



Utrecht University

Organising and Contesting the 2017 Kurdish Referendum on Independence:

Political Opportunities, Mobilisation Structures and Framing Processes in Iraqi-
Kurdistan



Tim Bogers
5506727

Utrecht University
2 August 2019

*A Thesis submitted to
the Board of Examiners
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights*

Supervisor: dr. Chris van der Borgh

Date of submission: 2 August 2019

Program trajectory: Research and Thesis Writing (30 ECTS)

Word count: 23.798

Cover page picture: Kurdish flags at the pro-Kurdistan referendum and pro-Kurdistan independence rally at Franso Hariri Stadium, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Levi Clancy, 2017).

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank all my respondents who were kind enough to make time for me and share valuable insights and information concerning the referendum; without their cooperation this research could not have been conducted.

I would particularly like to thank my thesis supervisor, dr. Chris van der Borgh, who has always supported me and provided me with useful feedback and suggestions on how to improve both my research and my thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Saba Azeem, who was so kind as to provide me with valuable context at the beginning of my research and share her experiences in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region with me. In addition, she provided me with access to her networks in Iraqi-Kurdistan, which really helped me kick-starting my research.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who has provided me with feedback on this thesis and who has supported me throughout the research and thesis writing processes.

Abstract

On 25 September 2017 a Kurdish referendum on independence was held in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, which was initiated by Kurdish elites, particularly president Barzani. However, this referendum was not uncontested, as it lacked international as well as, to some extent, national support. This thesis analyses the complex political processes that led to the referendum within the Iraqi-Kurdistan region by using the frame of contentious politics, which includes political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes. Through conducted interviews with knowledgeable people, as well as the use of academic articles, I have come to the following conclusion: favourable contextual circumstances were perceived and framed by president Barzani as the right time to seek secession from Iraq, thereby simultaneously providing an opportunity for Barzani himself to stay in power.

Key words: Iraqi-Kurdistan, referendum, independence, nationalism, contentious politics, political opportunities, mobilisation structures, framing processes

Abbreviations

AQI – Al-Qaeda in Iraq

EU – European Union

FGT – First generation theory of fiscal federalism

KHEC – Kurdistan Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

ISI – Islamic State in Iraq

ISIL – Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

JTWJ – Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

SGT – Second generation theory of fiscal federalism

US – United States

Table of contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| • Introduction | 7 |
| • Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework | 12 |
| ○ Contentious politics | 13 |
| ▪ Political opportunities | 13 |
| ▪ Mobilisation structures | 15 |
| ▪ Framing processes | 16 |
| ○ Identity | 17 |
| ○ Ethnicity | 19 |
| ○ Nationalism | 21 |
| ○ Referendums | 23 |
| ○ Federalism | 26 |
| ○ Conclusion | 29 |
| • Chapter 2: Context of Kurdish Nationalism and Independence | 30 |
| ○ Kurdish nationalism | 31 |
| ○ Status developments of Iraqi-Kurdistan | 34 |
| ○ Party politics | 37 |
| ○ International support | 39 |
| ○ The rise of ISIL | 41 |
| ○ Conclusion | 44 |
| • Chapter 3: Analysis of the 2017 Referendum | 45 |
| ○ The 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence | 46 |
| ○ Political opportunities | 47 |
| ○ Mobilisation structures | 53 |
| ○ Framing processes | 57 |
| ○ Conclusion | 60 |
| • Conclusion | 62 |
| • References | 66 |
| ○ Interviews | 66 |
| ○ Bibliography | 67 |
| ○ Cover photo | 75 |
| ○ Maps | 75 |

Introduction

On 16 October 2017 Iraqi government forces and Shia militias entered the Kurdistan region in Iraq with the goal of recapturing the oil-rich governorate of Kirkuk, as well as other areas situated along the Iraqi-Kurdish border. Within the next few days, the Iraqi forces were able to retrieve significant amounts of the Kurdish-controlled territories, including Kirkuk. This invasion was a result of the existing tensions between the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil, after the KRG had initiated a referendum on independence in its territories. This referendum on independence took place on 25 September 2017, and it was held in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region as well as in the contested disputed areas, which had been under Kurdish control after Kurdish Peshmerga forces had defeated the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The Iraqi army proved itself to be incapable of providing resistance against ISIL, and it was largely defeated by the terrorist organisation; the remaining forces had to retreat. There had always been a lot of contention over the disputed areas, as both the Iraqi government and the KRG claimed it to belong to their respective entities, but in the end they fell under Iraqi jurisdiction. Therefore, when an opportunity presented itself after the defeat of ISIL and the absence of the Iraqi army, the KRG initiated a referendum on independence to consolidate these newly acquired territories and secede from Iraq.

In terms of votes, the referendum could be perceived as a success; close to 93 per cent of the Kurds voted in favour of independence (Akreyi 2019:25). However, the referendum was perceived as controversial, mainly due to a lack of the necessary support from Baghdad as well as from the international community. In fact, only Israel had expressed its support for Kurdish independence, whereas the neighbouring states of Turkey and Iran issued threats relating to the independence referendum. Furthermore, Baghdad proceeded with a military intervention in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Due to the situation spiralling out of control, president of the KRG and initiator of the referendum, Masoud Barzani, was no longer able to hold his position and stepped down. This even further escalated the situation, as riots broke out and several opposition parties reported attacks on their offices just hours after Barzani had made his resignation public on 29 October (Reuters 2017, 30 October).

All in all, the referendum on independence drastically backfired. However, this could not have come as a surprise, as Kurdish elites were well aware that there would be no international support for the referendum. There had never been convincing international support for Kurdish independence, which was mainly rooted in the fear that the Kurds in

neighbouring states would get inspired and also demand independence, thereby sending the region into turmoil. Similarly, the Iraqi government had also never expressed its support for Kurdish secession, which was necessary to legally secede from the state. But not only international actors were expressing their concerns; ever since Masoud Barzani announced the referendum on 7 June 2017, there was widespread opposition from within the Kurdish political spectrum. Particularly Gorran, the second largest political party at that time, opposed the referendum. It did so mainly by referring to the, in their eyes, unlawful extension of Barzani's presidential term and the timing of the referendum.

When Barzani announced the referendum on independence, the Kurdistan region in Iraq enjoyed de facto autonomy under the 2005 Iraqi Constitution; Kurdistan was an autonomous entity with its own government within the federal state of Iraq. This was an important detail, as this shows that the KRG was already functioning semi-independently from Iraq. Combined with the lack of international support and, to some extent, national support, Barzani clearly took a huge risk by initiating the referendum on independence. As one of my interviewees mentioned: 'Frankly, assessing risks is not Kurds' strong point... They often act along Napoleon's diction: *On s'engage et puis on voit* [I engage and then I see]...'¹ However, as He (2002:91) argued, elites often calculate the outcomes of a referendum beforehand. I was really interested in the domestic political processes revolving around the Kurdish referendum on independence, particularly the contextual factors that made Barzani push for the referendum, despite the presence of international and national opposition. This has led me to formulate the following main question:

How and why was the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence in Iraqi-Kurdistan organised and contested?

This thesis will aim to contribute to the existing literature revolving around referendums. More specifically, it will attempt to expose the complex political processes at play that are tied to referendums, such as power politics and the dynamics between structural and agentic contextual factors that influence the decision to initiate a referendum. Throughout the empirical chapter, contentious politics will function as a framework for analysing these complex processes, as it helps to analyse the emergence and dynamics of social movements and contention. This led to the following sub-questions: *How and why was the 2017 Kurdish*

¹ Written interview with an author who has written about the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, 22 May 2019

referendum on independence organised? And How and why was the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence contested? In addition, this thesis will aim to contribute to a better understanding of the contextual factors that can influence a nation's shift from being satisfied with de facto autonomy to desiring a fully independent state. This led me to formulate a third sub-question: *How have the Iraqi-Kurdish nation and status developed?* Hopefully this thesis can contribute to providing new insights in order to better understand future referendums. As for the societal relevance, this thesis aims to provide insights that create awareness among the people about the complex political processes that revolve around and influence a referendum.

The research I conducted in order to answer the main question took place between 1 March and 1 June 2019. Rather than travelling to the Iraqi-Kurdish region, I opted to stay in the Netherlands and conduct interviews through Skype, which enabled me to talk to my contacts directly. My motives for staying in the Netherlands were twofold. First off, due to practical issues I was unable to travel to Iraqi-Kurdistan sometime at the end of February or beginning of March. Secondly, most of the Iraqi-Kurdistan region is currently listed as an 'orange' zone according to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which means that it is recommended to only go there if necessary. Some territories are even listed as 'red', meaning that travelling to the region is strictly prohibited (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2019, 12 June). I had already spoken to a few contacts in the Kurdistan region beforehand, and they assured me that I would also be able to conduct my research and gather sufficient amounts of data from the Netherlands. Therefore, I decided not to travel to the Iraqi-Kurdistan region.

As for finding relevant sources for my empirical chapters, I mainly used academic articles that were available through Google Scholar, as well as news articles that were available online. Luckily, as I do not speak Kurdish, most Kurdish and other regional news sources also had English versions of their websites. Since the main focus of my research was on the period prior to the referendum in 2017, a lot had already been written that was useful for this thesis. In addition, I was fortunate enough to get in touch with two authors who had both written articles and edited books revolving around the subject I was researching.

While I believe that I conducted a good research, I have to admit that I had some difficulties finding contacts who were able and willing to talk to someone whom they had never met and was not present in the region. Not physically being there hindered my research, since I was not able to meet people in person and establish rapport with them, which would have also helped me get access to new networks and new people. I sent emails to knowledgeable and well-connected people, but most of them never replied or eventually

stopped responding to my messages. Unfortunately I have been unable to get in contact with Kurdish elites, which would have been really valuable as my empirical chapter mainly revolves around the political dynamics during the campaign period of the referendum. Although it would have been interesting to grasp the perspectives of Kurdish elites, it is also questionable whether they would have been able to present new information.

The people I spoke to were very kind and always offered to help me with my research, either by letting me interview them or by connecting me to other well-informed people, and I am really thankful for that. In the end I conducted eight interviews that provided me with relevant information and new insights I could build on, both from an internal Kurdish perspective and an external foreign perspective. Most of my interviewees, who included Iraqi and Kurdish political analysts as well as PhD students and a Western aid worker, were present in the Iraqi-Kurdish region. Most of my interviews were conducted in English, which went very well. On two occasions I interviewed my contacts in Dutch, who were both present just before and during the referendum due to conducting fieldwork. One of my interviewees preferred that I would send him questions through email, which he then answered to the best of his abilities. In order to protect the people I have interviewed, the interviews have been anonymised.

This thesis is organised into three main chapters. The first chapter constitutes the theoretical framework which will discuss the academic literature that is relevant for this thesis. The theoretical framework is divided into six sections: contentious politics, identity, ethnicity, nationalism, referendum literature and federalism. Contentious politics consists of three interrelated components that help analysing the emergence of a social movement: political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes. The next sections of identity, ethnicity and nationalism will be discussed separately, but they share overlapping characteristics as they all revolve around a sense of belonging and group solidarity. The fifth section will discuss the literature revolving around referendums, whereas the sixth and last section will discuss the concept of federalism. The second chapter will provide the context necessary in order to better understand the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence and consists out of five sections. The first section will elaborate on the roots of Kurdish nationalism, with a main focus on the development in Iraq. Secondly, the status developments of Iraqi-Kurdistan after the region gained de facto autonomy for the first time in 1991 will be discussed. The third section will focus on the existing party politics within the Iraqi-Kurdish political spectrum. Fourthly, the international support for an independent Kurdistan region in Iraq will be elaborated upon. And lastly, the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

will be discussed. The third chapter will constitute the empirical chapter that focuses on the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence. The referendum will be analysed through the lens of contentious politics and its components of political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes in order to analyse how and why the referendum was organised and contested. This thesis will show that the framing of political opportunities was of great importance in organising the referendum, but also that these frames were not uncontested.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will constitute the theoretical framework of this thesis. It will start off by discussing the concept of contentious politics, since it will provide a lens for analysing the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence in the third chapter, thereby being the backbone of this thesis. Contentious politics is made up of three components: opportunity structures, mobilisation structures and framing processes. Each of those will be discussed extensively. Furthermore, as the next chapter of this thesis revolves around the Kurds seeking independence, it is imperative to understand why they desire this. Therefore the interrelated concepts of identity, ethnicity and nationalism, which all revolve around a sense of belonging and group solidarity, will also be discussed. As this thesis concerns a referendum on independence, another section of this theoretical framework will discuss the literature revolving around referendums. The last section will discuss the concept of federalism, since Iraq can be characterised as a federal state; Iraqi-Kurdistan was, and still is, an autonomous region within the Iraqi state.

*Contentious politics*²

This section will discuss the theoretical debate surrounding contentious politics and its core elements. Contentious politics was first defined by Tarrow and Tilly (2007:4) as ‘interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.’ This definition of Tarrow and Tilly has been widely used by other scholars when writing about contentious politics. Contentious politics includes three crucial elements: political opportunities, organisational structures, and framing. These elements are interrelated and function to analyse and better understand social movements. Tarrow (2011:120) claimed that ‘none of these powers in movement alone ensures the emergence or the outcomes of social movements. But taken together, they produce the movement campaigns, the cycles of contention, and outcomes [...]’. Leitner et al. (2007) did critique the literature on contentious politics by claiming it to be too state-centric and interest oriented, thereby neglecting differences within collective action. Instead, they formulated a different definition for contentious politics: ‘Contentious politics refers to concerted, counterhegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries’ (Leitner et al. 2007:157).

Political opportunities

Firstly, the concept of political opportunities refers to ‘consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national – sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics.’ (Tarrow 2011:32). Similarly, McAdam et al. (1996:3) discussed the development of the concept of political opportunity structures; the early work by American scholars tried to explain the emergence of a particular social movement by referring to changes in the institutional or informal power relations of a certain political system, whereas more recently European scholars have tried to explain social movements by incorporating a crossnational approach in terms of structure, extent and success, thereby referring to differences in the political characteristics of particular states. In addition, King (2007:117) mentioned that the set of opportunities encompasses three dimensions: material, ideological and temporal, but he then fails to give clear definitions of those dimensions. Furthermore, Tarrow (2011:32) added the element of threats to the political opportunity concept; political opportunities and threats,

² The part of contentious politics, including political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes, was taken from my Literature Review

where he defined threats as ‘those factors – repression, but also the capacity of authorities to present a solid front to insurgents – that discourage contention.’ It is also argued that opportunities can change over time, as McAdam (as cited in Alimi 2009:220) claimed; ‘Any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities’. Similarly, Tarrow (2011:202) argued that opportunities do not work in the same ways for everyone and for the entire length of a cycle, and that early risers may create opportunities for others, not only to others who sympathise for their cause.

These approaches focus more on the structural dimension of opportunities, thereby neglecting the ability of certain groups to create opportunities themselves. King (2007:117) critiqued the existing literature by stating that not enough attention had been paid to the changeability of opportunities, that is ‘the ways in which less powerful groups can use whatever they have at their disposal to overcome the more formidable assets of their opponents’ (King 2007:117), thereby, either intentionally or unintentionally, including the agency aspect. Similarly, Morris (2000) argued that too much agency was placed into the hands of external actors, rather than at the grassroots level, and Jasper (2004) argued that agency was often not even included in the scholarly literature concerning collective action. Therefore, when revising his *Power and Movement* for a third time, Tarrow does seem to have included more agency-laden statements. For example, he argued that ‘contentious politics emerges when ordinary citizens, sometimes encouraged by leaders, perceive opportunities that lower the costs of collective action, reveal potential allies, show where elites and authorities are most vulnerable, and trigger social networks and collective identities around common themes.’ (Tarrow 2011:33). However, by referring to their research conducted in multiple European states on the relationship between deprivation and political opportunities, thereby showing that grievance and opportunity are interrelated, Grasso and Giugni (2016) claimed that the relationship between contextual and individual factors should still be explored further. Merely the presence of opportunities in a structure is not sufficient; these need to be recognised and acted upon to lead to contentious politics. On the other hand, building on King (2007), people or groups can also create opportunities themselves, even where, ‘objectively’ seen, there are none. This is also where the more bottom-up aspects of mobilisation structures and framing come in. Therefore, as the empirical chapter will also show, the dynamics between the structural and agency dimension in terms of political opportunities should not be underestimated.

