Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

The Security Apparatus of Northern Iraq: One Thousand and One Kurdish Leaders and the Allure of the East

Andrés de Castro García

Head of Department of IR, Catholic University of Erbil, Ankawa, Iraq

ABSTRACT

The Northern Part of Iraq and its structures has generated considerable interest in the West in the last thirty years. This paper analyzes the creation of the security structures in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), highlighting the difficulties effected by their traditional disunity within the context of the historical periods that this article considers – the period from 1991 to 2003, 2003 to 2014, 2014 to 2017 and finally, 2017 to 2020. As for the last of the stages, this article claims that a US´s withdrawal from Iraq might change the strategy followed by the Iraqi Kurds whose identity and political structures are at stake.

Introduction

The Northern part of Iraq is home to several ethnic groups, including the Kurds. They are well known in the Middle Eastern region for their constant internal conflicts and their difficult relationships with other ethnicities. This article tries to analyze the impact that these circumstances have had in the establishment of a rudimentary security apparatus, currently composed by an alphabet soup of different armed groups that serve different tribal and individual interests. This situation is closely monitored by Iran, in their quest for regional power and influence.

The Kurds are an Indo-European ethnic group of mainly Sunni Muslims that has populated, -together with other groups – the mountainous regions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Throughout history they have been able to keep a unique identity due to the lack of contact with other ethnic groups. The latter can be attributed to minimal interest from external groups due in turn to the lack of developed resources – they were mainly sheep herders – and their aggressiveness, which would have put the tax-gatherers at risk for little or no gain as has been explained by Knappert (1993) who has mainly focused on the case of Turkish nationals of Kurdish ethnicity.

Having said that, the Kurds did manage to launch an effective public diplomacy campaign, which has been carefully studied and analyzed. It is a complicated exercise to find reliable sources that go beyond the calculated

---

CONTACT Andrés de Castro García ✉ andres.decastro@cue.edu.krd Head of Department of IR, Catholic University of Erbil, Ankawa, Iraq

Kurdish propaganda that has embedded itself in Western media and academia and largely legitimized a political movement that seeks independence.

Within this context, this article tries to critically analyze the formation and evolution of the KRG´s Security Apparatus. It also posits the risk that after all the efforts the West has put in the region, the Kurds will shift their allegiance toward the east, toward Iran.

In order to do so, this article employs a methodology of qualitative analysis, which includes hundreds of informal and formal interviews and focus group discussions with decision-makers, mainly the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraqi government officials as part of the fieldwork conducted by the author in the North of Iraq between 2017 and 2020 following the main criteria established by King and Keohane (1994), Firebaugh (2008) and more specifically those of Díaz Fernández (2019) and Van Puyvelde (2018).

It also bases itself in the latest main contributions in intelligence and security studies with splendid contributions such as Arcos, and his clarifications on what are intelligence studies and who is it for (2019), Esparza & Bruneau in their very successful intent to closing the gap between Law Enforcement and National Security Intelligence, that has allowed for the comprehensive approach that this article has in terms of the analysis of Law Enforcement as part of the Security Apparatus (2019), Gill & Phythian and their extraordinary analysis on the overall theory of intelligence, that have developed how States are still the central actors, but developed the role of non-state security agents (2012), Richards and the rich debate he provided regarding Intelligence Studies in the framework of Social Sciences (2016) and Matei & Halladay, who as editors and together with an extraordinary team have summarized the main debates of our discipline such as intelligence in democracies, the roles and missions of intelligence agencies, accountability and intelligence culture and an assessment of the future of intelligence in democracies in what became one of the latest and best contributions in Intelligence Studies (2019).

A non-state that is still an entity as a result of three accidents (1991, 2003 and 2014) and one accident that could never have succeeded: the 2017 referendum

There have been different denominations that the KRI has received: "proto-state" (Zartman, 2017), "quasi-state" (Natali, 2010), "space" (Leezenberg, 2017), and even "de-facto state" (Palani, Khidir, Dechesne, & Bakker, 2020). The reality, however, is that it is a non-state, as developed by authors like Charountaki (2020), integrated in Iraq by the 2005 Constitution. The discussion over the true nature of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is very appropriate for analysis on the region since public diplomacy has, at times, impacted so greatly that several academics have provided statements that go

far beyond the actual constitutional regulation and even the reality of power and domination on the terrain, with clear negative implications for accurate analysis.

