the Kurdish territories they claimed as theirs and occupied them. The West took advantage of this situation and proposed a new peaceful solution for the Kurds and a re-negotiation of terms with Turkey. In other words, one might presume that the US, the UK, France, and Italy, gave hope for a Kurdish state-building opportunity, but were also partially responsible for dismantling it. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne ended this conflict with Turkey and finally 'fixed' the disputed borders, officially establishing the division of the Kurdish population into four territories: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>v</sup>

In July 1958, a coup led by General 'Abd Al-Karim Qasim, overthrew the Monarchical system created after the end of the British Mandate of Iraq and established an experimental Republican State.<sup>vi</sup> *Wahda*, or Arab unity, was the goal of General Qasim's main policy, and he was going to consolidate his goal by giving key figures of the revolution political roles and constitutionally recognize Kurds and Arabs as equal. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mustafa Mullah Barzani and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) were legalized, and in 1958 Qasim freed many Kurdish leaders held captive during the transitional period, as Barzani, who had been exiled to the Soviet Union (USSR) after a brief period in Iran.



Regardless of his social and political openings, President Qasim soon began an *Arabization* process throughout the country, those who did not follow his policies were sentenced to death and his positive attitude towards the Kurds soon faded into altercations and micro conflicts.<sup>vii</sup> The KDP was forbidden to become an influential political party, however, together with other Kurdish movements (as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, headed by Jalal Talabani<sup>viii</sup>) they decided to cooperate with left pan-Arab parties against Qasim's ideas and pressures.

Nevertheless, Ba'ath nationalists led by Hassan Al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein took control of Iraq in 1968 with a military coup, after a brief period led by the Arif Brothers who had overthrown Qasim in 1963. The Ba'ath completely changed the façade of Iraq. These two dominant figures ruled with strong authoritarian tendencies and prevailed over the administration, such that they used violence to stop any arising opposition. The high level of brutality ceased any opposition, making this a dominant characteristic of the Ba'ath years. They had control over the entire government and altered any equilibrium that had been created in the precedent years with smaller parties and minorities, including the Kurds. Saddam Hussein gained complete power in Iraq in 1979. He acquired power shortly after the signing of the Algiers Accord that ended the 1974-1975 uprisings with the Kurds and the long-lasting border dispute with Iran.<sup>ix</sup> In the years that followed, what started as a violent repression of the Kurds, soon became Saddam Hussein's *Al-Anfal* Campaigns, where thousands of Iraqi Kurds were killed, and others fled to neighboring countries.<sup>x</sup>



What is interesting to understand is why the Kurds became such of an enemy for the Iraqi government, and how they were able to mobilize given they were mainly a rural population. Saddam Hussein saw minorities as a threat, and once foreign actors started infiltrating northern Iraq, he immediately wanted to secure his power and so persecuted the Kurds and other minorities. In fact, the US, Iran, and Israel were just three of the many foreign countries that played a considerable role within the Kurdish uprisings in Iraq. Even if many interventions were kept classified during the 1960s-1980s, the Kurds benefited from financial and military support from them.<sup>xi</sup> Notwithstanding the aid the Kurds in Iraq received by both the US, European countries, and neighboring ones, they kept being victims of power politics. Every aid given to the Kurds resulted in some favor and/or help which many times resulted in harsh conflicts and massacres, as for example during the Cold War, the 1991 and 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the War Against Terror.

During the Cold War, Washington wanted the fall of the Ba'ath Regime, and prevent the USSR from gaining more influence in the Gulf, to do so they used the Kurds *per se*, making them a by-product of the Cold War.<sup>xii</sup> The US 'used' the Kurds, militarized them, trained them, and helped them revolt against the Regime in order to weaken it. Such, that this period marked the official start of US-Kurdish covert relations, and also the beginning of a completely new foreign policy practice for the US: the US government was now interacting with a non-state actor.<sup>xiii</sup>



Again, in 1991 the Kurds played a fundamental role for the US as they revolted against the Ba'ath Regime after it had invaded Kuwait under Washington's request. What followed was a series of uprisings against the Ba'ath and a subsequent massacre of the Kurds. The US sent troops and relief only once Operation Provide Comfort begun and a no-fly zone was enforced from the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel upward.<sup>xiv</sup>