Mobilisation structures

Mobilisation structures were defined by McAdam et al. (1996:4) as ‘those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.’ (McAdam et al. 1996:4). King (2007) referred to these mobilisation structures as organisations, which he then described, in favourable contexts, as well formed, with structures of command and subordination, substantial solidarity, clear boundaries of group membership and identifiable spokespeople. The presence of mobilisation structures determines whether contentious politics transforms into a long-term insurgency or merely short-term violence. By referring to a strike in Poland in 1980, which eventually turned into an organisation, Tarrow (2011:122-123) discussed three lessons for contentious politics: contention can lead to the emergence of organisations through interactions with authorities, allies and third parties; organisations begin as local networks which eventually spread through contention; and key to survival of these organisations are the interpersonal networks within them.

However, Hobsbawm (1959) and Gamson (1990) argued that without clear leadership, organisations remain less successful than organisations with a hierarchical structure. On the other hand, Piven and Cloward (1977) argued leaders can also diminish the effectiveness of organisations, since over time organisations displace their goals and become embedded in the existing system. This also means that organisations depend on contextual factors. Furthermore, King (2007:141) distinguished between two types of mobilisation; mobilisation as a process refers to the way in which members of an organisation are recruited and motivated, whereas mobilisation as a variable refers to the extent of which members dedicate their energy and resources in pursuit of shared interests.

A main theoretical perspective on mobilisation structures is called resource mobilisation. Resource mobilisation theory is an instrumentalist stance and mainly focuses on the critical role of resources and formal organisations. It was a reaction on Olson’s (1965) collective action theory, which claimed that individuals would not voluntarily join in collective action unless forced or tempted with selective incentives, also referred to as the collective action problem. The resource mobilisation theory shifted attention from collective action towards organising, costs and benefits assessment, and the availability of resources (Zald in Levinger & Lytle 2001:187); from structure to agency. However, also this theory is not without criticism; the resource mobilisation theory has largely neglected the broader political environments in which contentious politics emerge, where the political opportunity approach, on the other hand, has ignored the structural basis for resource mobilisation (McAdam et al. 1996:168). In addition, this theory has been criticised for overemphasising

the mechanics of mobilisation at the expense of questions of collective identities (Klandermans and Tarrow in McAdam et al. 1996:205). In order to take into account meaning and identities, the aspect of framing is necessary, which will be discussed next.

Framing processes

Framing has been defined by David Snow as ‘conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (McAdam et al. 1996:6). Framing processes are perceived as the mediators between opportunity, organisation and action since these processes provide people with meaning in a certain context (McAdam et al. 1996:6). Tarrow (2011:31) continued by stating that framing relates to the generalisation of grievance by creating an ‘us’ versus ‘them’, thereby also revolving around identity construction. King (2007:121) added that framing also entails the power to manage the way in which outsiders, such as journalists or humanitarian workers, perceive a certain conflict.

When discussing the concept of framing, Williams and Benford (2000) distinguished between a more structural, top-down approach towards the composition of frames, whereas others adopted a more interpretive understanding of the interactive and everyday processes of framing, which is more bottom-up. Both approaches, however, focus on relationships between the cultural object, cultural producers and cultural receivers (Snow 2004:97). Collective action frames redefine social conditions as unjust and intolerable with the intention of mobilising potential participants, mainly by appealing to perceptions of justice and emotionality in the minds of individuals (Tarrow in Demmers 2017:64). Snow and Benford (as cited in Benford 1993:199) identified three functions of collective action frames: diagnostic, prognostic and motivational. Diagnostic framing involves diagnosing a context as problematic and in need of change; prognostic framing involves identifying a solution for the diagnosed problem, and includes a strategy, tactics and targets; and motivational framing involves a call to action (Snow & Benford in Benford 1993:199). Similarly, Gamson (1995) argued that a frame needs to include three elements in order for it to transform from understanding to motivating: injustice, identity and agency. An injustice frame involves the perception of experienced wrongdoing; identity refers to the identification of ‘us’ versus ‘them’; and agency refers to the notion that conditions can be altered through collective action, thereby empowering ‘us’ as ‘agents of their own history’ (Gamson 1995:90).

The main idea underlying collective action frames encompasses collective agency; in this sense collective action frames are more top-down in nature, since they are aimed at

transforming bystanders into supporters. This approach, in the eyes of Snow (2004:183), has a few blind spots; it focuses too much on the structural and organisational dimensions, thereby neglecting the role of frame leaders, and it perceives framing as a one-way process in which framers and audience are static entities, rather than dynamic entities who interact. Frame resonance, or the extent to which collective action frames and frames of the target audience align (Benford & Snow 2000:619), is therefore an important concept, since it also puts agency in the hands of the audience. Frame resonance is shaped by the intersection of two factors: credibility, which refers to the consistency, believability and legitimacy of the framing actor, and salience, which refers to the similarities between the values and experiences of the target audience and how a frame fits within existing cultural meanings (Snow 2004:105).

Besides collective action frames, Snow (2004:385) also mentioned everyday interpretive frames. These are frames that are employed by groups and give meaning to that group, and define and realise its interests. Over time, these frames can become culturally embedded, and they can become institutionalised (Snow 2004:385). Therefore, as frames become institutionalised, it can be stated that these are more structural or top-down in character, thereby shaping people's perceptions and behaviours. However, frames are also subject to change, rather than fixed (Goffman in Snow 2004:385). By referring to gender inequality in the United States and Germany, Ferree (2009) argued that framing can be strategically useful for individuals since it might open the door to dialogue with others who have developed their own frames in their own contexts, which enables people to form alliances in order to challenge, and perhaps even change, dominant or structural frames. It is important to understand these dynamics between the structure and agency dimensions of framing.

Identity

Now that contentious politics has been discussed, the next three sections will focus on the mostly anthropological trifecta of identity, ethnicity and nationalism. Identity can be perceived as an everyday concept; most people, if not everyone, identify themselves and others regularly, perhaps without even knowing it, and therefore it is an important concept. However, while identity plays an important role in everyday life, its meaning and definition are not so clear-cut. Nowadays, identity seems to be everywhere, yet also, as a consequence, nowhere (Verkuyten 2004:40); its overuse leads to vagueness. At a basic starting point, identity is the capacity to know who is who and what is what, rooted in language; this involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, and then knowing who we are

(Jenkins 2008:5). Brubaker and Cooper (2000:6) stated that the most general use of the term 'identity' refers to emphasising the way in which action, individual or collective, may be governed by 'particularistic self-understanding' rather than by 'putatively universal self-interest'. Demmers (2017:21) offered a simplistic definition of the concept of identity, being the answer to the question 'who or what are you?'; this can also be classified as personal identity.

Besides a personal identity, one can also derive his or her identity from group membership; this can be classified as social identity. Tajfel (1974:69) defined social identity as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from the knowledge of its own membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.' Thus, social identity includes groups and categories, such as nationality, religion, age and gender. Since this social identity revolves around group membership, it also inherently revolves around categorisation; who is part of a group, and who is not. Important in this regard is the notion that people also identify themselves by defining what they are not (Demmers 2017:23). It is important to realise that identities are fluid and constantly changing; people identify themselves depending on a certain context and can belong to multiple categories. As Demmers (2017:23) argued, people have multiple identities; social identities can mean different things in different contexts, and one identity can become prominent in a context whereas another identity is pushed to the background. Similarly, Hall (1996:17) stated that identities are never unified but increasingly fragmented, particularly in modern times; identities are 'never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses practices and positions' (Hall 1996:17). Being able to have multiple identities, and these identities being able to differ within social groups and to overlap with other social groups was conceptualised by Crenshaw (1991) as *intersectionality*.

As the concept of identity itself seems to imply a level of static-ness, as it revolves around something you have, Hall (1996:16) prefers writing about the dynamic and never-ending process of identification; a person first needs to identify with something or someone in order to have an identity. Similarly, Jenkins (2008:5) emphasised the process of identification; it is not something that one can have, but it is something that one does. Verkuyten (2004:64) claimed that the process of identification depends on personal characteristics, preferences, needs, experiences and circumstances. Hall (1996:16), on the other hand, placed more emphasis on social contexts; identification takes place based on common origin or shared

characteristics with another person, group or ideal, thereby creating solidarity established over this foundation.

So far, the concepts of personal identity and social identity and the process of identification have primarily focused on the self-ascribed nature of identification. However, since identification and categorisation also come with inclusion, exclusion and contestation, it is important to realise that other people are also able to ascribe an identity to others. Demmers (2017:23) referred to this as external ascribed identities; categorisations can be forced upon people. This is opposed to internal ascribed identities, when people categorise themselves. When it comes to categorisation, the modern state is perceived as an important actor. Demmers (2017:24) argued that states have the power to name, to identify, to categorise, to state what is what, and to state who is who. Fearon and Laitin (2000:848) perceived an identity as a social category, which they defined as ‘sets of people given a label (or labels)’. These social categories encompass two main features: rules of membership, that decide who is and who is not a member of the social category, and content, which revolves around certain characteristics shared by members of the social category (Fearon & Laitin 2000:848). It is important to realise that the relationship between personal identity and social identity, or social categories, is dynamic and not mutually exclusive; how people identify themselves is influenced by how they are identified and vice versa.

Ethnicity

Closely related to identity is the concept of ethnicity, which revolves around shared characteristics, such as language, ideology or nationality. Weber defined ethnicity, in the sociological sense, as a ‘sense of common descent extending beyond kinship, political solidarity vis-à-vis other groups, and common customs, language, religion, values, morality, and etiquette.’ (Cohen 1978:385). From an anthropological perspective, Barth summarised four main elements that ethnicity incorporated: a biological self-perpetuating population, a sharing of cultural values and forms, a field of communication and interaction, and a grouping that identifies itself and is identified by others as constituting a category different from other categories of the same type (Cohen 1978:385). Barth (as cited in Cohen 1978:385) went on to criticise the anthropological notion of ethnicity since it perceived the cultural and social forms as relatively separated aspects. By defining the concept of an ethnic identity, Hutchinson and Smith (1996) combined the social and ethnic dimensions; an ethnic identity referred to ‘the individual level of identification with a culturally defined collectivity, the sense on the part of the individual that she or he belongs to a particular cultural community.’ (Hutchinson &

Smith 1996:5). Pivotal in this definition is the notion that people need to have sense of belonging, which is based on their belief in a shared culture and common ancestry (Demmers 2017:26).

Similar to social identity, ethnicity comes with inclusion and exclusion, which is often referred to as *us* versus *them*. As Eriksen (2010:23) stated, without distinctions there would be no culturally diverse groups. Similarly, Cohen (as cited in Jenkins 2008:135) claimed that people only become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries. Nash (1996:25) identified cultural markers of ethnicity, which are perceived as the primary markers of ethnic differentiation, and more visible markers of ethnicity, which are perceived as secondary markers of ethnic boundaries. The cultural markers include kinship, referring to biological descent, commensuality, eating together, and religious cult, supernatural aspects with symbols, whereas the more visible markers include dress, language and physical features (Nash 1996:25). An important concept concerning us versus them classifications, which are often discriminatory in nature, is ethnocentrism; the perception that one's own group is superior to other groups (Hammond & Axelrod 2006:926). These notions of ethnic boundaries and us versus them classifications seemed to imply that ethnic boundaries were static and impermeable. However, Barth (as cited in Jenkins 2008:120) already declared his interest in the fact that groups and group boundaries persisted despite changing participation and membership.

Therefore it is important to discuss two different approaches towards ethnicity: primordialism and constructivism. Primordialism, or everyday primordialism, entails the notion that social categories are essentially natural, inevitable and unchanging (Fearon and Laitin in Demmers 2017:26); they are in one's blood and therefore fixed. This primordialist notion of ethnicity is now perceived as outdated, and it was overtaken by the constructivist approach in the 1960s (Green 2005:5). Constructivism, as opposed to primordialism, argued that ethnicity was socially constructed, and thereby changeable. As Baumann (as cited in Demmers 2017:28) stated by referring to Barth, what makes an ethnic identity 'ethnic' are the social processes that maintain the boundaries which people themselves perceive as ethnic. A very important concept within constructivism is that of reification, which entails the making of something abstract into something hard or absolute. Berger and Luckmann (as cited in Demmers 2017:29) defined reification in 1967 as 'the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products – such as facts of nature.' Since constructivism perceives ethnic identities as human products, this approach also embraces having multiple ethnic identities; people identify with different identities depending on

specific contexts (Chandra in Bayar 2009:1642). Similarly, addressing the dynamic relationships between ethnic groups, Barth (as cited in Jenkins 2008:121) stated that some cultural features are used by actors to express differences, whereas others are ignored, and in some cases even radical differences are denied.

This inherently means that there are also differences within ethnic groups themselves. For long there was a tendency to perceive ethnic groups as unified groups. Brubaker (2002:164) termed this *groupism*; the tendency to speak about ethnic groups, nations and races as internally homogeneous entities to which interests, agency and common purposes can be attributed. Furthermore, Anthias (1998:558) claimed that most of the literature concerning ethnicity focused on processes within the nation state, such as assimilation, integration or ethnic conflict, rather than at the transnational level. Similarly, Calhoun (1993:218) referred to states being the main actors in defining nationhood; other pre-existing ethnic groups had the choice to either assimilate to coincide with the boundaries of the nation state, or establish counter-state movements to try and form new states. Therefore ethnicity also has strong ties to nationalism, which will be discussed next.

Nationalism

Nationalism is similar to ethnicity, the difference being that nationalism revolves around the establishment of a nation coinciding with geographical borders: a nation state. As Gellner (as cited in Eriksen 2010:119) put it: ‘nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones’. Therefore identity markers, such as language or religion, would be embedded in the state system congruent with the ethnic boundaries. Nationalism follows the inclusion, and exclusion, of members based on a shared culture (Eriksen 2010:123).

A central term within nationalism is that of the nation, which is often perceived as a political and cultural project based on common heritage (Smith in Walby 2003:531). Therefore a nation is similar to an ethnic group. In the 1980s, Lewis (as cited in Eriksen 2010:118) even stated that he saw no reason to distinguish between ethnic groups and nations, since the difference revolved solely around size, not composition or functioning. When addressing the difference between ethnic groups and nationalism, Eriksen (2010:10) mentioned that an ethnic movement transforms into a nationalist movement when political leaders demand having a state of their own; while ethnic groups often do seek recognition and cultural rights, they do not demand control over a state. Motyl (1992:309) referred to

nationalists as people who belong to nations, who love their nations, who desire some form of political self-government or even independence, and who hate everything but their nations.

Benedict Anderson (2006), one of the most influential anthropological writers in the field of nationalism, stated that nationalism entails the feeling of belonging to a nation, or as he conceptualises it, as belonging to an imagined community. This community was imagined since most of its members would never even meet or know each other, and it was typified as a community since the idea of constituting a nation was deeply rooted inside its members and reproduced (B. Anderson 2006:6-7). Therefore this conceptualisation of nationalism shares primordialist as well as constructivist traits; the idea of the nation was imposed and created solidarity among its members since the day one was born, but it was also constructed and maintained through social interaction.

Nations, as opposed to ethnic groups, often desire to have a state of their own, hence the term nation-state is important within the concept of nationalism. However, as was also put forward by the constructivist approach towards ethnicity, ethnic boundaries are fluid and permeable, which makes the term nation-state problematic. Particularly in the time of modern states and globalisation, it has become easier for people to connect with others around the world, both in terms of physical travelling and online access. Walby (2003:531-540) discussed four reasons why nation-states were inappropriate to perceive as the main type of society: (1) there are more nations than states; (2) several key examples of supposed nation-states at their most developed moments were empires; (3) there are diverse and significant polities in addition to states, such as the European Union (EU) and religions, as well as the emergence of multi-lateral and global forms of governance; (4) and economic, political and cultural dimensions are not limited within bounded units. Gordon Anderson (2006) even went as far as to argue that the idea of a nation-state presented an obstacle to peace. This fear was also rooted in the fact that there are almost always multiple nations living in a state; 'Many of the world's people do not feel that the ruling elite in their state promotes their own national interest, but only that of the 'nationality' of the ruling party.' (G. Anderson 2006:75-76). Attempts by states to establish a true nation-state was accompanied by oppression of ethnic minority groups, which then, as a result, rose up in self-defense to advocate freedom of speech, religion and cultural expression (G. Anderson 2006:76).

As nationalism is concerned with establishing a nation-state, and, as discussed before, this being virtually impossible due to the permeable nature of ethnic boundaries, it is also important to include the concept of transnationalism. Vertovec (1999:447) referred to transnationalism, broadly speaking, as 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or

institutions across the borders of nation-states'; again, the use of the term nation-state does not seem entirely accurate here. Particularly so-called *ethnic diasporas* have received a lot of attention in scholarly literature revolving around transnationalism. Diasporas were defined as the "triadic relationship' between (a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came.' (Sheffer; Safran in Vertovec 1999:449). Eriksen (2010:191) stated that also the children of migrants have strong ties to their transnational roots, despite the fact that most of them have never even been there. This seems to imply that transnationalism includes primordial characteristics, while also the constructed nature of these ties, for example through their migrant parents, should not be underestimated. As Cohen (as cited in Vertovec 1999:450) stated: 'transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination.' Therefore a shared heritage can be perceived as a major binding factor.