It is not the case of one of the greatest *connoisseurs* of the Kurdish situation, Gerard Chaliand, who together with many other key elements, was able to identify the accidentality of the current situation and also point out that the Kurds only had a marginal role in the end result (Challiand, 2015).

He highlights three historical events that contributed to the current situation:

(1) President Saddam invades Kuwait: President H.W. Bush declares a no-fly zone

Iran and Iraq were engaged in a war between 1980 and 1988 in which the West supported Iraq to counterbalance Khomeini's Islamic extremism, which had become obvious at the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The Kurds in the Northern part of Iraq, fighting for their own interests, were engaged in skirmishes against the Iraqi Army and collaborating with Iran. After several threats, Iraqi Army planes used chemical weapons against the Kurdish population in the Iraqi Governorate of Halabja, killing mainly old men, women and children who could not hide in the mountains.

The West was shocked by the images of what became known as the "Anfal campaign." Three years later, Iraqi troops entered Kuwait and were shortly expelled by the United States during the First Gulf War. In 1991, the United States then initiated Operation Provide Comfort that, combined with the Resolution 688 of the Security Council of the United Nations, secured all the territories to the north of the 36 parallel and allowed the creation of a Kurdish administration of the territory (Challiand, 2015).

Soon after that, several major disagreements occurred between the two main Kurdish leaders regarding land rights and customs revenues (Hassan, 2015), prompting a three and a half years' war referred to as the "Iraqi Kurdish Civil War" (1993–1997). These events had significant national and international implications since the newly founded Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, received military assistance from Iran while Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Parties (KDP), reached several agreements with President Saddam that allowed him to deploy military to several parts of the North of Iraq to attack PUK military objectives.

The fragile and tense peace that followed kept the two different families in power mainly through their respective rudimentary political parties: the Barzanis in KDP and the Talabanis in PUK. Each party had, within it, several military units, in turn headed by different military leaders, all of whom desired power. In such a scenario, the Kurdish administration's collapse was inevitable, if not for the second accident that happened.

(2) Too much Cavalry and not enough time to think: The US invasion of Iraq

Following 9/11, the United States developed a strategy to try to control the vulnerabilities that had been exposed with regard to terrorism, which, at the beginning of the 21st century, was a concern in several continents including Africa (Besenyö & Mayer, 2015) and Latin America (Alda, 2014). The main focus, however, was clearly on the Middle East.

George W. Bush used the historical opportunity that presented itself to retaliate against Afghanistan's Taliban. President Bush also tried to link Saddam Hussein's Baath party to Al Qaeda using what Richard A. Tracey referred to as "flat-out wrong intelligence" regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), (Tracey, 2007). As a result of that intelligence, plans were designed to invade Iraq, and a US-led coalition entered Iraq in March 2003.

It was a precipitated move, difficult to justify under the umbrella of the retaliatory operations that followed 9/11. The Invasion of Iraq was strongly contested in many Western countries (Briguet, 2005) and in some of them both the citizens and the political elites disagreed at it was the case in France (Gueldry, 2003). Or as in Spain, where the Government agreed to the invasion but 91% of the citizens did not (Marin, 2003). It divided the West's political elites between those that wanted to avoid the invasion and those that did not.

The first few years that followed benefited the KRG, since the lack of a system allowed them to try to build their own political discourse and receive a friendly look from the United States who saw them as Saddam's longest-standing enemy. As Denise Natali described it, "In the absence of external sovereignty, the region thrives on international recognition, external patronage, and a weak central Iraqi government to advance its nationalist ambitions." (Natali, 2013, p. 71)

The post-Saddam era saw Iraq administered by a combination of Shia Arabs and Kurds, together with American patronage led by Paul Bremer. This allowed for both groups to dominate Iraq and to carve that system in stone with the 2005 Iraqi Constitution (Jawad, 2013).

Two years after the Constitution was enacted, Iraq witnessed a strategic agreement between Talabani and Barzani (Hassan, 2015). As a result, the Presidency of Iraq, a nominative position, is given to a PUK leader, while the positions of President and Prime Minister of the KRG are given to KDP and the PUK assumes the position of Deputy Prime Minister. All of these are agreed with the understanding that the Prime Minister of Iraq will be Shia Arab.

All of these negotiated agreements glaringly excludes Sunni Arabs from what have been, traditionally, their own leadership roles in the country and subjects them to a system, hereditary to the one established by Paul Bremen´s administration of Iraq that decided to defuse the Baathist apparatus by relegating the Sunni Arabs to a marginal role as a punishment for their loyalty to Saddam Hussein and after having the fear that without dismantling Sunni

Arab leadership in the country, the formation of a modern liberal democracy could not be achieved (Dawisha, 2009).