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, and the no-fly zone was lifted, the Kurds again played an important role for US-led operations in Iraq with its *peshmerga* (fighters).<sup>xv</sup> US infiltrations in Iraq begun with an operation named Northern Iraq Liaison Element (NILE), where CIA operatives entering from northern Iraq began to gather information on Saddam and his position, with the support of the *peshmerga*. On 21 March 2003 the US formally attacked Saddam Hussein's Iraq, infiltrating from Kuwait, and soon took control of the State. The US-led coalition's mission was named Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), as it intended to free Iraq from their ruthless dictator Saddam Hussein.<sup>xvi</sup> Therefore, the Kurds helped the US during the entire occupation of Iraq and OIF, and also by protecting the northern oil reserves and territories in Iraq, thus avoiding Western forces to intervene.<sup>xvii</sup>

The Kurds in northern Iraq, since the establishment of the no-fly zone, were able to create their own administration as an autonomous region: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). However, there was no official recognition of their being until 2005 when the new Iraqi Constitution entered into force. The US-led



coalition played a strong role in the creation of this constitution, as it established Iraq as a Federal State with regions and governorates. Consequently, the Kurds were able to create their own *de facto* autonomous region and have their administration with their own political parties, KDP and PUK. As of today, the KRG remains the only regional government present in Iraq.<sup>xviii</sup>

### What Future?

The Iraqi Kurds, since the establishment of the KRG, have enjoyed a partial autonomy and a peaceful state in regard to its military operations. However, nowadays the situation has drastically changed. After living several years of peace, starting 2013, northern Iraq has been suffering. The Kurds, as well as other minorities, have been living in a strong state of persecution fighting a global enemy. In early 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (also known as ISIL, ISIS, or Daesh), has declared a worldwide war in order to build its own Caliphate.<sup>xix</sup>

Since ISIL declared the beginning of its Caliphate and occupied many territories in northern Iraq and Syria, a global war against terrorism begun in both Iraq and Syria. Here, once again, a US-led coalition started the first on-ground operations and allied with the Kurds, both of Iraq and of Syria. Such that the Kurds are still nowadays believed to be one of the main playing actors fighting against ISIL, especially after the 2017 liberation of Mosul.<sup>xx</sup>



In October of 2019, US-Kurdish relations shifted drastically as the US government decided to end its partnership with the Syrian Kurds and withdraw from the conflict, leading to what has been labeled as a 'betrayal'.<sup>xxi</sup> Ever since, the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq, have been dealing with a series of conflictual foreign interventions, as Turkey's ghost war in Iraq.<sup>xxii</sup> Notwithstanding the end of US-Kurdish relations in Syria and partially in Iraq, the Kurds of Iraq have recently tied new relations with European powers, as France. In July, the KRG's President Barzani flew to France to visit President Macron, and during the first days of September, Macron flew to Baghdad in visit to the central government demanding the dismantlement of Iraqi militias and met again with Barzani to discuss development projects in the KRG. As of today, the KRG has a representation in the European Union, and many EU powers, as Austria, France, Bulgaria, Germany, Croatia, and many more, have either a commercial office or a Consulate in Erbil which strengthens both political and economic ties with the EU. The US is instead trying to restructure its military presence in Iraq, which after the killing of the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, has been extremely volatile.

Both EU powers, neighboring countries, and NGO's have helped the KRG and the Syrian Kurds during the Covid-19 pandemic, assisting with medical relief and aid. What has followed is a new future for the KRG, full of new relations, trade deals, and political recognitions. However, many questions remain pending. Will the KRG in Iraq remain standing? Or will the recent imbalances in the Middle East, due to the Syrian conflict, Covid-19, and Turkey, bring





the Iraqi government to persecute the Kurds once again? What future is there for the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria? What are the possible scenarios in place if the Syrian Kurds gain autonomy as the KRG? And, will these new relations with EU powers lead to another betrayal or a peaceful resolution?

<sup>i</sup> Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 36-38.

<sup>ii</sup> G. Stansfield, "The Kurdish Question in Iraq, 1914-1974", *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974*, Cengage Learning EMEA, 2006, pp. 1-3.