Referendums

As mentioned earlier, ethnic groups generally do not desire independence. However, certain contextual factors, such as oppression by the state, can induce calls for independence. One way of achieving independence is through initiating a referendum on independence. It is important to take in mind that democratisation is an important condition for referendum principles; authoritarian regimes are less likely to accept a referendum, unless these are able to serve their own interests (He 2002:72). Baogang He (2002:91) notes, by referring to referendums on boundary issues, that political actors often calculate the outcomes of the referendum beforehand, thereby influencing their commitment to the democratic procedure. Furthermore, referendums generally increase the legitimacy of a government, but only if the referendum is free from coercion and if the approval and turnout rate are reasonably high (He 2002:76). In his chapter, De Vreese (2007:3) included four types of referendums: (1) compulsory or binding referendums, which entails binding referendums intended to change constitutional law; (2) rejective or facultative referendums, which includes usually binding referendums on a certain law that had already passed through legislature; (3) initiative or direct legislation referendums, which entails usually binding referendums on a subject initiated by a petition of citizens; and (4) advisory or plebiscite referendums, including non-binding referendums on a subject initiated by the government or legislature.

It is important to realise that even if a referendum is initiated through a petition of citizens, the elites are still the ones who pose the question of the referendum, choose the wording of the question, and choose the timing of the referendum, thereby having a privileged position (Lupia & Johnston 2001:192). Also concerning political elites, Papadopoulos (2001:38) mentioned three strategies they can pursue in order to lessen risks arising from a citizen-initiated referendum. The first two strategies are aimed at preventing a referendum in the first place; they include encompassing parties that are likely to make effective use of the referendum as partners in the coalition, and negotiating with opponents to policy reforms in the government or parliament, who are likely to win a majority in a referendum, to anticipate the risk of a referendum (Papadopoulos 2001:38). The third strategy is aimed at steering the process, and it includes negotiating with the referendum initiators to see if their claims can be partially met (Papadopoulos 2001:38).

Furthermore, De Vreese (2007:7) categorises four main categories of actors involved in a referendum campaign: (1) political elites, including parties and candidates; (2) civil society, interest organisations and lobbyists; (3) the media and public opinion; and (4) the electorate. These actors all function within a context that determines the dynamics of a referendum campaign. A political party needs to make strategic decisions concerning who will be most visible during the campaign, as these people come with either positive or negative connotations; this is important both in gaining popular support as well as forming strategic alliances (De Vreese 2007:10). Furthermore, political parties need to unify their often internally divided party in order to portray a clear and solid campaign message; voters are prone to consider other political options when a party is portraying unclear or divisive messages (Zaller in De Vreese 2007:10). Adding to that, Franklin et al. (as cited in Szczerbiak and Taggart 2004:564) claimed that voters generally use referendums to express their confidence or otherwise in the government.

By combining their own findings from the 2003 EU membership election results with the existing literature on referendums, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2004) argue for a causal model towards referendums that combines explaining referendum results and voter turnout. Their model relied on independent variables that they believed had most explanatory power. In terms of explaining referendum results, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2004:567-573) identified the following independent variables: (1) broad underlying attitudes towards EU membership, (2) balance, strength and clarity of elite cues, and (3) the balance of resources enjoyed by either side of the argument. As for the underlying attitudes towards the EU variable, the extent to which this was a reliable indicator of referendum outcomes depended on the level of

knowledge and awareness that voters had about European issues (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2004:568). Concerning the elites variable, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2004:568) argued that non-party actors, such as the head of state as well as business and religious organisations, which had been largely ignored in referendum literature, can have influence on the referendum outcome, depending on their function and position. Furthermore, the extent of elite influence depended on their credibility as well as the level of public knowledge and awareness on European issues (Ibid.). As for the available resource variable, both financial resources and access to mass media influence the referendum results (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2004:569). De Vreese (2007:11) emphasised the fact that the debate revolving around a certain issue does not end after the results become known; the debate continues, and the winning parties often have the strategic opportunity to control the framing of the issue in the future.

As for voter turnout, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2004:573-580) identified five independent variables: (1) general level of participation in national elections, (2) the degree of mass and elite contestations of EU membership, (3) intensity of European preferences among the population, (4) the degree of civic engagement in the European issue, and (5) the overall level of resources invested in the campaign by both Yes and No camps. Concerning the participation in national elections, the authors referred to post-communist states that had to elect presidencies, thereby hypothesising that the higher the general level of electoral participation, the higher the referendum turnout. As for the degree of mass and elite contestation, it was operationalised by examining how important social and political actors and the public opinion lined up concerning EU membership. The intensity of European preferences among the population variable was operationalised into two other independent variables: the general degree of mass and popular contestation concerning EU membership, and the contestation revolving around the issue at hand, which was identified as the fourth variable. This entailed the non-party and non-governmental initiatives engaged in campaigning on the European issue. The fifth and last variable concerning voter turnout, the level of resources invested in the campaign, was operationalised by comparing the current resources invested with the resources invested in the previous referendum campaign.

In his article, He (2002) attempted to empirically investigate the ideal that referendums settle disputes over national identity and boundary questions, particularly concerning secession, by examining all 173 boundary-related referendums between 1791 and 1998. Referendums on boundary issues have become more prominent from the twentieth century onwards. Particularly in the 1990s a lot of referendums took place; approximately 24 per cent

of all referendums since 1791 took place in the 1990s (He 2002:73). This increase in referendums on national identity and boundary issues also confirms that the notion of a nation-state has become outdated; ethnic and national boundaries often no longer coincide which increasingly leads to minority nations seeking independence. De Vreese (2007:4) noted that referendums on sovereignty and boundaries are more likely to activate and further unify existing notions on borders, identities and sense of belonging, rather than changing how people or groups think about these issues.

He (2002:74-75) categorised referendums concerning national identity or boundary questions into four groups. The first category included union referendums that combine two territories into one state, joining or re-joining a state and linking with a state, such as during the colonial times. The second category included referendums that revolve around independence, thereby playing a major role in the establishing of new states. Thirdly, referendums can also be used in contexts of supranational states. For example, referendums concerning the EU, and whether to join, withdraw or expand the EU or to approve EU treaties and the challenges for existing national identities or boundary questions. The fourth category included referendums that revolve around autonomy issues, such as self-rule, self-determination, decentralisation, devolution and separate parliament or assembly. Autonomy referendums serve to maintain cultural and ethnic identities without undermining the existing state. If a region receives more autonomy through a referendum, but remains part of the state, the state can be characterised as a federal state; the concept of federalism will be discussed next.

Federalism

Federalism revolves around decentralisation of certain regions without becoming independent; these regions would receive autonomy within its state borders. In the 1970s, Oates (as cited in Strumpf & Oberholzer-Gee 2002:2) claimed that, in the absence of spill overs, decentralisation is welfare superior to centralised decision making. Federalism was described by Elazar (1987:5) as ‘the linking of individuals, groups, and polities in lasting but limited union in such a way as to provide for the energetic pursuit of common ends while maintaining the respective integrities of all parties.’ Those who favour a federal system generally do so because a mix of three reasons: a federal system encourages efficient distribution of national resources, it encourages political participation and a sense of a democratic community, and it helps to protect basic liberties and freedoms (Inman & Rubinfeld 1997:44).

Inman and Rubinfeld (1997:44-53) identified three principles, or models, of federalism: economic federalism, cooperative federalism and democratic federalism. Economic federalism ‘prefers the most decentralized structure of government capable of internalizing all economic externalities, subject to the constitutional constraint that all central government policies be decided by an elected or appointed ‘central planner.’” (Inman & Rubinfeld 1997:45). Oates (2005) referred to economic federalism as fiscal federalism, and he distinguished two phases: first-generation theory of fiscal federalism (FGT), which prevailed during the 1950s and 1960s, and the newer second-generation fiscal federalism (SGT). The FGT envisioned a context in which governments at different levels provided public goods to the territories under their jurisdiction. The SGT literature was divided into two approaches; the first approach perceived the central government as the mediator, trying to structure intergovernmental fiscal relations to the point where local governments would serve the interests of the central government, while the second approach perceived local governments as independently operating jurisdictions where one elected public official would serve the whole population (Oates 2005:357-358).

Cooperative federalism scholars argued that it is a mistake to treat each jurisdiction as a separate entity that regulates its own territory (Bulman-Pozen & Gerken 2008:1256); these local governments all function within a federal state. According to this approach, the central government’s main function was to encourage and enforce interjurisdictional contracts in order to provide public goods and prevent economic competition between local governments (Inman & Rubinfeld 1997:49). All central government policies must therefore be unanimously approved by elected representatives from all local governments (Inman & Rubinfeld 1997:48). This form of federalism prevailed in the United States from the 1950s until the late 1970s and it had social equality as its main objective; it was a response to the challenges of market failure, post-war prosperity, racism, urban poverty, environmentalism, and individual rights (Kincaid 1990:139). However, since these challenges became increasingly nullified, combined with a growing belief that local governments should be the ones to guarantee a climate of freedom and democracy for its citizens, cooperative federalism slowly transformed into coercive federalism, as Kincaid (1990) defined it. Coercive federalism entailed coercive attempts made by the central government to ensure interjurisdictional cooperation in order to maintain the supremacy of the central government, such as imposing economic measures aimed at changing local government policies (Kincaid 1990:139). A context in which local governments challenge the central state’s authority and

make policies outside the federal system was called uncooperative federalism by Bulman-Pozen and Gerken (2008:1256).

Democratic federalism, or majority-rule federalism, also seeks an efficient allocation of social resources and perceives local governments as main actors in providing public services. It combines certain aspects of the principles of economic and cooperative federalism. Contrary to economic federalism, democratic federalism does not assume that the government provides public goods and mediates interjurisdictional spill overs (Inman & Rubinfeld 1997:51). Contrary to cooperative federalism, only a majority is required when it comes to decision-making, and not unanimity (Inman & Rubinfeld 1997:51). Sonnicksen (2018:43) further conceptualised democratic federalism as comprising both horizontal, intragovernmental, and vertical, intergovernmental, dimensions. Ideally, this would lead to either a competitive and a rather majoritarian democracy based on institutional power, or a consensus democracy based on the separation of power (Sonnicksen 2018:43). Since this approach generally seeks equalisation, it is generally supported by economic federalism. As to further analyse the relationship between democracy and federalism, Benz and Sonnicksen (as cited in Sonnicksen 2018:43) introduced the concept of coupling, which refers to the extent to which the intergovernmental and intragovernmental dimensions structurally and strategically interact.

In his chapter, Akreyi (2019) discussed why federalism is also a paradoxical concept. At the core of this notion is the fact that federalism is often used to keep an ethnically and religiously diverse state together, yet it also provides opportunities for independence (Danilovich in Akreyi 2019:15). Federalism is perceived as a short term solution which, in the long term, could facilitate secession since it entails the creation of a state structure at the local level, which comes with political resources that can be used to accomplish independence. In order to prevent calls for independence, Horowitz (as cited in Akreyi 2019:16) argued that the central state should take into consideration the interests of the local groups. As shown throughout this chapter, claims for independence are often ethnic in nature. Discussing central regimes, Cameron (as cited in Akreyi 2019:16) interestingly stated that federalism is unlikely to hold an unjust regime together, but that it is equally unlikely that federalism pulls a regime apart.

In certain contexts autonomous regions within a federal state do seek independence. Therefore it is important to look at the concept of a de facto state. Palani et al. (2019b:3) defined de facto states as ‘entities that meet normal criteria for statehood, but lack international legal recognition.’ Caspersen (as cited in Palani et al. 2019b:4) identified five

characteristics for an entity to classify as a de facto state: (1) it controls the majority of the territory it claims, thereby having de facto independence; (2) it is building state institutions and attempting to increase internal and external legitimacy; (3) it declares formal independence or demonstrates its desire to become independent; (4) it has not yet gained international recognition; and (5) it has existed for at least two years. De facto states often make use of three groups of claims in order to gain international recognition: (1) self-determination, which revolves around national identity, historical continuity and past grievances; (2) remedial secession, which revolves around alleged human rights violations; and (3) earned sovereignty, which revolves around the creation of effective, legitimate and democratic entities (Palani et al. 2019b:4).

Conclusion

This theoretical framework has discussed the literature revolving around multiple concepts that will help to better understand the remainder of this thesis. Contentious politics constitutes the backbone of this thesis, since it revolves around how and why people mobilise. As Leitner et al. (2007) took into account that collective action cannot be perceived as homogeneous due often to existing internal differences, their definition of contentious politics will be the reference point in this thesis. Particularly the concepts of political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes within contentious politics are important, since these will be used for analysing the organisation and contention of the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence in the empirical chapter. In this chapter these components of contentious politics were discussed separately, but this thesis will show that these concepts are interrelated. Furthermore, the different dimensions of opportunities, mobilisation and framing will also play an important role; these dimensions include structure and agency and how they are interrelated. Therefore this thesis follows King (2007), McAdam et al. (1996) and Snow (2004), who all stated that there is a dynamic relationship between the structure and agency dimensions, rather than a static structure. It is important to realise that this thesis mainly analyses the referendum at the different elite levels.

Chapter 2: Context of Kurdish Nationalism and Independence

In order to better understand the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence, context must be provided that will discuss the historicity as well as relevant developments leading to this referendum. That is exactly what this chapter will do. Since the Kurdish nation in Iraq desires to be independent, it is imperative to better understand what drives this nation towards independence. Therefore the first section of this chapter will focus on Kurdish nationalism. This will provide detailed information about its origins and development until 1991. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, and the new boundaries that were drawn as a consequence, shattered the Kurdish population among different states. As the Kurdish people developed in different socio-political contexts, one should be cautious when speaking of Kurdish nationalism. The second section of this chapter will focus on the status developments of the Iraqi-Kurdistan region. After the Gulf War ended in 1991, the Kurdistan region in Iraq had established de facto autonomy, thereby having the characteristics of an independent state without actually being one. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution recognised Kurdistan as an autonomous region, but the non-implementation of Article 140 caused, and still causes, tensions between the Kurdistan region and the Iraqi government. The third section will provide a detailed assessment of the party politics within the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, which have influenced the referendum on independence and have shaped the political landscape to what it is today. As will become clear throughout this chapter, the Kurds, also within the Iraqi borders, cannot be seen as a homogeneous ethnic group. Fourthly, the international support for an independent Kurdish state will be discussed, thereby analysing the positions of the regional actors and the United States. Their main concerns of Kurdish independence revolve around the distribution of oil and spill over effects of Kurdish nationalism, thereby making the region more unstable. Lastly, the origins and rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) will be analysed, with a main focus on Iraq, as this had a major impact on the decision to hold a referendum on independence in the Kurdistan region; this will become clear in chapter 3.

Kurdish nationalism

It is imperative to take a closer look at the roots of Kurdish nationalism and how it developed. This section will mainly focus on the development of Kurdish nationalism since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, as this proved to be a decisive event that would both induce and fragment Kurdish nationalism.

During the time of the Ottoman Empire, ethnic identities had very little political significance since the central government incorporated a centralisation policy in order to overcome tribal autonomy and coalitions (Yavuz 2001:5). As a result, a ‘dominant nationhood’ with a focus on Islam was promoted to create a unified empire, but this was not without resistance; minorities who refused to accept this new dominant ideology would demand more authority from the state (Stansfield 2014:66). In this context, the first signs of Kurdish nationalism started to evolve as tribal leaders were not going to give up their power so easily under the Ottoman centralisation efforts. As a result, tribes started to unite and form more cohesive movements, causing the tribal Kurdish ethnicity to develop and become more relevant. It is important to realise that these signs of early nationalism were a result of local power struggles between center and periphery, rather than a result of contested nationhood (Stansfield 2014:63).