This fact, along with those previously mentioned, contributed to the strengthening of Iran and to the creation of DAESH.

(3) DAESH: A result of institutional weakness and bullying of Sunnis

In the hundreds of interviews conducted by the author in Iraq between 2017 and 2020, Iraqi citizens and foreigners working for several institutions, all of diverse ethnicities, were asked the question "Do you think DAESH could have occurred under Saddam?" The majority of the interviewees grinned sardonically but all of them, without exception, agreed that DAESH never would have stood a chance between 1979 and 2003. Saddam Hussein's firm control over the country would never have allowed any other organization to take over.

What is also a fact is that from 2003 and up to the formation of DAESH in 2014, several Sunni Arab groups were engaged in armed attacks and acts of terrorism mainly against the Shia population as a reaction to their perceived marginalization.

Those two elements – the vacuum left by Saddam's firm hold and the subsequent marginalization of Sunnis – together with the West´s proxy plans in Syria against President Bashar Al Assad, formed the perfect breeding ground for the creation of DAESH.

In 2014, the International Coalition that was formed against DAESH decided to use the Kurds in Syria and Iraq as a proxy force, mainly to avoid the deployment of too many boots on the ground and support an infantry force through the much safer method of aerial bombing. Even if the economic prosperity that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) had experienced since 2003 was put to an end that year (Sumer & Joseph, 2018), its political and military credentials were boosted when the KRG received sizable military assistance and foreign currencies, and was able to take military positions outside of the agreed boundaries of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

(4) First non beneficial accident

The fourth accident – the first one that was not benign to the Kurds – happened when Massoud Barzani, then President of the KRG, decided to push for a referendum of independence. He failed to listen to diplomatic delegations in Erbil who, consistent with their speech, had expressed their views that it was not the right time for a referendum. At the time, many authors argued that although it was easy to foresee a "yes" in the referendum, the end result would be catastrophic to the region's security, economy and diplomacy, and would cause a disruption to the whole Middle Eastern region (Rubin, 2017). At the time, it was easy to foresee the lack of international support for the referendum both from regional and international powers. Only Israel had shown some signs of support (Wahab, 2017) and it was rather simple to imagine some retaliation from regional powers and from the central government that could

have negatively impacted the security, economy and political stability of the KRI.

In response to the referendum, the Iraqi Federal Government decided to close the KRI's air space from October 2017 to March 2018. Furthermore, it deployed the Iraqi Army and Hashd Al Shabbi, a combination of militias that were originally created to fight DAESH and that are very heterogeneous but the majority of them are dominated by pro-Iranian Shia leadership, to the areas known as "disputed territories," a set of Iraqi territory that is an "in between space" as well defined by (Meier, 2019), betwixt the KRG´s dominated territories and those under direct administration of the Iraqi Central Goverment in order to retake them going back to the *status quo* of the years before DAESH, before 2014. The main objective was Kirkuk, a city known for its abundance of oil and other natural resources.

In October 2018, the brigade of PUK Peshmerga that was protecting Kirkuk retreated but not without first attacking the Hashd Al Shabbi allegedly with a MILAN (German made anti-tank weapon) and destroying an M1 Abrahams tank that belonged to the Iraqi Forces, as reported at the time by several media outlets, including Deutsche Welle.[1]

There are so many implications that we can derive from that action. First, that the Peshmerga was attacking Iraqi Armed Forces allegedly using European Union weaponry given to them for the exclusive purpose of fighting DAESH. Germany, at the time, temporary withdrew its training mission. Second, that the PUK withdrew troops without an agreement with the KDP. That was seen as an act of treason by the KDP because they claim that there was an understanding to protect the Kurdish administration of Kirkuk at all costs, especially given the abundance of natural resources in the region. There also were accusations from the KDP to the PUK that the latter had reached a secret agreement with Baghdad that was clearly detrimental to the Kurds, who lost an important percentage of the oil that they were extracting from the ground in a very unclear system of economic and financial distribution of natural resources that has always be at the height of the political tensions between the Kurdish administered north and the Central Iraqi Government (Al-Nidawi, 2019).

However, one of the key elements of this key event is the Kurdish public diplomacy campaign regarding this issue, which is composed of several phases.