<sup>iii</sup> The United Kingdom had actually already agreed upon the division of the Ottoman Empire as the war was ending, together with its French ally in 1916. This pre-partition was named after the two French and English diplomats that drafted the agreement, accordingly François Georges-Picot and Mark Sykes. This document is actually considered as a turning point between Western and Middle Eastern relations and is viewed as the basic framework used to split the Ottoman Empire. The Sykes-Picot Agreement is not only important because it shaped an initial independent territory for the Kurds, and confirmed it in the Treaty of Sèvres, it is of fundamental importance also nowadays given that the consequences of this agreement are still strongly despised; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>iv</sup> Stefano Torelli, "Così ci inventammo il Kurdistan", *Limes: Il Mito Curdo*, ed. 7, 2017, pp. 8-9.

<sup>v</sup> Stefano Torelli, "Così ci inventammo il Kurdistan", cit., 14-16.

<sup>vi</sup> Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 148-150.

<sup>vii</sup> Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy. International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 130-132.

<sup>viii</sup> Jalal Talabani was the leader and co-founder of PUK, an opposition party made up by Kurds who did not agree with Barzani's ideals. PUK and KDP did however cooperate when the Iraqi government started suppressing and massively killing Kurds in northern Iraq, but still nowadays both parties remain in conflict. To read more about PUK, see: Karim Yildiz, Tanyel Taysi, *The Kurds in Iraq. The Past, the Present and Future*, Pluto Press, 2007.

<sup>ix</sup> The *Shatt Al-Arab* dispute.

<sup>x</sup> The *Al-Anfal* Campaigns were eight mass killings portrayed by Saddam on the Kurds with the use of chemical weapons, recognized by many as a genocide and/or ethnic cleansing. Bruce Montgomery, "The Iraqi Secret Police Files: A Documentary Record of the Anfal Genocide", *Advances in Anthropology*, No. 5. 2005, pp. 73-73. Montgomery's studies are based on the Police Files the Human Rights Watch has in their Archives, under the Human Rights Watch Initiative programs.

<sup>xi</sup> Kurds in Iran, Turkey, and Syria were not considered as non-state actors during these years and did not attract any foreign interest; Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy. International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>xii</sup> Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, cit., pp. 137-139.

<sup>xiii</sup> Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy*, cit., pp. 135-137.

<sup>xiv</sup> Library of Congress, CRS, Report for Congress by Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: US Regime Change Efforts and Post-War Iraq*, 3 April 2003.

<sup>xv</sup> National Intelligence Council, *Principal Challenges in Post-Saddam Iraq*, National Intelligence Council, *Principal Challenges in Post-Saddam Iraq*, Intelligence Community Assessment prepared by P.R. Pillar, National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia, January 2003, declassified September 2009, pp. 22-24.




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<sup>xvi</sup> Library of Congress, CRS, Report by C. Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategies, Approaches, Results, and Issues for Congress*, Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress, United States, April 2, 2009, p. 40.

<sup>xvii</sup> Library of Congress, CRS, Report by C. Dale, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Strategies, Approaches, Results, and Issues for Congress*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>xviii</sup> Library of Congress, CRS, Report by Kenneth Katzman, *The Kurds in post-Saddam Iraq*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>xix</sup> Giovanni Parigi, "Il Kurdistan Iracheno, uno Stato di Fatto", *Limes: Il Mito Curdo*, ed. 7, 2017, pp. 44-46.

<sup>xx</sup> Henri J. Barkey, "Il Rapsodico Approccio Americano ai Curdi", *Limes: Il Mito Curdo*, cit., pp. 131-136.

<sup>xxi</sup> To read more see: Il Café Geopolitico, "Stati Uniti - Curdi: L'ennesimo abbandono", 9 October 2019 at <https://ilcaffegeopolitico.net/112108/stati-uniti-curdi-lennesimo-abbandono>

<sup>xxii</sup> To read more see: The Washington Kurdish Institute, "Turkey's Ghost War in Iraq", 26 November 2019 at <https://dckurd.org/2019/11/26/turkeys-ghost-war-in-iraq/#:~:text=Little%20light%20has%20been%20given,the%20Kurdish%20region%20of%20Iraq.&text=Despite%20the%20many%20monitions%2C%20Turkey,been%20protracting%20the%20attacks%20since.>