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1922 and boundaries were redrawn, the Kurds found themselves in four present-day states: Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. As Ozoglu (as cited in Gunter 2013:35) argued: ‘Kurdish nationalism appeared to be the only viable choice for Kurds in the absence of a functioning ideology such as Ottomanism.’ It is, however, almost impossible to speak of one Kurdish nationalism, since the Kurds experienced different socio-political contexts and regimes in their respective states. For example, present-day Kurdish political parties do not share the same objectives; the KDP in Iraq favours a nation-state model for the Kurds, whereas the PKK and PYD in Turkey and Syria favour autonomy within the existing state borders (Tugdar & Al 2019:131). In the post-Ottoman period states prioritised their own nationalist discourses which legitimised their authoritarian rule and hegemonic political culture, thereby having diverse effects on the Kurdish identity formation (Vali 1998:83). It was not until these moments that Kurdish nationalism really started to develop and calls for independence gained more ground. Still, Kurdish nationalism remained deeply fragmented, particularly across borders, because of its diverse societal development (Vali 1998:83). For this reason, the remainder of this section will focus on the development of the Kurdish nationalism in Iraq.



Map 1: Greater Kurdistan region (Antiwar, 2017).

At the end of 1918, a few years prior to the official fall of the Ottoman Empire, the British were able to occupy the three provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. These provinces included three main ethnic groups in Iraq: the Shia and Kurdish populations constituted the majority groups, whereas the Sunnis could be seen as the elite minority (Yesiltas 2014:41). The British favoured the Sunni ruling elites, thereby trying to build a modern Arab state, but also wanted to include the Shia and Kurdish populations in their state building process in order to create a unified Iraq (Yesiltas 2014:43). One of the reasons why Mosul, a primarily Kurdish province, was prioritised was because of its oil reserves; these oil reserves were perceived as a main component to stability and prosperity in Iraq. The British were therefore not willing to honour the already existing Kurdish calls for independence; instead, the Kurds were incorporated in a newly founded Iraqi state, thereby creating grievances among the Kurdish population (Vali 1998:83).

In 1932, Iraq officially became an independent state. Arab nationalism provided a response to the colonial powers as well as the identity tensions in Iraq (Yesiltas 2014:46). Unlike the Shias, the Kurds alienated from the rest of Iraq's society through politically driven revolts against the authorities. In the 1930s, the Kurds in Iraq began to develop ideas of how to secure their Kurdish identity and interests within the state. It is important to realise that Kurdish leaders had been stressing since the 1940s that they strived for more autonomy within the state of Iraq, and not for independence (Romano in Danilovich & Pineda 2019:206). Eventually the biggest Kurdish political party to date was established in 1946: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani. As a result of failed

negotiations between the KDP and the Iraqi state in the aftermath of a Kurdish revolt in 1943, Barzani was expelled to Iran in 1945, where he later fled to the Soviet Union (Yesiltas 2014:47).

In 1958, the Iraqi regime collapsed, and many believed that the new government would incorporate a democratic regime. The new president, General Abd al-Karim Qasim, welcomed Mustafa Barzani back from his banishment and legalised the KDP (Yesiltas 2014:47). Furthermore, despite promoting a unified Iraqi identity, the new Constitution recognised Kurds and Arabs as partners, and Kurdish nationalist leaders and organisations were given influence in Iraqi politics (Ibid.). However, these collaborative relationships quickly deteriorated as Qasim's opponents forced him to place renewed emphasis on Arab nationalism, thereby also closing Kurdish organisations. In 1961, this situation unfolded into an armed conflict between the Kurds and the Iraqi state, which did not end until 1975.

On 8 February 1963 Qasim's government was overthrown by the Baathists and the Arab military. The Baathists were not open to any sort of agreement, but luckily for the Kurds, this regime was toppled in that same year and replaced by military rule for the next five years (Yesiltas 2014:48). In 1966, president Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz, recognised that the Kurdish ideology proved to be an important factor for the development of the Iraqi state as a whole, thereby attempting peaceful negotiations; the Bazzaz Declaration fulfilled nearly all Kurdish demands, such as acknowledging the Kurdish nationality, accepting the Kurdish language as an official language, and representation in the central government (Yesiltas 2014:49). However, the military rulers did not approve the concessions done, so Bazzaz was dismissed and the best chance for the Kurds and a democratic Iraq vanished. Gunter (2013:37) identified the 1960s as the period during which the Kurdish movement really took on characteristics of a nationalist movement as a reaction to the excesses of Iraqi Arab nationalism.

In 1968, another regime change took place; the Baath Party took power once again, but now made sure to quickly nullify threats to their regime. Perceived as one of those threats was the Kurdish quest for autonomy, since it undermined the idea of being able to control the whole state. In 1970, the Baath Party offered the most extensive autonomy agreement ever seen in the context of Iraq; it was perceived as the only option to create a strong Iraqi state (Yesiltas 2014:50). However, the autonomy agreement was never implemented due to tensions that arose during the negotiations revolving around the territorial extent of Kurdish autonomy, which was set to be decided through a referendum in the Kurdish areas; the fighting continued in 1974, causing even more grievances. A major issue revolved around oil;

the Iraqi state did not want to lose the oil producing areas of Kirkuk and Mosul, since it feared that this would play into the hands of Kurdish independence. The Kurdish revolt was defeated in 1975, but another opportunity for autonomy emerged in 1980 when the Iraq-Iran war started; the Kurds and Iran formed an alliance to fight against the Iraqi state of Saddam Hussein. Hussein was afraid his regime would fall at the hands of this alliance, and so he decided to order a genocide against the Kurds, thereby also utilising chemical and neurological weapons. The attacks that followed between 1987 and 1989 became known as the al-Anfal campaign, during which over 100.000 civilians in the Kurdistan region were killed (Yesiltas 2014:51). The atrocities committed by the Saddam Hussein regime were aimed at wiping out the Kurdish population, but it ended up pushing Kurdish nationalism in Iraq to new heights (Gunter 2013:37).

Status developments of Iraqi-Kurdistan

This section will focus on the status developments of the Iraqi-Kurdistan region since 1991. In 1991, the Iraqi-Kurdish region gained de facto autonomy for the first time following the Iraq invasion in Kuwait, which sparked an international operation that would later evolve into the Gulf War. Thereafter, this section will elaborate on the importance of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution for the Kurdish desire of autonomy.

The United States (US) played an important role in the 1991 Gulf War. The US was worried about Saddam's increasingly aggressive policy having complications for the stability of the oil rich region; president Bush called for an uprising against the Iraqi regime (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:205). An international coalition launched Operation Desert Storm, which included mostly air strikes. The Kurds were encouraged by the international support and revolted against Saddam's regime, but just when the uprising almost succeeded, the Americans became concerned that the Kurds' autonomy in Iraq would inspire problematic Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iran and Syria (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:205); the US backed down from supporting the Kurds.

The Iraqi army was mostly defeated by the Operation, but Saddam was still in power and deployed brutal retaliation strategies against the Kurds. This development led to the establishment of a no-fly zone by the international coalition over northern Iraq; some areas of Iraqi-Kurdistan were covered by the no-fly zone, whereas some areas remained under Baghdad's control (Danilovich 2014:3). Yet still, this proved to be a big opportunity for the Kurds, as Saddam's forces withdrew from the north, thereby enabling the Kurds to establish the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (Owtram 2019:80); a de facto state in Iraq with

its own parliament. Even despite these favourable conditions, the Kurdish leaders were not aiming for full independence, since they realised this would be opposed by other states that harboured Kurds, such as Iran, Turkey and Syria (Danilovich 2014:3). The borders of the KRG were established through the so-called 'green line', which was established by the United Nations in 1991 (Natali 2010:48). This green line was not without controversy; the Kurds made a claim that certain areas were part of the Kurdistan region, while these areas were put under the Iraqi jurisdiction through the green line. These areas claimed both by the Iraqi government and the KRG would become known as the disputed areas. The contention over the status of the disputed areas further deteriorated the relationship between the KRG and Baghdad. Particularly the Kirkuk governorate caused contention; the northern areas of Kirkuk were now controlled by the KRG, whereas the other parts fell under the jurisdiction of the Iraqi government. Both parties perceived this governorate as a priority; Kirkuk was perceived by the Kurds as the center of Kurdish society and culture, and it was even called the 'Kurdish Jerusalem' (Talabani in Danilovich 2014:33), whereas Baghdad was afraid the Kurds would use Kirkuk's oil reserves as leverage for Kurdish independence.

With the no-fly zone in full effect, combined with additional international aid, the Kurdistan region was able to develop strong economic and administrative capacity between 1991 and 2003 (Yesiltas 2014:52). However, despite also offering the region its recognition, the nature of the international aid program prohibited Kurdistan from becoming an independent state, thereby assuring the territorial integrity of Iraq (Natali 2010:29). In addition, Saddam's hostilities against the Kurds continued until his actual defeat in 2003 following the American invasion of Iraq.

After the Iraq War in 2003, the Kurdish leadership continuously addressed that they did not desire independence, but wanted more autonomy within the state of Iraq (Romano in Danilovich & Pineda 2019:207). Baghdad found itself in a difficult position. Due to the experienced autonomy between 1991 and 2003, the Kurds needed to be given at least some form of autonomy in order to receive their support for a new and strengthened Iraqi state. On the other hand, Baghdad also realised that more autonomy would also provide new opportunities for Kurdish independence. In 2005, a new Iraqi Constitution was adopted by means of a referendum, which gave the Kurdistan region considerable protection and representation, yet it gave the region fewer rights than it had enjoyed under their de facto independence from 1991 onwards (Anaid 2019:44). Article 117 of the Constitution states the following: 'This constitution, upon coming into forces, shall recognize the region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region.' (Danilovich 2014:50). This

new federal character of Iraq, which was supported by the US, was perceived as the best way to guarantee minority rights, to prevent a return of dictatorship, and to keep the state together (Natali in Akreyi 2019:15). It is important to realise that while the new Constitution did provide the Kurdistan region with more autonomy, it strictly prohibited independence. The extent of this new Kurdish constitutional autonomy, however, was open to various interpretations; the KRG claimed that its regions should directly benefit from their autonomous energy productions, whereas the Iraqi government claimed that all profits should be controlled by the federal government and should be distributed proportionally to their populations (Danilovich 2014:8). The new federal character of Iraq did not do well among the Shia and Sunni Arabs, who preferred a strong Arab central government.

At the national level, the Kurdish political parties reintegrated into the Iraqi political spectrum, and some senior positions in the Iraqi state were offered to Kurdish politicians (Anaid 2019:44). At the same time, the KRG was increasingly working on improving its own international diplomatic position by opening offices in foreign capitals, thereby aiming for international recognition and strengthening its economic position (Anaid 2019:45). For example, in 2006 the KRG adopted a series of laws that encouraged foreign investment in the region (Anaid 2019:45). On the other hand, there was contention about the status of Kirkuk and the other disputed areas and the KRG's desire to manage its own internal affairs, including its oil fields (Yesiltas 2014:52). The Iraqi state was hesitant to accept this autonomy as it believed that this would threaten its territorial integrity. This ultimately led to deteriorating relationships between Baghdad and Erbil, particularly after the 2010 parliamentary elections. Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister at that time, was critical of the 2005 Constitution and argued that the power of the KRG should be reduced, and that authority should once again be centralised to Baghdad (Yesiltas 2014:52).

A big issue revolved around Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, or rather the non-implementation of it. This Article stated that the central Iraqi government needed to conduct a referendum in the disputed areas and implement its results before 31 December 2007 (Danilovich 2014:55). This referendum would revolve around whether the disputed areas would become a part of the Kurdistan region or remain part of Iraq. The deadline was not met, after which the KRG and Baghdad signed the Erbil Agreement in 2010, just after parliamentary elections. Part of this Erbil Agreement was the promise made by Kurdish officials to support Iraqi prime minister Maliki on the condition that he would implement Article 140 (Danilovich 2014:55). However, till this day, this Article has not been implemented by the Iraqi government. Not implementing Article 140 led to outrage among

Kurds; Kurdish officials began shifting their rhetoric from desiring a federal Kurdistan region to desiring a fully independent state (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:207). This growing discontent in combination with favourable changes in context led to the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence. The next chapter will discuss this referendum extensively.

Party politics

As the sections above showed, Kurdish nationalism mainly developed because of historical grievances. However, it is important to realise that the Kurds cannot be seen as one homogenous group, mainly because of ideological differences. Even within the Kurdistan region in Iraq, internal differences often caused power struggles within Kurdish politics, thereby also hindering the KRG from functioning effectively. This section will analyse these internal discrepancies by looking at the main political parties in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region.

The first Kurdish political party that was established was the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1946, under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani, in order to express Kurdish nationalist feelings and support cross-border Kurdish communities (Natali 2010:3-4). The KDP has always been the biggest Kurdish party in Iraqi-Kurdistan, but their hegemony was never uncontested. In the 1970s multiple leftist political parties were established, such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975, under the leadership of Jalal Talabani. Talabani split off from the KDP based on ideological and strategic differences. The PUK is traditionally identified with more radicalism and more leftist and liberal elements, whereas the KDP is regarded as more conservative and traditional (Stansfield in Greaves 2019:56). However, the newer parties lacked resources and mechanisms of support to maintain local governance, which caused them to operate as clandestine organisations in tribal contexts and establish alternative and smaller local governance structures (Natali 2010:28). This prevented the Kurdistan region from establishing internal sovereignty.

After the defeat of the Iraqi army in 1991, the international community provided aid to the Kurdistan region, which had just established the KRG through a collaborative effort between the KDP and PUK. The KRG was based on a system that shared and separated the power between the two parties equally. So, for example, a KDP minister was obliged to have a PUK deputy minister and vice versa (Natali 2010:33). Also, attempts were made to form one military by unifying the Peshmerga forces, which were still operating under their separate party's commands (Danilovich 2014:69). However, in the aftermath of the war, the territories falling under KRG jurisdiction remained largely fragmented due to tribal affiliations to either the KDP or the PUK. Instead of bringing the parties closer together, the donor agencies and

foreign governments contributed to increased tensions and fragmentation. These foreign actors treated Barzani of the KDP and Talabani of the PUK as individual party leaders, rather than as a regional government; some donors and international organisations favoured either the KDP or the PUK and their respective territories, creating jealousy at the local level (Natali 2010:46).

Eventually these tensions, which became even more tense due to conflicts over oil sources, led to a Kurdish civil war between the KDP and the PUK in 1994; the KDP was supported by Turkey, whereas the PUK was supported by Iran (Danilovich 2019:5). During this civil war the KDP even requested Saddam Hussein's forces to seize Erbil and to defeat the PUK militias (Owtram 2019:80). As a result, Hussein sieged and captured the PUK-held Erbil, thereby seeing an opportunity to regain control of the northern parts of Iraq. Concerns among US officials that, once again, Hussein would commit genocide led the US to launch operation Desert Strike, which included mostly air strikes; as a result, Hussein was forced to retreat. The Kurdish civil war ended in 1998 due to mediation of the US. The tensions between the parties still remained, but the Washington Agreement created some form of stability by dividing the KRG into two administrative parts: the KDP gained control of the Erbil governorate and the PUK gained control of the Sulaymaniyah governorate (Natali 2010:53).

Following the defeat of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the new Iraqi Constitution in 2005 granted the Kurdish region a high level of autonomy; Masoud Barzani, affiliated with the KDP, became the president of the KRG. Since Iraqi-Kurdistan had no regional constitution, it was mainly dependent upon inter-party agreements between the KDP and the PUK. This ultimately led to the 2006 PUK-KDP Reunification Accord, which was mainly an effort at ending the hostilities between the two parties and forming a united front against Baghdad (Danilovich 2014:56). Particularly the need to be present in Iraq's domestic politics was important, since it included the nomination of Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK, as Iraqi president; since this was supported by the KDP, it validated the Reunification Accord (Danilovich 2014:56). While this agreement did end the hostilities between the KDP and PUK, smaller political parties were excluded from the political spectrum in Kurdistan. Several attempts were made at drafting a regional constitution, but a new opposition party had emerged which hindered this process: Gorran.

Gorran, or 'Movement for Change', was formed by critical PUK dissenters in 2009 and aimed for better representation for the public, thereby also challenging the two-party dominance in the KRG (Tugdar & Al 2019:131). Muhammad Hajji, a senior figure within

Gorran, stated the following: ‘We’ve lost trust in the leadership of both the PUK and KDP.... Barzani is not the president of the Kurdistan Region, but the president of his party’s political bureau.’ (Ahmed in Greaves 2019:62). During the 2005 elections, the KDP and PUK won a combined total of 89 per cent of the votes, which dropped to a mere 57 per cent in 2009 (Palani et al. 2019a:7). In the 2013 elections Gorran won 24 seats, as opposed to the PUK, its rival, which only won 18 seats (Watts 2014:160). This was a shock for the KRG government, since Gorran had now become the second largest party in Kurdistan; it disrupted the existing power balance between the KDP and PUK. Closely working together with other political parties, such as Kurdistan Islamic Union and the Kurdistan Islamic Group, Gorran formed a strong opposition against the PUK and KDP government. However, the party’s aim was to change the system, rather than to participate in it. Nawshirwan Mustafa, Gorran leader, stated the following: ‘We don’t care how the government is run so much as the system.’ (Watts 2014:160). As will become clear from the next chapter, Kurdish party politics are still in full effect and greatly influence the internal dynamics in the Kurdistan region. It is interesting to note that the current prime minister of Iraqi-Kurdistan, Nechervan Barzani, stated in 1998 that the KDP and PUK are ideologically ‘virtual identical’, that their ‘goals are the same’, and that the differences are ‘a personal matter’ (Stansfield in Greaves 2019:56).