In the first phase, the Kurds acknowledged the attack and highlighted the fact that Iraqi Forces had entered contested territory, then pointing out that Iraqi Forces soon retrieved the destroyed M1 Abrahams to "hide the evidence from its use," as reported in Nechirvan Barzani's[2] Rudaw news outlet.[3]

After Germany's decision to withdraw their training mission, which allowed them to avoid the awkwardness in having to explain the use of their material against Iraq's Defense Forces, the Kurds quickly denied the use of the German made MILAN system. Furthermore, they turned public attention toward the

anomaly of how the Hashd Al Shaabi obtained M1 Abrahams tanks.[4] This was done primarily through Kurdistan 24, a media outlet linked to the current Prime Minister and former head of the Security Council, Masrour Barzani. Months later the same information was touted, the fact that a pro-Iranian militia within the umbrella of the Iraqi Forces had advanced American military equipment.

The KRG today: Sultanism, patronage and public diplomacy

The KRG is the result of the combination of mainly two tribes that operate under the pretext of having formed political parties, and although largely opposing, are only united in their similar propensity toward sultanism, patronage, and perpetuating the idea of "Kurdistan" through public diplomacy campaigns that benefits them both.

Kawa Hassan has described Kurdish authoritarianism as "Sultanism," with the following four pillars: "crony capitalism that is the result of blurred boundaries between the ruling party and the state, and between the public treasury and private wealth; personalism and dynasticism, even though the regime is not necessarily a monarchy; a kind of hypocrisy in which the constitution and laws are manipulated in the interests of ruling parties; and a narrow social base that means the ruling elite can enter its will independent of society." (Hassan, 2015, p. 6).

Both sultanism and patronage, exercised by the KDP and PUK have made them prone to clashing with each other in different moments in history, most notably in 1964, 1976, 1978, 1981 and 1983 for territory, weapons and power, as it has been very well described by Mustafa (2020).

That leads us to the third element, public diplomacy. This is a Herculean effort by the Kurds to appear united to the West and to sell an image of a modern people "oppressed" by its neighbors and ready to be integrated into a modern and liberal international community. "The KRG makes sure to show to the world that the Kurds are peaceful, tolerant, diverse, and hospitable. A significant number of KRG officials use also social media to reach out to the world and share the Kurdish culture." (Danilovich & Abdulrahman, 2017)

Academic publications written by academic Iraqi Kurds, while *de facto* acknowledging this policy go as far as to ask for more. Including recommendations made to the KRG's authorities on the need for staff expansion and professionalism for more effective promotion:

" … These weaknesses indicate the KRG Representation's mismanagement of Facebook in promoting the KRG as a brand. From this standpoint, we strongly recommend that the KRG employ professional staff as public diplomacy practitioners to expand its activities across the United States and to cover all activities and updates on the Facebook of the KRG Representation in the United States." (Bali & Karim, 2018, p. 7)

The issues expounded above have been some of the key reasons for many authors to doubt the consolidated democratic status of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Fumerton & Van Wilgenburg, 2015).

Kurdish Mulūk al-Tawāʾif as miscellaneous rulers of a dysfunctional security apparatus

During the Parthian (247 BC to 224 AD) and Arsacid (247 BC to 224 AD) periods, there were rulers called *Mulūk al-Tawāʾif* or kings of territorial divisions (Amir Arjomand, 2019), who have also earned the name of "petty kings" (Christensen, 1944), in turn similar as a concept to the Taifa Kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule (García de Cortázar & González Vesga, 2009).

Thousands or hundreds of years later, the Kurdish case in Iraq is not much different. There is a recurring rivalry between the main political figures of the main political parties, which has long characterized the KRI (Leezenberg, 2017). Since the security apparatus is personal-tribal/party-dominated, the situation raises a long list of concerns that are explained below.

Different militias with only the name in common: Peshmerga

Kurds have been very successful at installing the image of a brave military force that carries a name full of significance, the combination of the Kurdish words "pesh" and "merga," which translate to "the ones who face death." The supposed inclusion of women in the forces and a polished public diplomacy campaign are some of the elements that contributed to successfully diverting discussions away from more basic issues, particularly over the different groups, forces, political parties that make it a disunited entity with no clear parameters on what is supposedly meant when one says "Peshmerga".

One year after the establishment of the no-fly-zone in 1991, the KDP and the PUK agreed to unify their Peshmerga under the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs. There was little incentive to continue with this grand plan under the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War in 1994–1997, when the two groups fought each other.

They once again agreed on a unification in 1998. Following international pressure, they allocated certain troops from the KDP and PUK militia to formally "serve" under the Ministry even as they were still dependent, as in feudal societies, on their original party-militias, and served "as vehicles for political patronage by KDP and PUK" (Fumerton & Van Wilgenburg, 2015, p. 1).

The pattern is consistent and evident from the beginning – there is mistrust among each of the different leaders of each of the Kurdish tribes-political parties. There is pressure from the international community that sees the incongruity in a divided security apparatus. Each layer of international

pressure has been knowingly dealt with by the Kurds through a rather complicated – and ultimately fake – unification process that validates themselves to the West. None of these efforts, of course, can address the impossible: unify the Kurds under one leader.

One of the most recent examples of this protracted conflict is the PUK HQ shooting in Erbil[5] alledgely by KDP militias, following an alledged PUK shooting of the KDP HQ in Sulaymaniyah.[6]

That same day, the KDP spokesperson gave an interview in which he said that "KDP ties with PUK should not be affected by 'minor' incidents."[7]

Three weeks later, President Nechivan Barzani gave a speech, in which he stated "we have to ... establish an organized and trained force and remove the obstacles that hinder reforms in the Peshmerga Ministry."[8] This was an effort to maintain Western support for the Kurdish militias in terms of injecting foreign currencies, military equipment and training in the KRI. Peshmerga unification, a process that has been failing for three decades, would certainly not have any chance to flourish three weeks after the party-militias attack one another's HQ.

However, it is worth noting that even as the KDP and PUK are the biggest groups, there are several militias that carry the name "Peshmerga" and which are loyal to different political parties of varying political influence, from the purely personalistic military groups to the ones that manage to credibly look like a political party.

Apart from the Brigade 70 of PUK and the Brigade 80 of KDP, there are two Peshmerga forces called Zerevani (KDP) and the PUK's Emergency Force, which are supposedly under the control of the Ministry of Interior (Fumerton & Van Wilgenburg, 2015). Even if some authors attribute to them the role of a military police or gendarmerie (Hadad & Wallace, 2017), the reality is far more complicated, made so by the foreign pressure that has forced the KRG to create a structure more dedicated toward satisfying the viewer, in this case, the West, and its own political and economic interests, than to have an adequate structure, legal framework and military efficiency.

The intelligence branch of Peshmerga, the "Hewalgri" suffers from the same condition. The creation of the logo and the promotion behind it was necessary more for the fulfillment of that same goal of satisfying Western sponsors, rather than the successful effort of having combined all the military intelligence under one institution. The latter is a challenging enough process in every system, even in the most developed ones as highlighted by Esparza and Bruneau (2019), who by using a comparative analysis between the cases of the US, France and Spain were able to identify different challenges and weaknesses of intelligence fusion and the role of all the intelligence agencies. This approach has to be complemented with the acknowledgment of the difficulty for the creation of processes with democratic control, as brilliantly developed by Matei (2015) an author that has been able to identify the necessary

categories and that has successfully applied them to different case studies. Both structures could serve to analyze the Northern Iraq security apparatus if and when it shows the pertinent levels of democratic and efficiency.

Two police forces for the two main tribal political parties: Asayesh

The word "Asayesh" means, literally, security in Kurdish. They are two forces, one for the KDP-dominated Dohuk and Erbil, and one for the PUK-dominated Suleymania and Halabja.

They are in charge of fighting major crimes, such as smuggling and terrorism (Hadad & Wallace, 2017) while also performing counter-intelligence measures. They are, therefore, a combination between a strong police force and an internal counter-intelligence service, with no clear boundaries in tasks and jurisdiction with other security agencies.

There is, however, a supposed established structure, created to please Western donors called *Ecumena Asayisa Herema Kurdistane* (Kurdistan Region Security Council) headed by a Chancellor in an attempt to appear legitimate.[9]

To each their own: Zanyari and Parastin two intelligence forces in the KRI

PUK'S Zanyari and KDP's Parastin have existed long before their formal creation as a need to protect their respective party-militia from security challenges that they could face.

Even if the most remarkable part of their experience and achievements is on spying one another, the KRG presented a superficial plan in 2011, supposedly in compliance to Western instructions. Following the passing of the Kurdistan Region Security Council's (KRSC) Law 4, they formally unified Zanyari and Parastin under the KRSC. However, not only do they maintain different Director-Generals[10] but the closest they get to working with each other is when they mutually spy on each other. This fact complicates foreign efforts to cooperate with KRG authorities in the common fight against transnational threats.