International support

This section will focus on the international support for Kurdish independence in Iraq and its subsequent referendum. Some of the key actors will be analysed, particularly those situated in the Middle-Eastern region or along the Iraqi-Kurdish borders, such as Baghdad, Iran, Turkey and Israel. As was demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the US played a major part in the region as it has influenced the developments in Iraq and its Kurdistan region since the 1990s. However, the role of the US will not be discussed here since it will be in the next chapter.

The KRG needed Baghdad to give up its veto and agree with independence. However, as has become clear throughout this chapter, the Iraqi government, arguably the most important actor involved in the Kurdish quest for independence, rejected the referendum. The main reason for opposing Kurdish independence revolved around the violation of Iraqi sovereignty, particularly if the new Kurdish state would include portions of the disputed areas (Nader et al. 2016:43). The Iraqi parliament declared the referendum unconstitutional and issued a total of twelve orders as punishment measures to be implemented by the Iraqi government against the Kurdistan region. These included, among others, the deployment of Iraqi troops in the disputed areas, charging the Kurdish leaders responsible for the

referendum, closing all Kurdistan international border crossings, bringing all oil reserves in the Kurdistan region under Iraqi control, and closing the airspace of the Kurdistan region (Akreyi 2019:26).

Since Baghdad was not going to accept Kurdish independence, the KRG needed the international community to put pressure on the Iraqi government. However, international support was seriously lacking. Traditionally, Turkey has always been against an independent Kurdistan region in Iraq due to the fear of a spill-over effect to Turkey's own Kurdish citizens concerning the desire of becoming independence (Tugdar & Al 2019:127). Even when the KRG gained more autonomy in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Turkey was very much resisting this (Nader et al. 2016:57). It can be stated that its fear mainly revolves around the subject of sovereignty. However, due to changing regional and domestic contexts, Turkey began to perceive the KRG as an alternative source of energy, a buffer against a hostile Baghdad and Iran, and a partner in Turkey's attempts to resolve its Kurdish issues (Tol in Nader et al. 2016:57-58). This improved the relationship between the Kurdistan region and Turkey and made the Turkish government sympathetic to the Kurdish desire of independence. However, when the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence was announced, Turkey did not support Barzani and the KRG (Tugdar & Al 2019:127). Turkey supported Iraq's territorial integrity and wanted to prevent further instability in the Middle-Eastern region as well as continued access to Baghdad-controlled oil and gas reserves (Nader et al. 2016:91). One major factor contributing to Turkey's fear was the civil war in Syria from 2011 onwards. During the war in Syria, Kurdish parties were known to fill the power vacuum by establishing control in certain areas, thereby referring to it as 'Western Kurdistan' (Tugdar & Al 2019:133). Turkey felt threatened by these developments, and this contributed to not supporting Kurdish independence in Iraq.

Iran also did not support the referendum on independence in Iraqi-Kurdistan, and expressed frustration over this decision made by Barzani. Iran's deputy foreign minister for Middle East and African Affairs stated the following: 'Iran has confidence that, among the Kurdish leaders, there are also wise individuals who will not allow Iraq to be broken up.' (Nader et al. 2016:101). In order to understand this reaction, a closer look needs to be taken at the context and goals of Iran. Iran desires to be a big regional actor; it would like to play a decisive role in the shaping of politics and economics in the Middle-Eastern region, as well as to be accepted by other regional states and the international community (Aziz & Kirmanj 2019:147). This strongly influences the behaviour of the state, as an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan could pose a threat to their desired hegemony in the region. When the referendum

was announced by Barzani, Iran, as a predominantly Shia state, had just established its hegemony over the Levant and Mesopotamia through supporting the Shia-dominated governments of Iraq and Syria (Aziz & Kirmanj 2019:148). Therefore Iran wanted to protect this status quo, where Iraqi-Kurdistan wanted to change the status quo by becoming independent. This could be seen as the main reason for not supporting the referendum. However, since Iran had good relationships with both the KDP and PUK parties in Iraqi-Kurdistan as well as economic interests in the region, it never expressed harsh opposition (Nader et al. 2016:117-119).

Israel had a completely different approach; on 29 June 2014, Israeli prime minister Netanyahu openly expressed his support for a Kurdish state in Iraq (Romano & Rojhilat 2019:164). Israel was the only state in the world that favoured Kurdish independence. Pivotal to this position was the strategic alliances Israel sought with non-Arabs and non-Muslims in order to counter the Arab resistance against Israel's existence (Romano & Rojhilat 2019:164). Baghdad does not recognise the existence of Israel, and therefore it made sense for Israel to partner up with the traditional opponents of the Iraqi state, being the Kurds. Possibly also of importance was the distribution of oil, which had always officially been denied by the KRG; by 2015, approximately two-thirds of Israel's oil needs was produced by the Iraqi-Kurdistan region (Romano & Rojhilat 2019:175).

The rise of ISIL

In 2014 a new threat emerged that would challenge both the KRG and the Iraqi state: terrorist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). On the other hand, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, the rise of ISIL also provided opportunities for Kurdish independence. This section will provide an overview of the developments and origins of ISIL, and it will elaborate on the context that provided ISIL to emerge as a major threat to not only Iraq and Kurdistan, but to the whole Eastern Mediterranean region. However, since this thesis focuses on the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, this section will mainly look at ISIL within the context of Iraq.

The roots of ISIL can be traced back to 2003 when the US invaded Iraq. By that time, a man named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had already started building his own jihadi group, called Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (JTWJ), expressing anti-Shia rhetoric and promoting the traditional Islamic ideology (Lister 2014:6). When US forces invaded Iraq in 2003, the air strikes targeted areas within the Sulaymaniyah governorate, where Zarqawi had established his jihadist base. As a result, the JTWJ increased its terrorist activities by deploying suicide

bombers and kidnapping and beheading foreign hostages (Lister 2014:8). After the defeat of Saddam Hussein, the US helped in creating a transitional government in Iraq. The Americans favoured to work together with the Shia majority, and Maliki established a primarily Shia Iraqi government, thereby excluding the Sunni minority from national politics (Laub 2016:2). This led to a feeling of marginalisation among the Sunnis. Zarqawi believed that his organisation could take advantage of the chaos created through the invasion, thereby presenting his organisation as the defender of the Sunni community (Lister 2014:7).

Zarqawi's organisation merged with Al-Qaeda in 2004, thereby forming an Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq, called AQI (Laub 2016:1). However, this fusion also caused internal tensions within the AQI because of strategic differences. Zarqawi was notorious for his desire of cleansing the society through violence, whereas the Al-Qaeda branch insisted on combating infidel regimes and avoiding damaging the image of the jihad where possible (Lister 2014:8). Nonetheless, the AQI was preparing to establish an Islamic state in Iraq. Later on, the AQI merged with five other insurgent groups based in Iraq to form the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM) in order to unite and better coordinate Iraq's jihadi insurgency (Lister 2014:8).

In 2006, Zarqawi was killed by a US airstrike. Zarqawi's successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, became the new leader of the organisation, and shortly after he announced the establishment of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). The ISI was supposed to transform the insurgent group into a military-political actor responsible for governing territory (Lister 2014:9). At the end of 2006, ISI had reached financial self-sufficiency; between 70 and 200 million dollars was raised each year by collecting ransoms, extortion and oil smuggling (Lister 2014:9). However, local opposition emerged since it incorporated a strict and traditional Sharia law in the areas it was governing, which included Islamic punishments, enforced praying and prohibiting alcohol and drugs. From 2007 onwards, local tribal militias, called Sahwa, had engaged in combat tactics in order to counter ISI, mainly in Sunni held areas. These Sahwa were supported by the US and local security forces and proved to be an effective counter; ISI suffered great defeats at the hands of the Sahwa militias. However, since the US retreated from Iraq between 2009 and 2010, the effectiveness of the Sahwa was diminished, but it was still enough to reduce ISI from a military-political actor back to a terrorist organisation (Lister 2014:10). Still, the ISI had established an organisational structure with financial independence that it could rely on. Also the fact that Maliki's Shia government was not supporting the Sahwa militias and was not able to pay salaries caused grievances among the Sunni Sahwa members, who could then be swayed by ISI into joining the terrorist organisation (Lister 2014:10). After the US retreated from Iraq in 2010, Sunni political

leaders and tribal chiefs claimed they were being marginalised and that their cities were being neglected (Gulmonhamad 2014:4). A prominent Sunni leader, and cofounder of the Sunni Sahwa militias, openly expressed his disappointment with Maliki's policies, thereby stating that he was against ISIL, but that he was protesting against Maliki (Parker in Gulmonhamad 2014:4). Also, another Sahwa leader stated that the Sunni tribes would fight the Iraqi government until their demands were met (Gulmonhamad 2014:4). ISI was slowly increasing its influence in a growing number of Sunni areas.

At that point, there was a lack of any formal ISI pledge to the Al-Qaeda organisation, which resulted in a gradual division between the two organisations. In late 2006, Masri had pledged allegiance to ISI leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. However, both of them were killed by a joint US and Iraqi airstrike. After the deaths of these two prominent figures, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the new leader of the ISI, who renamed the organisation to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in April 2013 (Gulmonhamad 2014:2). This new name was more fitting with the ambitions of the terrorist organisation in the Eastern Mediterranean area. Baghdadi's plan was to go beyond Iraq's borders; ISIL cells performed mass terrorist attacks in civilian areas, targeting mainly minority groups in order to provoke radicalisation (Lister 2016:17-18). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was of Iraqi origin and had spent time in US operated prisons in Iraq. Within those prisons, terrorist cells were established and organised, and a good portion of the nationalists that once served in Saddam Hussein's Baath party became part of ISIL (Laub 2016:1). This was a way for the remaining Baath members to retake the power they lost as a result of the US de-Baathification in 2003 (Laub 2016:1).

Following the Arab Spring in 2011, ISI continued its streak of expanding its territory by conducting military operations in the southern areas as well as in the Kurdish areas in the north (Lister 2016:11). Furthermore, ISIL started Operation Soldier's Harvest in July 2013, which aimed to undermine the capacity and confidence of the Iraqi security forces through assassinating and threatening security personnel, soldiers and police (Lister 2016:11). On 10 June 2014, ISIL seized Mosul as well as several other areas; the Iraqi army fled and left these places undefended. Following the seizure of Mosul, ISIL released an audio recording on 29 June that announced the establishment of the caliphate (Lister 2016:14). Next on route was Erbil, the capital of the KRG. However, Kurdish Peshmerga forces were able to stall ISIL's march towards the city (Akreyi 2019:22). ISIL's influence in the Kurdistan region will be discussed more in detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the context that is imperative to understand the empirical chapter revolving around the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence. It is important to realise that there exists no such thing as one Kurdish nationalism. This is due to the fact that the Kurdish people are scattered around several states, thereby experiencing different socio-political contexts and developing different strategic and ideological mind sets. Kurdish nationalism in Iraq is also hindered by the fact that, although the Kurdish political parties share the same objective, they do not agree on each other's strategic approaches and they often collide in a struggle for power. Even when the 2005 Iraqi Constitution provided the KRG with more autonomy, the struggle for power eventually continued, mainly due to deeply rooted grievances within the existing party politics. New opposition parties emerged to challenge the existing two-party politics that dominated Iraqi-Kurdish political spectrum. Over time, due to grievances against the Iraqi government, the rhetoric of Kurdish elites began to shift towards demanding full independence. The rise of ISIL in Iraq was perceived by Kurdish elites as an opportunity to push for independence through initiating a referendum on independence, despite the fact that there was no international support for Kurdish independence. The next chapter will delve deeper into the contextual factors that contributed to the decision to initiate the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence and the contention that came with it.

Chapter 3: Analysis of the 2017 Referendum

This chapter will discuss the Kurdish referendum on independence in Iraq, which took place on 25 September 2017. As will also become clear in this chapter, the referendum was heavily contested; it lacked both national and international support. Therefore it is interesting to look at why the referendum was held despite the controversy surrounding it. This chapter will first give a brief overview of general information about the referendum; its geographic location, the voting results and its consequences. Thereafter it will analyse the period before the referendum itself and discuss the factors that contributed to the decision to hold the referendum. It will do so by applying the theoretical framework of contentious politics and its subordinate factors of political opportunities, mobilisation structures, and framing processes. Particularly the role of the president Masoud Barzani and other Kurdish elites will be analysed here since they are the ones with the power to frame, and are able to really influence decisions made at the national level. They are also most involved with negotiations at the international level and with the Iraqi government in Baghdad. By applying the theoretical framework of contentious politics, this empirical chapter will contribute to a better understanding of the process dynamics of referendum campaigns, including the assessment of the contextual factors that influenced the call for a referendum. This chapter will show that particularly president Barzani pushed for the referendum on independence since he perceived this was the best chance for Iraqi-Kurdistan to gain independence as well as his best chance to stay in power.

The 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence

This section will briefly provide general information about the referendum on independence, including its geographical borders, voter turnout and its results and consequences. The decision to hold this referendum was taken during a meeting headed by the president of Iraqi-Kurdistan: Masoud Barzani. The question put forward was ‘Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?’ (Park et al. 2017:199). People were able to vote even in the disputed areas under Peshmerga control, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. According to the Kurdistan Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (KHEC) 4.587.255 people were eligible to vote, and 3.305.425 people actually voted; this is a voter turnout of approximately 72 per cent (Akreyi 2019:25). In total 2.861.471 voted in favour of independence, where only 224.468 voted against independence; a staggering 92.73 per cent voted in favour (Akreyi 2019:25). One of my interviewees argued that the results of a referendum on independence would always be the same, no matter the timing.³

The referendum was heavily contested and controversial as internal sovereignty and international support was lacking; therefore the referendum on independence backfired. Within two weeks of the vote on 25 September 2017, the Iraqi army proceeded with an intervention, thereby entering Kirkuk and claiming the city and its oil fields as well as the surrounding disputed areas (International Crisis Group 2019:1). As will become clear later in this chapter, the city of Kirkuk had ideological as well as strategic importance, so the loss of the city was a massive blow to the Kurdistan region. Furthermore, Baghdad imposed sanctions and cut Kurdistan’s budget from seventeen to twelve percent (International Crisis Group 2019:1). Other international actors joined in imposing sanctions as well, such as Turkey and Iran, together with the Iraqi government, and closed the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports, thereby cutting the Kurdish connection to the outside world (Ibid.). This massive backlash caused president Masoud Barzani, the initiator of the referendum, to step down from his position. A year later he declared the following: ‘The referendum’s timing may not have been ideal, but it was our right to state our will. We lost less than if we had lost our will and determination. ... With the referendum, international principles and rights, such as the right to self-determination, proved to be just empty talk with no basis in reality. We now comprehend that we have to stand by ourselves and be strong on our own.’ (International Crisis Group 2019:2). Masoud Barzani’s nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, took over his position as president.

³ Interview through Skype with a Kurdish diplomat, 21 May 2019.

Political opportunities

Firstly, the political opportunities leading to the 2017 referendum on independence will be analysed. As discussed in the theoretical framework, political opportunities refer to ‘consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national – sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics.’ (Tarrow 2011:32). This section is divided into three main parts: the first two will include the more objective opportunities of the war against ISIL and the economic context, whereas the last part will include the more subjective dimension of opportunities perceived by president Barzani. The war against ISIL provided opportunities mostly in terms of physical territory and international visibility, whereas the economic context, in terms of Baghdad’s budget cut and the oil crisis, further deteriorated the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad. President Barzani perceived these factors as an opportunity for himself to stay in power. The dynamic relationship between the objective and subjective spectrums of opportunities will be important throughout this section.