As in the case with Peshmerga and even with Asayesh, the push for party-militia unification is a chimera that should not be pursued. In the three decades of this cat-and-mouse game, the West has invested resources and energy, while the Iraqi Kurds have used quite a high percentage of their time and effort toward falsely complying with unfeasible Western requirements as a detriment to building a system that would at least be efficient. If that would have been the case, that time, effort and Western resources could have been used in building their own structures, which could have, most likely, led to the development of several Kurdish intelligence agencies with strong expertise and experience focused on, inevitably, spying on each other's tribal and political

leaders. Not that the current practice is any different, but at the moment the Iraqi Kurds are required to exert extra effort toward pretense and the construction of two parallel systems, the real one and the "showroom" one intended for Western visits.

Western naivete combined with a successful Kurdish public diplomacy campaign proved to be the perfect combination for what ended up happening. Things might be about to change.

A US withdrawal from Iraq can be fatal for the Kurds but they will find out only after the game is over

President Trump´s decision to withdraw US troops from Syria in December 2018[11] surprised many security analysts and public officials, both Iraqi and foreign. Should it mean the beginning of a new American strategy toward the Middle East (Tadros, 2019), it would have implications for the security apparatus of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). One cannot forget that the United States served three purposes for the KRG, after the emergence of DAESH and until 2019: air capabilities which allowed the bombing of DAESH targets on field; economic resources, allegedly to pay Peshmerga; and what Kurds claim to believe to be a political patronage that would be their ticket to the path of independence from Baghdad.

At the beginning of 2020 and before the COVID-19 pandemic had any influence in Iraq, the political discussion was mainly focused on the Iraqi citizen's claims for a better system of governance and a call to end what is seen as the tearing of Iraq as a result of an "offshoring" of the fight between the United States and Iran (Courraud & Quesnay, 2020).

With DAESH formally defeated – even taking into consideration some attacks of questionable origin that have been attributed to DAESH in 2020 – and after facing the 2017 rejection to their independence plans, a very divided KRG feels not to have more options but to get closer to an Iranian-dominated Iraqi central government, as highlighed by many authors, including Palani et al. (2020). The election of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi – the former Head of Iraqi Intelligence – as the new Prime Minister of Iraq on the 7th of May 2020 only makes it more plausible for Tehran's plans to be implemented in Iraq since there are many facts that would make us fear that Iran will use this opportunity to give a final swat in the region.

Iran is not a partner for the Kurds but a feline with a raised paw, just ready to strike

It would be a mistake to think that Iran has anything new to discover with the Kurds, both its domestic population and the ones who are Iraqi nationals. A relationship going back several thousands of years between Farsi and Kurds

has allowed Iran to understand how easy of a prey they will be to catch, especially since the United States might be out of the region for a relevant amount of time.

Kurds will not be given a chance to enhance their playful political game with Tehran and will face Iranian Realism at the earliest possible stage. Michael Rubin already stated the day before the 2017 referendum that, despite the common understanding that Anakara would be the worst enemy to the Kurdish quest for independence, Tehran is actually much worse, as a result of the diverse ethnicities existing in the country and a big suspicion that Kurdish statehood could rise in Iran (Rubin, 2017).

What remains to be seen is how Iran will dismantle the security apparatus in Northern Iraq, or drive it toward irrelevance after their complete certitude that the Kurds are unusable as a collaborationist force. This is not for lack of will from the Kurdish side but for lack of professionalism in their security apparatus, and most especially for their unending personal and tribal pursuits. Even if the most rational approach would be to integrate the KRI's security apparatus into the Iraqi system, there is clarity in Baghdad that it would not be possible, other than on paper in order to claim the complete integration of all the militias in Iraq, with Hashd Al Shaabi as the obvious target.

A quick look at the map points to the possibility of the KRG seeking Ankara as a partner and savior. The role of Turkey will be interesting. If Ankara decides to play the counterbalance just enough, they will do so not to strengthen the Kurds but to debilitate Iran's position in the region. They might do it as a messenger of the United States and Israel, by their own free will, or both. The overall situation taking into consideration those issues and the relationship between the US and Turkey could have a very strong impact. What we can count on is for Turkey's longstanding knowledge and experience with Kurds that they will most likely benefit from.

Also, the current situation provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran has increased the power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and we could use it as an indicator of the strengthening of the Iranian Regimen ´s hard-liners (Pollack, 2020) and it invites for a necessary attention of the consequences of this fact in Iraq.

Unlike the end of 1,001 nights, lives may not be spared at the end of this non-fairy tale. None will live happily ever after. The only set of questions that the West has to ask is: Are we aware of the real situation of the region? How polluted are our intelligence reports with information dragged from sources that act as a loud speaker of propaganda? Are we aware of the actual implications that staying in such Region imply? Do we understand the heavy price that will be paid if the West decides to have a mediocre involvement (politically, militarily, economically) in the Middle East? Are we aware of the mid and long term implications of a presence reduction in that crucial part of the

World? How long until the West´s best regarded "allies" decide to use their newly received military equipment and use their training against the West?

The Middle East is a hornet´s nest. And it is best when you can avoid getting bitten. There are only two valid approaches for the West. Either to escape -and pay the price- or to deal with it from a position of power and influence -and pay a different price-. The middle option might be one of the displeasing versions of geopolitical self-immolation.

Conclusions

Regardless of a very successful public diplomacy campaign, the history of the Kurds is one of disunity and fragmentation.

In the case of Iraq, three accidents (1991, 2003 and 2014) allowed the KRI to build a security apparatus led by innumerable chiefs of different factions of heterogeneous party-militias. For three decades, the mentioned structures have supposedly been immersed in a process of unification and normalization that have created inefficient structures, wherein pleasing the West as a funding mechanism has been prioritized over building the necessary structures.

A decrease in the presence of the US and other NATO countries in Iraq, together with a stronger Iranian presence in the country, will result in a desperate alliance between Tehran and the different Kurdish leaders that is likely to bring about further disunity and chaos in the region, reminiscent of some of its worst historical moments.

Notes

1. https://www.dw.com/en/german-army-restarts-training-iraqi-kurds-but-future-of-mission-in-doubt/a-41070521.
2. Prime Minister of the KRG between 2006 and 2009 and then from 2012 until 2019 when he became President of the KRI.
3. https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/251020173.
4. https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/39ab42af-3aee-4a87-a7cf-624601002c44.
5. https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/200920192.
6. https://ekurd.net/unknown-gunmen-attacks-puk-2019-09-21.
7. https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/a22529f2-f23b-4645-a0cc-e1fbe13979e2.
8. https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/50aaabb4-7a58-4a0d-8b0d-686f1a0abffe.
9. https://krsc.gov.krd/general-security-asayish/.
10. https://krsc.gov.krd/parastin-zanyari/.
11. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html.

Notes on contributor

Andrés de Castro García is the Head of the Department of International Relations at the Catholic University of Erbil (CUE) in Northern Iraq. He earned his Ph.D. in International

Security at the Instituto Universitario General Gutierrez Mellado (IUGM-UNED) in Madrid, and a Law Degree from the University of Salamanca, also in Spain. Dr. de Castro specializes in Intelligence and Security Studies.

ORCID

Andrés de Castro García ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3794-7703

Bibliografía

Alda, S. (2014). Estado y crimen organizado en América Latina: Posibles relaciones y complicidades. *Revista Política y Estrategia*, *124*, 73–107.

Al-Nidawi, O. (2019). *Finding a way forward in the Baghdad-Erbil oil dispute*. Washington, DC: Middle East Institute.

Amir Arjomand, S. (2019). *Revolution: Structure and meaning in world history*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Arcos, R. (2019). Understanding the relationships between academia and national security intelligence in the European context. In L. F. Gearon (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Universities, Security and Intelligence Studies* (pp. 156–167). London, UK: Routledge.

Bali, A., & Karim, M. (2018). These weaknesses indicate the KRG Representation's mismanagement of Facebook in promoting the KRG as a brand. *Sage Open*, *8*(1), 1–9.

Besenyö, J., & Mayer, Á. (2015). Boko Haram in context: The Terrorist Organizations's Roots in Nigeria's Social History. *Defence against Terrorism Review*, *1*, 47–58.

Briguet, G. (2005). *Grands Etats europeens dans la guerre d´Irak: Raisons et justifications*. Geneve, Switzerland: Institut européen de l'Université de Genève.

Challiand, G. (2015). *La question Kurde*. Paris, France: Seuil.

Charountaki, M. (2020). Non-state actors and change in foreign policy: The case of self-determination referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. 33(3).

Christensen, A. (1944). *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*. Copenhague, Denmark: Ejnar Munksgaard.

Courraud, M., & Quesnay, A. (2020). *La crise irakienne se polarise contre la tutelle iranienne*. Paris, France: Analyse Opinion Critique.