Firstly, the rise of ISIL played a major part in the idea of initiating a referendum in Iraqi-Kurdistan. From 2014 onwards the Iraqi army was unable to withstand this terrorist insurgency, thereby retreating from the frontlines, which proved that the Iraqi federal government could neither protect Iraq nor its Kurdistan region. As a result, Masoud Barzani ordered Kurdish Peshmerga forces to step in and drive back ISIL forces from areas situated along the contested border of Iraqi-Kurdistan and Iraq, such as Kirkuk, Mosul, Makhmoor and Shingal (Palani et al. 2019a:4). The Peshmerga forces were able to defeat ISIL and take control of these areas, thereby also taking advantage of the power vacuum that emerged as a result of the defeat of the Iraqi army and its inability to maintain control over the disputed areas. Despite the threat of ISIL, the Iraqi federal government had been trying desperately to hinder foreign governments from providing the Peshmerga forces with weapons, since it was afraid that military aid could help the Kurds towards independence (Akreyi 2019:23). In the same fashion, Masoud Barzani saw that the battle against ISIL provided an opportunity: ‘Our conviction is that after the war against IS, the interest, the opportunity [for independence] will also disappear’ (Palani et al. 2019a:6). As the Iraqi army had been defeated by ISIL, it was also unable to resist or threaten the Kurdish initiative of a referendum.



Map 2: Map of Kurdish territorial control following the war with ISIL (Political Geography Now, 2017).

Prior to engaging in battle with ISIL, Iraqi-Kurdistan emerged as an important and recognised actor in the Middle Eastern politics, and improved its diplomatic relations with other states (Palani et al. 2019a:6). It was for this reason that Erbil became more effective in the battle against ISIL, thereby also earning greater international visibility, where this visibility had the purpose of gaining international recognition as a state. The fact that Kurdish leaders were now attending international events and conferences was aimed at showing that Kurdistan was worthy of recognition (Ibid.). As part of the international coalition against ISIL, Peshmerga forces were deployed to other states, which was against the Iraqi Constitution (Palani et al. 2019b:8). This was proof of Iraqi-Kurdistan’s de facto statehood. Defeating ISIL, with support from foreign states such as the US, therefore convinced the

Kurds that they had now gained even more status in the international arena, and that they would have better chances of increased support for their own state. This, however, turned out to be a false assumption; only Israel had expressed support for Kurdish independence since the referendum was announced. Therefore the Kurds were desperate for the support of the US, which played a peculiar role in the matter.

On 22 August 2017, one month prior to the referendum, the United States Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, and president Barzani had a meeting together, discussing the plans for a referendum on independence (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:208). Mattis expressed his understanding of this referendum, but he also mentioned he had concerns that the referendum would negatively influence the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil, thereby hindering the joint war against ISIL (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:208). President Barzani assured him that the referendum would have no impact on the war on terror, after which Mattis mentioned that it was an ‘honest discussion between two friends, and President Barzani stated that he hoped for all issues to be resolved through peaceful means and through dialogue.’ (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:209). Additionally, Mattis reiterated that he was not against the vote itself, but rather against the timing of it (Rudaw, 30 August 2017). Masoud Barzani did not interpret this as strong opposition and considered Mattis’ mild response as indirect support for the referendum (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:208). However, since the US did not back the referendum on independence, this interpretation proved to be wrong. It is debatable whether Barzani genuinely did not interpret Mattis’ response accurately, or whether he chose the interpretation which suited him best; independence would strengthen his position as president. The role of president Barzani will be discussed more in detail later in this section. In a letter written to Barzani, delivered on 23 September 2017, the US Minister of Foreign Affairs once again expressed his concerns about the referendum on behalf of the US. He urged Barzani to first engage in dialogue with the Iraqi government, thereby mentioning that the referendum should be a last resort: ‘should the talks not reach a mutually acceptable conclusion or fail on account of lack of good faith on the part of Baghdad we would recognize the need for a referendum.’ (Tillerson 2017). This quote also implied that the US did not oppose the idea of a referendum per se; it would be a viable option as an ultimatum.

Yet still, the combination of defeating ISIL, capturing new territories and the demise of the Iraqi army led to a feeling of invincibility among the Kurds. One of my interviewees, who was in the Kurdistan region two weeks prior to the referendum, stated that the overconfidence of the Kurds she experienced, particularly after Kirkuk was taken, is what

surprised her most.⁴ The control over new territories could be perceived as the objective opportunities for statehood; in order to become an independent state, a nation needs territory. This newly established territorial control provided an opportunity to transform it into a fully independent state by initiating a referendum. Particularly the capturing of the Kirkuk governorate was pivotal since it had symbolic as well as strategic importance. Kirkuk was perceived as Kurdistan's 'historic capital', and the taking of this city showed Kurdish 'readiness' of independence (Danilovich & Pineda 2019:206), whereas its rich oil reserves served strategic and economic importance. As one of my interviewees mentioned: 'It was always a dream to take Kirkuk, this was written in the mountains, and it would also become a [Kurdish] state immediately; Kirkuk has oil and pipelines.'⁵ Additionally, the Peshmerga spokesperson claimed that they 'could not risk the city's majority-Kurdish populations – and oil fields that include one of Iraq's largest – falling into militant hands.' (Rudaw in Akreyi 2019).

This newly exerted control over a territory larger than 50% of Iraqi-Kurdistan's official size strengthened Kurdistan's bargaining position with Baghdad (Palani et al. 2019a:4). The fact that there was no political agreement between the Iraqi and Kurdish governments on what would happen to the secured areas after they had been retaken from ISIL provided an opportunity for Kurdish forces to increase their control. Additionally, there was frustration among Kurdish leaders about the failure by the Iraqi government to implement Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. Therefore, with these territories now under Kurdish control, it was recognised as an opportunity and it was perceived as the right time to secure Kurdistan's extended borders by initiating a referendum and claiming independence. This could be seen as the more strategic, and therefore the more subjective dimension of opportunities. President Barzani referred to Article 140 now being 'implemented and completed' (Palani et al. 2019a:4).

A second set of factors that provided opportunities for the referendum on independence had to do with the economic situation of Iraqi-Kurdistan, particularly the oil distribution and the budget cut by Baghdad. After the implementation of the new Iraqi Constitution in 2005, the Kurdish region was supposed to receive seventeen percent of the Iraqi budget; it never exceeded 11.4 per cent (Akreyi 2019:19). By instituting its own oil laws and attracting international oil companies in 2005, the Iraqi-Kurdistan region achieved some degree of economic independence. As a result, Baghdad sought to punish international oil

⁴ Interview through Skype with a PhD student who had conducted fieldwork in Iraqi-Kurdistan, 21 May 2019.

⁵ Interview through Skype with an Iraqi political analyst, 22 April 2019.

companies operating under these Kurdish laws, thereby prohibiting them from operating in other parts of Iraq (Le Billon 2015:69). Additionally, in February 2014, prior to the war with ISIL, the Iraqi federal government decided to cut the budget share to the Kurdistan region, which aggravated already existing grievances and contributed to calls for independence. According to Baghdad, the Kurdistan region had been selling oil independently, which was denied by Barzani, who stated that the region had only started selling oil independently after Baghdad had unlawfully cut their budget (Akreyi 2019:17). President Barzani was referring to the budget cut as a crime and stated the following: ‘[S]uppose there had been problems between Erbil and Baghdad, and Erbil was to be blamed, but taking the bread and milk out of people’s mouths and babies of Kurdistan is no less than Anfal and chemical bombardment.’ (Akreyi 2019:21). Therefore, after the Kurdish Peshmerga forces were able to defeat ISIL and take control of Kirkuk, its oil and gas reserves were utilised to make up for Baghdad’s budget cut (Akreyi 2019:24). When it comes to oil reserves, the Kurdistan region constitutes more than one-third of Iraq’s total reserves (MNRKRG in Akreyi 2019:22). Approximately seventeen per cent of the Iraqi oil production came from the Iraqi-Kurdish borderlands, mostly from the Kirkuk oil reserve (Le Billon 2015:69); losing this oil field to the KRG left a big hole in the Iraqi economy. As for gas reserves, the Kurdistan region holds between 1.5 and three per cent of the world’s total reserves (MNRKRG in Akreyi 2019:22). These available natural resources played into the hands of Kurdish independence, especially since the relations between Baghdad and Erbil deteriorated.

Some political observers even went as far as to say that without these resources Kurdistan would never have been interesting for the international community, thereby making independence impossible (Akreyi 2019:22). With this in mind, trying to become even more economically independent, the KRG started attracting more international oil companies, such as ExxonMobil and Gazprom Neft in 2012 (Palani et al. 2019b:7). According to the Ministry of Natural Resources, more than 45 companies from more than 30 states were attracted to the Kurdistan region since 2003 (Akreyi 2019:22). This shows that a lot of international actors had economic interests in the region, thereby hoping to maintain good relationships with Erbil. As Simon Hatfield (as cited in Banco 2017), CEO of the Canadian oil company WesternZagros Limited, stated: ‘No one in this region offers assistance without expecting something in return. There is no such thing as altruism, personal gain is the underlying motivator’. Banco (2017) even went as far as to claim that during George W. Bush’s presidency, US officials and diplomats were involved in the corruption in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, thereby profiting at the expense of the locals. It is arguable that without natural

resources, the Iraqi-Kurdistan region would not have been such a center of attention at the international level, which would have made becoming independent even harder.

However, the drop in oil prices in 2014 caused a major financial crisis in Iraqi-Kurdistan since the region was extremely dependent on oil incomes; approximately 80 per cent of the Iraqi-Kurdish economy is dependent on oil revenues (Banco 2017). The KRG was between three and five months behind in paying approximately 1.4 million employees and lowered the salaries of its civil servants between ten to 75 percent (Salih 2016:1). Furthermore, most of the budget received from Baghdad went to the public sector that was characterised by competition between the KDP and PUK parties, both trying to buy political allegiance (Salih 2016:2); party politics will be discussed more into detail later in this chapter. These factors of economic mismanagement, accompanied with accusations of corruption, led to public discontent as well as international concerns, which stagnated the plans of holding a referendum on independence (Salih 2016:2-3). Despite the then present concerns, some people claimed that the conditions for an independent Kurdish state had ‘never been as favourable over the past century as they are now’, as the Kurds’ ‘weight has grown in Iraq and Syria, partly due to their central role in fighting IS.’ (Salih 2016:4).

Both the previously discussed opportunity factors of the rise of ISIL and the economic context could be characterised as more objective opportunities, which were then recognised and acted upon. However, there was a more subjective factor that also needs special attention: president Masoud Barzani. His presidential term officially had already ended in 2013, but was extended for two years in the same year through a parliamentary law issued by the KDP and the PUK (Palani et al. 2019a:6). In 2015 Barzani’s presidential term was extended for a second time until the next presidential elections in 2017, since the political parties failed to reach an agreement concerning his presidency (Palani et al. 2019a:6). Mainly opposition party Gorran opposed Barzani’s presidency. It was argued by the KDP, Barzani’s party, that this was not the time for change; Barzani was a stabilising actor, and the extension was needed to lead the nation into battle with ISIL and lead Kurdistan to independence (Palani et al. 2019a:7). Despite the controversy surrounding Barzani’s presidency at that time, the international community remained mostly quiet about the matter; their priority was the war against ISIL rather than Kurdish domestic politics. Building on this, one of my interviewees stated that Barzani had been a Peshmerga commander for decades, so the international community needed him to command the Peshmerga forces in the battle against ISIL.⁶ The

⁶ Interview through Skype with a Kurdish political analyst, 15 March 2019.

reliance of the international community on the president provided an opportunity for Barzani to remain the president of the region and secure his position by pushing for a referendum on independence, which would gain him even more power and status.

By playing the nationalist card of independence, Barzani put the opposition into a dilemma. The order of an independence referendum was seen by many in the PUK and Gorran as an attempt to distract the population from the deteriorating economic situation (Natali in Owtram 2019:85). But also despite being against Barzani, the opposition could not oppose his idea of a referendum, simply because independence had always been a Kurdish ideology. As one of my interviewees mentioned: ‘You either support his [Barzani’s] intention for a referendum and independence, which is basically the peak of Kurdish nationalism, or you will be seen in the eyes of the Kurdish public as weak or traitors, or basically not nationalist enough.’⁷ Opposing the referendum would be perceived as going against Kurdish nationalism, which was at its peak through Barzani’s nationalist rhetoric paired with historic oppression (O’Driscoll & Baser 2019:12). Also campaigning against the referendum was not an option, since this would only further legitimise Barzani as the Kurdish leader and initiator of independence (O’Driscoll & Baser 2019:12). As it turned out, even parts of the opposition, such as factions of the PUK and other smaller parties, prioritised gaining independence over issues of internal politics (Palani et al. 2019b:14). Therefore Barzani created opportunities for himself to stay in power by calling for a referendum on independence.

Mobilisation structures

This section will focus on the Kurdish mobilisation structures and how these influenced the 2017 referendum on independence. As discussed in the theoretical framework, mobilisation structures were defined by McAdam et al. (1996:4) as ‘those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action’ (McAdam et al. 1996:4), where King (2007:121) refers to mobilisation structures as organisations with command structures, solidarity, boundaries of group membership and identifiable spokespersons. Therefore this section will mainly focus on the Kurdish mobilisation structures, primarily analysing the existing party politics and how this influenced the campaign of the referendum.

The Kurdistan Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (KHEC) was responsible for the organisation of the referendum. The KHEC was established on 1 March

⁷ Interview through Skype with a Kurdish political analyst, 15 March 2019.

2015, amidst the fight against ISIL, and committee positions were divided among the political parties; the KDP held the position of the chair, the PUK the deputy chair, the Kurdistan Islamic Union the position of decision making executive, and Gorran became the head of the electoral division (Park et al 2017:202). The referendum was organised in Iraqi-Kurdistan region, the disputed territories and among Kurds in diaspora. However, since the Peshmerga forces had defeated ISIL and gained control of more territory, the boundaries became unclear and there was widespread confusion over who was eligible to vote (Park et al. 2017:203).

When Masoud Barzani announced in June 2017 that a referendum on independence would be held, the Iraqi-Kurdish political landscape was divided. It is important to realise that president Barzani himself called for the referendum, and not the parliament (O'Driscoll & Baser 2019:12). The KDP claimed that Erbil needed a strong leadership to move to independence and to fight against ISIL, rather than a democracy in fragile political conditions (Palani et al. 2019a:8). This was a plea to extend Barzani's presidency at least until after the referendum. Gorran, the second biggest party, on the other hand, did not participate in the decision to announce the referendum and it boycotted the parliamentary meeting that took place in order to vote on approving it, just as the Kurdistan Islamic Group and several PUK parliamentarians (Park et al. 2017:202). Some PUK leaders were in favour of postponing the referendum, whereas Gorran and Kurdistan Islamic Group wanted the referendum and the presidential and parliamentary elections to be held on the same day. They feared that pro-referendum parties would use the referendum to acquire more popular support (Palani et al. 2019a:9); Kurdish people have the dream of living in an independent Kurdistan, so they knew the referendum would do well among the people. In addition, only 68 of the 111 members of parliament attended the meeting; 65 of them approved the referendum (Park et al. 2017:202).

The main argument for opposing the referendum was the perception of Barzani being the unlawful president since the extension of his presidential term; 'the lack of statehood is not an obstacle to democracy' (Palani et al 2019:8). In October 2015, the Kurdistan region experienced violent demonstrations over Barzani's extended presidential term and delayed salaries (Palani et al. 2019b:14). The KDP accused Gorran of encouraging the demonstrations in particularly the Sulaymaniyah governorate. As a result, the KDP removed the Gorran Parliament Speaker as well as four Gorran members of parliament in October 2015, after which the parliament was deactivated. This led to discontent among the opposition; the parliamentary vote on 15 September 2017 on the referendum was the first parliamentary session held since its dismissal. The discontent among the opposition parties, which was strengthened by the financial crisis, resulted into an agreement of partnership between the

PUK and Gorran in May 2016, which posed a serious threat to the KDP; combined, the PUK and Gorran occupied 42 seats as opposed to the KDP's 38 seats (O'Driscoll & Baser 2019:12). In order to prevent loss of power, the KDP needed a distraction, and the referendum project served to unite the people behind the KDP elite (O'Driscoll & Baser 2019:12).

So while the extension of Barzani's presidential term provided continuity, it also caused more friction in the political spectrum and greatly obstructed the efforts of gaining support for the referendum. In addition, all this emphasis on independence spilled over and became an omnipresent subject among the Kurdish people, thereby in turn influencing Kurdish politics to the point there was no turning back (Palani et al. 2019a:8).