Danilovich, A., & Abdulrahman, H. (2017). Aiming at secession: The KRG´s activism in the international arena. *UKH Journal of Social Sciences*, *1*(1), 48–59. doi:10.25079/ukhjss.v1n1y2017.pp48-59

Dawisha, A. (2009). *Iraq. A political history from independence to occupation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Díaz Fernández, A. M. (2019). *La investigación de temas sensibles en criminología y seguridad*. Madrid, Spain: Anaya.

Esparza, D., & Bruneau, T. (2019). Closing the gap between law enforcement and national security intelligence: Comparative approaches. *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, *32*(2), 322–353. doi:10.1080/08850607.2018.1522219

Firebaugh, G. (2008). *Seven rules for social research*. Princetown, USA: Princetown University Press.

Fumerton, M., & Van Wilgenburg, W. (2015). *Kurdistan's political Armies: The challenge of unifying the peshmerga forces*. Beirut, Lebanon: Arnegie Middle East Center.

García de Cortázar, F., & González Vesga, J. M. (2009). *Breve Historia de España*. Madrid, Spain: Alianza.

Gill, P., & Phythian, M. (2012). *Intelligence in an Insecure World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Gueldry, M. (2003). La France et la Guerre d´Irak: Les Raisons du refus. *Contemporary French Civilization, 31*, 21–48.

Hadad, H., & Wallace, B. L. (2017). *Small Wars Journal*. Retrieved from https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-iraqi-kurdish-security-apparatus-vulnerability-and-structure

Hassan, K. (2015). *Kurdistan´s politized society confronts a sultanistic system*. Beirut, Lebanon: Carnegie Middle Eastern Center.

Jawad, S. (2013). *The Iraqi Constitution: structual flaws and political implications*. London, UK: LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series.

King, G., & Keohane, R. O. (1994). *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Knappert, J. (1993). The Kurds, a brief history. *International Journal on World Peace*, *10*(2), 67–70.

Leezenberg, M. (2017). Iraqi Kurdistan: A Porous political space. *Anatoli*, (8), 107–131. doi:10.4000/anatoli.608

Marin, M. (2003). España y la crisis de Irak. *Política Exterior*, *17*(93).

Matei, C. (2015). Managing democratic civilian control with effectivness of intelligence in Romania: Lessons learned and Best/Worst practices before and after NATO and EU integration. In P. Gil & M. Andregg (Eds.), *Democratization of Intelligence* (pp. 131–149). London, UK: Routledge.

Matei, C., & Halladay, C. (2019). *The conduct of intelligence in democracies: Processes, practices, cultures*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Meier, D. (2019). 'Disputed territories' in northern Iraq: The frontiering of in-between spaces. *Mediterranean Politics*, 1–21. doi:10.1080/13629395.2019.1681733

Mustafa, S. (2020). Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum: Political parties, opportunity and timing. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1–17. doi:10.1080/13530194.2020.1724077

Natali, D. (2010). *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Natali, D. (2013). The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Stabilizer or spoiler? *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, *14*(2), 71–79.

Palani, K., Khidir, J., Dechesne, M. &., & Bakker, E. (2020). De facto states engagement with parent states: Kurdistan's engagement with the Iraqi Government. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1–19. doi:10.1080/13530194.2020.1714429

Pollack, K. M. (2020). *The Coronavirus Won't Kill the Islamic Republic*. Washington, DC: Foreign Policy.

Richards, J. (2016). Intelligence Studies, Academia and Professionalization. *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs*, *18*(1), 20–33. doi:10.1080/23800992.2016.1150683

Rubin, M. (2017). *Will Iraqi Kurds Become Independent?* Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

Sumer, F., & Joseph, J. (2018). The paradox of the Iraqi Kurdish referendum on independence: Contradictions and hopes for economic prosperity. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *24*(1), 1–15.

Tadros, S. (2019). *U.S. Middle East Strategy*. Stanford, USA: Hoover Institution.

Tracey, R. S. (2007, January 2). Trapped by a mindset: The Iraq WMD intelligence failure. *Air & Space Power Journal*

Van Puyvelde, D. (2018). Qualitative research interviews and the study of national security intelligence. *International Studies Perspectives*, *19*(4), 375–391. doi:10.1093/isp/eky001

Wahab, B. (2017). *Why Israel Is Cheering On Iraqi Kurds' Push for independence*. Washington, DC: The Washington Institute.

Zartman, W. (2017). States, boundaries and sovereignty in the Middle East: Unsteady but unchanging. *International Affairs*, *93*(4), 937–948. doi:10.1093/ia/iix118