The Kurdish political parties mainly depend, in terms of support, on regional and tribal affiliations, thereby trying to defend their specific regional interests; Gunter (in Greaves 2019:56) argued that the parties are divided by 'philosophy, geography, dialect and ambition'. In Iraqi-Kurdistan, the two main political parties, the KDP and PUK, each govern their own territory independently with their own security services, courts, militias and their own economic resources with their own separate trading relations; 'Each party is in effect a de facto state in itself.' (Greaves 2019:56). One of my contacts interviewed several Kurdish officials during the campaign period of the referendum, and they expressed concerns that Kurdistan was not yet ready for independence by referring to the fact that the region did not have one unified army yet.⁸

Historically, the KDP had always been unpopular in Sulaymaniyah, a stronghold of both the PUK and Gorran, and therefore the referendum was also less popular in this governorate (Palani et al. 2019a:9). This led to the establishment of the 'No for Now' movement by Shaswar Abdulwahid, the owner of media conglomerate NRT TV, who claimed that the referendum was 'an excuse by Kurdish leaders to remain in power' (Palani et al. 2019a:9). However, the effectiveness of this movement remained limited to the governorates of Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, since the majority of the Kurdish people were very much for independence. Concerning media coverage of the referendum, the KHEC published some regulations which included the right to information and express opinion, and the obligation for media to be accurate and impartial (Park et al. 2017:211). However, the KDP made sure to gain support for the referendum through the KDP-aligned, and essentially biased, media (O'Driscoll & Baser 2019:12). In addition, Shaswar Abdulwahid mentioned that there were some incidents that obstructed the work of the NRT TV Channel and media coverage

⁸ Interview through Skype with a PhD student who conducted fieldwork in Iraqi-Kurdistan, 21 May 2019.

approximately one month prior to the vote: on 22 August the Kurdish intelligence agency hindered the opening of a new NRT studio where a program on the referendum would be broadcasted; on 27 August, the NRT was suspended for a week; on 31 August armed men broke into the NRT studio in Dohuk, threatening to set it on fire (Park et al 2017:211).

This resistance against the referendum also had an impact on the campaign of the referendum. One of my interviewees even identified the campaign as anticlimactic; the first few months there were a lot of talks, behind the scenes, between the Kurdish political parties. It was not until about three weeks prior to the referendum that my contact started seeing visual campaigning in favour of the referendum, such as a few billboards and aerial banners in Erbil, where he was stationed; there was no visible form of opposition whatsoever.⁹ As mentioned earlier, the campaign in the PUK and Gorran stronghold Sulaymaniyah received even less attention than in the KDP held areas.

Park et al. (2017), as part of a wider delegation with the purpose of observing the referendum, spent one week in Iraqi-Kurdistan observing the referendum; this delegation included academics, national and local politicians, and members of political and trade union organisations. In total there were approximately 23.000 independent observers, both with or without party affiliation, who volunteered; 8.000 of them were related to the 'No for Now' campaign and thereby blocked from performing their observing tasks (Park et al. 2017:200). Park et al. (2017) arrived in Erbil on 22 September and attended a KDP rally in a football stadium; Barzani was speaking to a 40.000 people crowd, calling for a 'yes' vote, and many people had gathered around the stadium as well. Banners in favour of the referendum were present throughout Erbil and Dohuk, both in Kurdish and in English, whereas opposition to the referendum was nowhere to be seen, nor in protests nor in banners (Park et al. 2017:207). This changed as the delegation moved out of the pro-KDP Erbil to Sulaymaniyah, which was more pro-Gorran and pro-PUK and controlled by PUK militia forces, where they only saw one single billboard with information on the referendum. This shows that the existing party politics had a big influence on the campaign of the referendum. Two of my interviewees were in the Kurdistan region during, or just prior to the referendum. While they were there, they experienced mixed contexts; one of my interviewees experienced euphoria in the KDP-held Erbil, but experienced very little attention for the referendum in the PUK-held areas¹⁰, whereas my other contact also experienced a lot of campaigning in the PUK-held

⁹ Interview through Skype with a Western aid worker, specialised in campaigns, active in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, 27 May 2019.

¹⁰ Interview through Skype with a professor and author who had conducted research on Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, 25 April 2019.

Sulaymaniyah, although she described the atmosphere as tense rather than euphoric.¹¹ It should be noted that she was in Sulaymaniyah when it was preparing a rally initiated by Barzani.

It is important to realise that not all parties were internally unified about their party's approach towards the referendum. Where the KDP and Gorran did seem unified in favour and against the referendum respectively, the PUK increasingly experienced tensions and divisions within the party. One of my interviewees stated that the PUK leader was ill during the campaign of the referendum; this was one of the reasons the PUK was so internally divided. He even went as far as to say that Kurdistan would have achieved more if Talabani would have been involved, also at the international level: 'the international arena always mentioned the [political] divisions as a flaw.'¹² Only one PUK faction, led by Kosrat Rasul, participated in the referendum campaigns by the KDP (O'Driscoll & Baser 2019:12). In Kirkuk, with support from the Sulaymaniyah faction, the local PUK organisation rejected to hold the referendum, whereas some prominent PUK politicians as well as the PUK vice-president expressed support for the referendum (Park et al. 2017:208). It was claimed by anonymous sources that a few days prior to the actual referendum the vice-president showed up with 3.000 Peshmerga forces to threaten those PUK members who were resisting and hindering the voting process (Park et al. 2017:208).

Framing processes

This last section will focus on the framing aspect by the Kurdish elites, particularly during the campaign of the referendum. Framing was defined by David Snow as 'conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action' (McAdam et al. 1996:6). Most important in this regard were the processes of internal and external framing; Kurdish elites had to frame the referendum on independence in order to gain support at both the national and international level. Park et al. (2017) identified three referendum narratives present among Kurdish political parties: the 'failed partnership-right time' narrative, the 'not a proper referendum' narrative, and the 'no right to partitioning' narrative. These different narratives will be analysed first. Subsequently, the framing at the international level will be analysed.

¹¹ Interview through Skype with a PhD student who conducted fieldwork in Iraqi-Kurdistan, 21 May 2019.

¹² Interview through Skype with a PhD student and author who had conducted research on the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, 18 May 2019.

The ‘failed partnership-right time’ narrative focused on the detrimental relationship with Baghdad and the existing grievances caused by not honouring Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. Kurdish elites, particularly of the KDP, emphasised the historical grievances Baghdad was to blame for; the cycle of betrayal and resorting to violence against the Kurds by the Iraqi government has always been present in the Kurds’ minds (Anaid 2019). The addressing of Baghdad’s failures was part of a change in strategies: from emphasising democracy and state-building to claiming the failure of the partnership with Iraq (Palani et al. 2019b:8-9). The focus here was more on degrading Baghdad rather than stressing the positive aspects of Kurdistan. Since negotiations with Baghdad concerning a Kurdish state had failed, it was perceived the right time to initiate a referendum and consult the Kurdish people about the future of Iraqi-Kurdistan. President Barzani stated the following: ‘Due to the Iraqi government and the Iraqi political leadership’s exclusive policies, violations of the constitution, and ignoring the rights and demands of the people of Kurdistan [...] we reach the conclusion that we have to return to our people’s opinion and will, and let them decide on their future.’ (Palani et al. 2019b:9). Furthermore, Barzani (as cited in Palani 2019b:10) mentioned that Kurdistan went to Baghdad voluntarily in 2003 to establish a democratic and federal Iraq, and that therefore Kurdistan had the opportunity to voluntarily leave it as well. This ‘failed partnership-right time’ narrative also emphasised Kurdish unity rather than the political diversity present in the political spectrum. In June 2017, president Barzani stated the following in an interview: ‘The referendum issue is about the destiny of a whole people. That’s why this issue is bigger than any other political framework, or any political parties, or any political problems within the party system.’ (Park et al. 2017:206).

In addition, Nichervan Barzani, nephew of president Masoud Barzani, and at that time prime minister of Iraqi-Kurdistan, claimed that one of the reasons why the referendum was held was because the Kurdish elites had serious concerns about the nation and the situation in Kurdistan; ‘every day we are threatened, with all of my respect for *Hashde Shabi* [Iraqi state-sponsored militia forces], each of them is threatening Kurdistan’ (Barzani in Anaid 2019). Here Baghdad was framed as a threat, which added an extra dimension to the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad. Similarly, Barzani (as cited in Palani et al. 2019b:9) stated that the oppressive nature of Baghdad had not changed: ‘The culture of resorting to military force to resolve the Kurdish issue has not changed in Baghdad, after decades of genocide against Kurds at the hands of the Iraqi government.’ This element of threat was not included in the ‘failed partnership-right time’ narrative, but does add a dimension to the deteriorating relationship between Baghdad and Erbil.

The battle against ISIL also contributed to the perception that this was the right time for Iraqi-Kurdistan to become independent. The war on terror caused the region to receive international attention, which presented a unique opportunity for Kurdish independence. As president Barzani claimed, ‘Our conviction is that after the war against IS, the interest, the opportunity [for independence] will also disappear’ (Palani et al. 2019a:8). Furthermore, KRG officials stated in *The Guardian* that the successes against ISIL were achieved in spite of Baghdad, rather than because of its support (Townsend 2017); the Iraqi army proved itself to be incapable of protecting its territory, which was another argument for secession from Iraq. The war against ISIL was not included in the ‘failed partnership-right time’ narrative as identified by Park et al. (2017), but did seem to have an important role in framing why now was the right time for independence. Barzani pushed for this referendum since he saw opportunities for independence. Also, as was mentioned earlier in this thesis, his own personal motivations to stay in power might have contributed to him initiating the referendum.

However, the ‘not a proper referendum’ and the ‘no right to partitioning’ narratives did not agree with initiating a referendum on independence and can be seen as counterframing. The ‘not a proper referendum’ narrative encompassed two arguments. The first argument held that the referendum was announced by an illegitimate president, thereby making the referendum invalid. Secondly, it was argued that the referendum was a means to provide an illegitimate president with status, rather than being about the independence of Iraqi-Kurdistan; it was to cover up the lack of democracy, Barzani’s suspension of parliament after his term had ended, and the development of an autocratic regime under his rule (Park et al. 2017:206). This narrative argued for a Kurdish state built on democratic foundations, which was emphasised by particularly Gorran.

The ‘no right to partitioning’ narrative claimed that the referendum was illegal according to the Iraqi Constitution and law; it was argued that a referendum on independence can only be possible in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution and law, which from this perspective would never occur (Park et al. 2017: 206-207). The legal dimension was not the main concern, but rather the cooperation of the Iraqi state. This narrative was mainly articulated by the Iraqi-Turkmen Front, which had existing tensions with the KDP. On the other hand, it was also argued by a member of parliament of the Iraqi-Turkmen Front that Baghdad was widening the divisions through sectarian politics since it did not treat Erbil as a part of Iraq (Park et al. 2017:207). The unlawful budget cut could be seen as an example of this.

Concerning framing at the international level, Barzani mainly addressed Western and Arab states. When addressing Western actors, he referred to the right of self-determination, historical injustices, and the Peshmerga contribution in the fight against ISIL, and he emphasised that the referendum would not affect the functioning in the international coalition against ISIL (Palani et al. 2019b:13). Particularly the battle against ISIL was used in legitimising the call for independence. Fighting against ISIL, Kurdish Peshmerga forces suffered from the losses of 1.800 forces, 9.000 injured, and 60 missing (Palani et al. 2019a:8). This in combination with the fact that Peshmerga forces were able to defeat ISIL, also on behalf of the international community, sparked a feeling among the Kurds that they had earned the right of an independent state. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Barzani stated the following: ‘[a]fter the big sacrifice of the *Peshmerga* and breaking the myth of Isis, we thought they [the international community] would respect this right [of self-determination]’ (Palani et al. 2019a:9). When addressing the Arab states, Barzani emphasised the sectarian nature of Iraq and Iraq’s constitutional violations, particularly during president Maliki’s term, since Maliki was perceived as a sectarian leader by Arab Sunni states (Palani et al. 2019b:13). Furthermore, Barzani claimed that Iraqi-Kurdistan had always been a stable factor in the region: ‘In the past 25 years we have proven that we are not a threat to any country, we are friends and a factor for stability in the region and we will continue to be so, and we will respect the principles of the international law.’ (Palani et al. 2019b:13).

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence through the lens of contentious politics by discussing political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes. In terms of opportunities, particularly the war against ISIL provided a context and international visibility that Kurdish elites could use to push for independence. The victory of Kurdish Peshmerga forces over ISIL provided Iraqi-Kurdistan with more territory; particularly Kirkuk was important as it harboured large amounts of oil and since it was perceived as the Kurdish cultural capital. President Barzani was able to exploit these opportunities, as pushing for independence in these favourable conditions would provide him with more power. Barzani’s political party, the KDP, fully supported his claims, whereas Gorran strongly opposed his calls for a referendum, since it perceived the referendum as a Barzani and KDP power project. The PUK was divided; several factions opposed the referendum, whereas others supported it. This also influenced the campaign at the local level; the KDP areas of Erbil and Dohuk were heavily campaigning in favour of the referendum,

whereas there was rarely any campaigning in the Gorran stronghold of Sulaymaniyah. The opposition framed the referendum as illegitimate, as Barzani was perceived as the unlawful president. Barzani, on the other hand, framed that the opportunities were now favourable for independence, thereby also referring to the detrimental relationship with Baghdad; now was the time for independence.

Conclusion

This conclusion will start off by providing a brief summary of the first two chapters. Thereafter, the main question will be answered by referring to the empirical chapter and the interconnectedness of the components of contentious politics, including political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes, that provided a lens for analysing the organisation and contention of the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Finally, this conclusion will end with recommendations for future research.

The first chapter constituted the theoretical framework of this thesis, which included contentious politics, identity, ethnicity, nationalism, referendum literature and federalism. Contentious politics referred to the emergence of social movements, the effectiveness of which is determined by the presence of political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes. Political opportunities referred to a change in the political or institutional spectrum that encourage collective action, mobilisation structures to the formal and informal organisations through which people mobilise, and framing processes to the strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion a shared understanding of certain contexts, thereby trying to legitimise and motivate people to mobilise. As I will demonstrate when answering the main question, the interconnectedness of these individual components should not be neglected. The concepts of identity, ethnicity and nationalism that were discussed all revolved around group membership and group solidarity. Identity, at its core, is all about how people identify themselves. People mostly derive their identity from group membership, which is often ethnic in nature; people mostly identify with, and are categorised by others, based on descent, language or ideology. This ethnic identity then transforms into nationalism when certain ethnic groups, or nations, desire to have their own state. As was demonstrated by this thesis, one way of seeking independence is through a referendum. Another option for ethnic groups is to demand more autonomy within an existing state; if this is accepted, the state can be characterised as a federal state. However, when a nation is not satisfied by merely the autonomy within a federal state, it transforms into a *de facto* state: an entity that seeks independence but has no legal international recognition.

The second chapter provided the context necessary to better understand the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence. Ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq had been on the rise, mainly as a reaction to the oppression the Kurds faced by the Iraqi authorities. This nationalism peaked under Saddam Hussein's

regime, as mass atrocities were committed against the Kurds. As a result of the Gulf War and the established no-fly zone in 1991, Iraqi-Kurdistan was able to gain de facto autonomy and establish the KRG. After the defeat of Saddam Hussein, the Kurds stressed they did not desire to become independent, but wanted more autonomy within the state of Iraq. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution provided the KRG with its desired autonomy, but the non-implementation of Article 140, concerning a referendum on the jurisdiction of the disputed areas, deteriorated the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil. In order to form a front against Baghdad, the two biggest parties, KDP and PUK, settled their differences and formed a coalition. The KRG began striving for independence, although there had never been any international support for Kurdish independence. The neighbouring states feared that Kurdish secession from Iraq would ignite nationalist calls in other states, and the international community was worried that the region would be in turmoil as a result. However, as ISIL was continuing to pose a threat to the region and gaining more ground, the international community had no choice but to partner up with the Iraqi-Kurdistan region. In this context president Barzani and the KRG saw an opportunity to initiate a referendum on independence. The remainder of this conclusion aims to discuss the complex political processes that were at play during the period before the referendum. The main question posed at the beginning of this thesis was the following:

How and why was the 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence in Iraqi-Kurdistan organised and contested?

This main question will be answered by referring to political opportunities, mobilisation structures and framing processes, their interrelatedness and their different dimensions. The main dynamics here revolve around the framing of opportunities in order to mobilise support; opportunities need to be recognised and framed to become meaningful and mobilise support. Particularly frame resonance, as discussed by Snow (2004), is important since people often mobilise based on frames that overlap with their own perception. Throughout this thesis, mainly the role of the Kurdish elites has been analysed; president Barzani and his party, the KDP, and some parts of the PUK were very much in favour of the referendum, whereas other parts of the PUK and Gorran opposed it. Despite the national as well as international opposition, president Barzani still pushed for a referendum on independence. This was because he identified opportunities, which could then be framed in order to mobilise support for his cause. These opportunities could be perceived as both objective and subjective in nature. As Tarrow (2011) stated, opportunities are not the same for everyone, and early risers

may create opportunities for others, also those not sympathetic to their cause. In this regard, the emergence of ISIL in Iraq provided objective and subjective opportunities for Barzani to frame and initiate a referendum on independence.

As for the objective opportunities, due to Kurdish Peshmerga victories over ISIL, the Kurds were able to gain control over the disputed areas; an opportunity presented itself to consolidate this by having a referendum in the disputed areas. Particularly the Kirkuk governorate was pivotal, as it contained vast amounts of oil that stimulated economic independence, and since Kirkuk was perceived as the Kurdish cultural center, thereby sparking Kurdish nationalism. As these territories were now under Kurdish control, it was framed as the right time to secede from Iraq. By referring to the incapability of the Iraqi army to protect the Kurdish region, thereby also emphasising the historical grievances against Iraq that played a huge role in shaping Kurdish nationalism, Barzani framed that the partnership with Iraq had failed; it was the right time for independence. By referring to the concept of threats, as identified by Tarrow (2011), it can also be stated that the Iraqi government was not able to militarily oppose the referendum as it had been defeated by ISIL; the Iraqi government could not discourage the referendum, apart from economic measures, which can also be seen as an opportunity. In addition, the war against ISIL provided the Kurdistan region with the objective opportunity of international visibility. Kurdish Peshmerga forces had defeated ISIL, which was then framed as defeating ISIL on behalf of the international community, thereby claiming that Kurdistan had earned the right of independence.

As for the subjective opportunities, the war against ISIL provided an opportunity for Barzani to frame that, amidst a war, it was not the time for a presidential change. By framing the opportunities discussed above as being the best opportunity for Kurdistan to become an independent entity, he initiated the referendum, thereby creating an opportunity for himself to stay in power longer; his presidential term had already ended. In this context, the Iraqi state could be perceived as the structure, whereas the Kurdistan region was contesting this structure; this shows that, at the national level, initiating the referendum was agentic in character. As King (2007) argued, even 'less powerful' people can create opportunities. Barzani realised that the Kurdish people had the dream of an independent Kurdistan and harboured grievances against Iraq, as these everyday interpretive frames (Snow 2004) had become embedded in the system, so he knew he would have the majority of the popular support. As He (2002:91) claimed, elites often calculate the outcome of a referendum beforehand. In the context of Iraqi-Kurdistan, Barzani was the president, and therefore a powerful actor who was able to effectively frame opportunities and mobilise support.

However, as Barzani initiated a referendum because he saw opportunities, he also created opportunities for particularly Gorran, and certain PUK factions, to contest his initiative and framing of the referendum by articulating counter frames; there was no frame resonance between Barzani and Gorran and several PUK factions. In this context, Barzani could be perceived as the structure, whereas the opposition against Barzani could be perceived as the agency contesting the structure; there was contention within the contention. The PUK was internally divided; some factions were on board with the referendum, whereas others contested it. At that time, PUK leader Jalal Talabani was ill, and he was not able to do any campaigning. Therefore it seems that Hobsbawm (1959) and Gamson (1990) were right when claiming that organisations are less successful without a clear leadership.

Gorran, on the other hand, formed a united front against president Barzani. This party framed the referendum as a KDP power project which served to empower president Barzani, whose presidential term officially had already ended, rather than having the goal of independence. Gorran was not against independence, but argued for a Kurdish state built on democratic foundations, which was prioritised over independence. However, since the party realised that the majority of the Kurds would be in favour of independence, there was almost no visible opposition, not even in the Sulaymaniyah stronghold, although it is important to realise that there was less campaigning in favour of the referendum in the opposition-held areas.

In short, Barzani perceived that the war against ISIL provided opportunities and framed that this was the time to push for independence, also by emphasising past grievances, which simultaneously enabled him to stay in power. Gorran and parts of the PUK opposed Barzani since they perceived him as an illegitimate president and saw the referendum as a KDP power project. However, since the Kurdish people had always had the nationalist dream of independence, their contention to the referendum remained very limited.

This thesis mainly focused on the collective action frames (Snow 2004); it focused on the elite level, and how they organised, contested and framed the referendum. Therefore further research could perhaps focus more on the effects on the local level; how the frames of the elites affected the people, how these resonated with their own frames, and what they took into consideration when voting. It would also be interesting to see if and how the articulated frames by the elites changed after the referendum, particularly now that we know that the referendum was a disaster. Lastly, further research could perhaps analyse the effects of the independence referendum in Iraqi-Kurdistan on the Kurdish populations living in Syria, Turkey and Iran.

References

Interviews

Interview through Skype with a Kurdish political analyst, 15 March 2019.

Interview through Skype with an Iraqi political analyst, 22 April 2019.

Interview through Skype with a professor and author who had conducted research on Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, 25 April 2019.

Interview through Skype with a PhD student and author who had conducted research on the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, 18 May 2019.

Interview through Skype with a Kurdish diplomat, 21 May 2019.

Interview through Skype with a PhD student who had conducted fieldwork in Iraqi-Kurdistan, 21 May 2019.

Interview through Skype with a Western aid worker, specialised in campaigns, active in the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, 27 May 2019.

Written interview with an author who had written about the Iraqi-Kurdistan region, 22 May 2019

Bibliography

- Akreji, H. R. (2019). The paradox of federalism and the Iraqi federation. *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime: Iraqi Kurdistan*.
- Alimi, E. (2009). Mobilizing under the gun: theorizing political opportunity structure in a highly repressive setting. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 14(2), 219-237.
- Anaid, A. (2019). Seeking sovereignty under modern conditions: The case of Iraqi Kurdistan. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 35-52). Routledge.
- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anderson, G. L. (2006). The idea of the nation-state is an obstacle to peace. *International Journal on World Peace*, 23(1), 75-85.
- Anthias, F. (1998). Evaluating 'diaspora': beyond ethnicity?. *Sociology*, 32(3), 557-580.
- Aziz, S., & Kirmanj, S. (2019). Iran's regional hegemony and Kurdish independence. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 146-163). Routledge.
- Banco, E. (2017, 17 January). The curse of oil in Iraqi Kurdistan. Retrieved from <https://gpinvestigations.pri.org/the-curse-of-oil-in-iraqi-kurdistan-1c9a9a18efd1>
- Bayar, M. (2009). Reconsidering primordialism: an alternative approach to the study of ethnicity. *Ethnic and racial studies*, 32(9), 1639-1657.
- Benford, R. D. (1993). "You could be the hundredth monkey": Collective action frames and vocabularies of motive within the nuclear disarmament movement. *Sociological Quarterly*, 34(2), 195-216.

- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of sociology*, 26(1), 611-639.
- Brubaker, R. (2002). Ethnicity without groups. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives européennes de sociologie*, 43(2), 163-189.
- Brubaker, R., & Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond “identity”. *Theory and society*, 29(1), 1-47.
- Bulman-Pozen, J., & Gerken, H. K. (2008). Uncooperative federalism. *Yale LJ*, 118, 1256.
- Calhoun, C. (1993). Nationalism and ethnicity. *Annual review of sociology*, 19(1), 211-239.
- Cohen, R. (1978). Ethnicity: Problem and focus in anthropology. *Annual review of anthropology*, 7(1), 379-403.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford law review*, 1241-1299.
- Danilovich, A. (2014). *Iraqi Federalism and the Kurds: Learning to Live Together*. Routledge.
- Danilovich, A., & Pineda, P. (2019). Kurdish interests and US foreign policy in the Middle East. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 201-215). Routledge.
- De Vreese, C. H. (2007). context, elites, Media and Public Opinion in Referendums: When Campaigns really matter. In *The dynamics of Referendum Campaigns* (pp. 1-20). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Demmers, J. (2017). *Theories of violent conflict: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Elazar, D. J. (1987). *Exploring federalism*. University of Alabama Press.
- Eriksen, T. H. (2010). *Ethnicity and nationalism: Anthropological perspectives*. Pluto Press.

- Fearon, J. D., & Laitin, D. D. (2000). Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity. *International organization*, 54(4), 845-877.
- Ferree, M. M. (2009). Inequality, intersectionality and the politics of discourse: Framing feminist alliances. In *The discursive politics of gender equality* (pp. 106-124). Routledge.
- Gamson, W. (1990). *The Strategy of Social Protest*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Gamson, W. A. (1995). Constructing social protest. *Social movements and culture*, 4, 85-106.
- Grasso, M. T., & Giugni, M. (2016). Protest participation and economic crisis: The conditioning role of political opportunities. *European Journal of Political Research*, 55(4), 663-680.
- Greaves, N. M. (2019). United we stand, divided we fall: Transcending the obstacles to internal sovereignty in Iraqi Kurdistan. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 53-71). Routledge.
- Green, E. D. (2005). What is an ethnic group? Political economy, constructivism and the common language approach to ethnicity.
- Gulmohamad, Z. K. (2014). The Rise and Fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (Levant) ISIS. *Global security studies*, 5(2).
- Gunter, M. M. (2013). The contemporary roots of Kurdish nationalism in Iraq. *Kufa Review*, 2(1).
- Hall, S. (1996). Who needs identity. *Questions of cultural identity*, 16(2), 1-17.
- Hammond, R. A., & Axelrod, R. (2006). The evolution of ethnocentrism. *Journal of conflict resolution*, 50(6), 926-936.

- He, B. (2002). Referenda as a solution to the national-identity/boundary question: An empirical critique of the theoretical literature. *Alternatives*, 27(1), 67-97.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1959). *Primitive rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movements in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Hutchinson, J., Smith, A. D. 1996. *Ethnicity*. Oxford: University Press.
- Inman, R. P., & Rubinfeld, D. L. (1997). Rethinking federalism. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 11(4), 43-64.
- International Crisis Group. (2019). *After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence bid* (Middle East Report 199).
- Jasper, J. (2004). A strategic approach to collective action: Looking for agency in social-movement choices. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 9(1), 1-16.
- Jenkins, R. (2008). *Social identity*. Routledge.
- Kincaid, J. (1990). From cooperative to coercive federalism. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 509(1), 139-152.
- King, C. (2007). Power, Social Violence, and Civil Wars, in Chester A. Crocker et al, *Leashing the Dogs of War. Conflict Management in a Divided World*.
- Laub, Z. (2016). The Islamic State. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 10.
- Le Billon, P. (2015). Oil, secession and the future of Iraqi federalism. *Middle East Policy*, 22(1), 68-76.
- Leitner, H., Sheppard, E., & Sziarto, K. M. (2008). The spatialities of contentious politics. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33(2), 157-172.

- Levinger, M., & Lytle, P. F. (2001). Myth and mobilisation: the triadic structure of nationalist rhetoric. *Nations and Nationalism*, 7(2), 175-194.
- Lister, C. (2014). Profiling the Islamic state.
- Lupia, A., & Johnston, R. (2001). Are voters to blame? Voter competence and elite maneuvers in referendums. In *Referendum democracy* (pp. 191-210). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- McAdam, D., McCarthy, J. D., Zald, M. N., & Mayer, N. Z. (Eds.). (1996). *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Motyl, A. J. (1992). The modernity of nationalism: nations, states and nation-states in the contemporary world. *Journal of International Affairs*, 307-323.
- Nader, A., Hanauer, L., Allen, B., & Scotten, A. G. (2016). *Regional implications of an independent Kurdistan* (No. RR-1452-RC). RAND CORP ARLINGTON VA ARLINGTON United States.
- Nash, M. (1996). The core elements of ethnicity. *Ethnicity*, 24-28.
- Natali, D. (2010). *The Kurdish quasi-state: Development and dependency in post-Gulf War Iraq*. Syracuse University Press.
- Oates, W. E. (2005). Toward a second-generation theory of fiscal federalism. *International tax and public finance*, 12(4), 349-373.
- O'Driscoll, D., & Baser, B. (2019). Independence referendums and nationalist rhetoric: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *Third World Quarterly*, 1-19.
- Olson, M. (1965). The logic of collective action: Public goods and the theory of groups.

- Owtram, F. (2019). From shotgun marriage to amicable divorce? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Self-determination, secession and recognition in comparative perspective. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 72-89). Routledge.
- Palani, K., Khidir, J., Dechesne, M., & Bakker, E. (2019a). The development of Kurdistan's de facto statehood: Kurdistan's September 2017 referendum for independence. *Third World Quarterly*, 1-20.
- Palani, K., Khidir, J., Dechesne, M., & Bakker, E. (2019b). Strategies to Gain International Recognition: Iraqi Kurdistan's September 2017 Referendum for Independence. *Ethnopolitics*, 1-22.
- Papadopoulos, Y. (2001). How does direct democracy matter? The impact of referendum votes on politics and policy-making. *West European Politics*, 24(2), 35-58.
- Park, B., Jongerden, J., Owtram, F., & Yoshioka, A. (2017). On the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and disputed territories in 2017. *Kurdish Studies*, 5(2), 199-214.
- Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. (2012). *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. Vintage.
- Reuters. (2017, 30 October). Iraqi Kurd parties attacked hours after Barzani resigns as president. Retrieved from <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-kurd-parties-attacked-hours-after-barzani-resigns-president>
- Romano, D., & Rojhilat, S. (2019). Israel's periphery doctrine and the Kurds. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 164-181). Routledge.
- Rudaw. (2017, 30 August). US defense secretary did not oppose Kurdistan referendum, explains President Barzani. Retrieved from <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/30082017>

- Salih, M. A. (2016). Low Oil Prices Complicate Iraqi Kurdish Independence. *Middle East Institute Policy Focus Series*, 63, 530-539.
- Snow, D. A. (2004). Framing processes, ideology, and discursive fields. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, 1, 380-412.
- Sonnicksen, J. (2018). Federalism and democracy: a tense relationship. In *Calidad democrática y organización territorial*(pp. 31-52).
- Stansfield, G. (2014). Kurds, persian nationalism, and Shi'I rule: surviving dominant nationhood in Iran. In *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East* (pp. 59-84). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Strumpf, K. S., & Oberholzer-Gee, F. (2002). Endogenous policy decentralization: Testing the central tenet of economic federalism. *Journal of Political Economy*, 110(1), 1-36.
- Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P. (2004). The politics of European referendum outcomes and turnout: Two models. *West European Politics*, 27(4), 557-583.
- Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Information (International Social Science Council)*, 13(2), 65-93.
- Tarrow, S. G. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2007). Contentious politics and social movements. In *The Oxford handbook of comparative politics*.
- Tillerson, R. (2017, 23 September). THE LAST WRITTEN DRAFT – DELIVERED ON 23RD SEPTEMBER.
- Townsend, M. (2017, 25 February). Kurds offer land for independence in struggle to reshape Iraq. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/25/mosul-peshmerga-kurds-iraq-baghdad-erbil>

- Tugdar, E. E., & Al, S. (2019). Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Aspirations and the Neo-Ottomanist Turkey. In *Federalism, Secession, and International Recognition Regime* (pp. 127-145). Routledge.
- Vali, A. (1998). The Kurds and their 'others': fragmented identity and fragmented politics. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 18(2), 82-95.
- Verkuyten, M. (2004). *The social psychology of ethnic identity*. Psychology Press.
- Vertovec, S. (1999). Conceiving and researching transnationalism. *Ethnic and racial studies*, 22(2), 447-462.
- Walby, S. (2003). The myth of the nation-state: Theorizing society and politics in a global era. *Sociology*, 37(3), 529-546.
- Watts, N. F. (2014). Democracy and Self-Determination in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East* (pp. 141-168). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Williams, R. H., & Benford, R. D. (2000). Two faces of collective action frames: A theoretical consideration. *Current perspectives in social theory*, 20, 127-152.
- Yavuz, M. H. (2001). Five stages of the construction of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 7(3), 1-24.
- Yesiltas, O. (2014). Iraq, Arab Nationalism, and Obstacles to Democratic Transition. In *Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East* (pp. 41-57). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Cover photo

Cover page photo: Clancy, L. (2017, 22 September). Kurdish flags at the pro-Kurdistan referendum and pro-Kurdistan independence rally at Franso Hariri Stadium, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kurdish_flags_at_the_pro-Kurdistan_referendum_and_pro-Kurdistan_independence_rally_at_Franso_Hariri_Stadiu,_Erbil,_Kurdistan_Region_of_Iraq_12.jpg

Maps

Map 1: Ditz, J. (2017, 25 September). Region Moves to Isolate Iraqi Kurdistan as Votes Are Counted. Retrieved from <https://news.antiwar.com/2017/09/25/region-moves-to-isolate-iraqi-kurdistan-as-votes-are-counted/>

Map 2: Political Geography Now. (2017, 22 September). Referendum 2017: Iraqi Kurdistan Map. Retrieved from: <https://www.polgeonow.com/2017/09/referendum-2017-iraqi-kurdistan-map.html>