

Charles University

Faculty of Science

Geography

Regional and Political Geography



Bc. Filip Sommer

**Geopolitics of Iraqi Kurdistan: A Role of External and Internal Actors in
Kurdish Issue**

Geopolitika Iráckého Kurdistanu: analýza role vnitřních a vnějších aktérů
kurdské otázky v Iráku

Diploma Thesis

Supervisor: RNDr. Libor Jelen, Ph.D.

Prague, 2021

Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci zpracoval samostatně a že jsem uvedl všechny použité informační zdroje a literaturu. Tato práce ani její podstatná část nebyla předložena k získání jiného nebo stejného akademického titulu.

V Praze, 11. 12. 2020

Bc. Filip Sommer

Acknowledgment

First of all, I would like to thank to my supervisor RNDr. Libor Jelen, Ph.D., for his professional guidance of the submitted master's thesis, valuable advice, comments and all other help. I would also like to thank to all my family who was very patient during my trips and adventures in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

My thanks also belong to my friend Tomáš Kaválek who was my personal guide on this subject (not only in northern Iraq), for his advice and the hour-long debates, and for providing the background during my first field research.

I would also like to thank to my Kurdish friends, especially to dr. Aziz Barzani, Shivan Fazil, Kamaran Palani and others who wished to remain anonymous. Without them, this thesis could not have arisen. My other thanks belong to some of my non-Kurdish friends living in the Kurdistan region of Iraq for longer time.

Last but not least, I would like to thank to Falah Mustafa Bakir, the KRG's Head of Foreign Relations during my first visit, for providing an interview and valuable advices that greatly enriched this thesis.

I would also like to thank all the other people who contributed to this thesis and to all my friends for their support.

Abstract

This thesis represents a comprehensive analysis of the geographical and geopolitical position of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) as an official political institution of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). Firstly, it focuses on the internal issues of this institution and its division between two main Iraqi Kurdish political parties: KDP and PUK. Secondly, it examines the form of the relationships between the KRG and central government in Baghdad. The regional position of the KRG is explained by capturing the relationships among the KRG, the governments of the key regional countries (Turkey, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel) and important Kurdish political parties operating in this area (PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, ENKS and KDPI). Thirdly, the global actors (United States of America, Russian Federation and China) and their position towards the Iraqi Kurds, is also included. And finally, this thesis deals with the problematics of the Kurdish referendum of independence in 2017 and the role of ISIS as an “game changing” actor in the regional dynamics. This thesis builds on extensive search of scientific literature (about 70 titles), field research in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in the form of the interviews with 20 respondents and media reports on this topic and region. Additionally, this thesis is enriched by interview with Falah Mustafa Bakir, then KRG’s Head of Foreign Relations.

Key words: Kurdistan regional government, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Turkey, US, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

Abstrakt

Tato práce představuje komplexní analýzu geografického a geopolitického postavení kurdské regionální vlády (KRG) jakožto oficiální politické instituce Regionu Iráckého Kurdistánu (KRI). Práce se zaměřuje na vnitřní záležitosti této instituce a její rozdělení mezi dvě hlavní irácké kurdské politické strany: KDP a PUK. Dále zkoumá formu vztahů mezi KRG a ústřední vládou v Bagdádu. Regionální postavení KRG pak vysvětluje zachycením vztahů mezi KRG, vládami klíčových regionálních zemí (Turecko, Sýrie, Írán, Saúdská Arábie a Izrael) a důležitými kurdskými politickými stranami působícími v této oblasti (PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, ENKS a KDPI). Mimo jiné se věnuje problematice globálních aktérů (Spojené státy americké, Ruská federace a Čína) a jejich pozic vůči iráckým Kurdům. V neposlední řadě se pak zabývá problematikou kurdského referenda o nezávislosti v roce 2017 a rolí Islámského státu (ISIS) jako aktéra „měnicího hru“ v rámci regionální dynamiky a vztahů. Tato práce je postavena na rozsáhlé rešerši vědecké literatury (okolo 70 titulů), terénním výzkumu v oblasti Iráckého Kurdistánu formou rozhovorů s 20 respondenty a mediálních zpráv, zaměřujících se na toto téma a region. Tato práce je navíc obohacena o rozhovor s Falahem Mustafou Bakirem, tehdejším ministrem zahraničních věcí kurdské regionální vlády.

Klíčová slova: Irácký Kurdistán, Kurdská regionální vláda, Strana kurdských pracujících (PKK), Turecko, USA, Islámský stát

Content

| | |
|--|-----------|
| List of figures, graphs and tables..... | 8 |
| List of abbreviations..... | 8 |
| 1. Introduction..... | 10 |
| 2. State of art..... | 14 |
| 3. The Middle East..... | 18 |
| 4. Kurdistan region of Iraq - defining the region and setting research questions..... | 21 |
| 5. Methodology..... | 25 |
| 6. Using the case study..... | 28 |
| 7. Kurdistan regional government and its relations with selected actors..... | 30 |
| 7.1. The KRG and its internal structure from 1991 to 2017..... | 30 |
| 8. The KRG, KDP and PUK and their orientation in the foreign policy..... | 36 |
| 8.1. Relations with selected actors..... | 36 |
| 8.1.1. Position of the KRI in Iraq..... | 37 |
| 8.1.2. Surrounding countries - Turkey, Syria, and Iran..... | 41 |
| 8.1.3. Regional political parties - PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, ENKS and KDPI..... | 41 |
| 8.1.3.1 The relations between KRI, Turkey, PKK, and HDP..... | 42 |
| 8.1.3.2 The relations between KRI, Syria, PYD, and ENKS..... | 47 |
| 8.1.3.3 The relations between KRI, Iran, KDPI, and PJAK..... | 49 |
| 8.1.4. The relations between KRI and other regional actors - Saudi Arabia and Israel..... | 52 |
| 8.1.5. ISIS as a “game-changing” actor in the regional relations..... | 55 |
| 8.1.6. Global actors - the United States of America, the Russian Federation and China..... | 57 |
| 8.1.6.1 The relation between the KRI and the United States of America..... | 60 |
| 8.1.6.2 The relation between the KRI and Russian Federation..... | 64 |
| 8.1.6.3 The relation between the KRI and China..... | 67 |
| 9. Analyzing the data..... | 69 |
| 9.1. Internal issues and relations with Iraq and regional actors..... | 70 |
| 9.1.1. Relations between KDP and PUK..... | 70 |
| 9.1.2. The position of the KRG in Iraq..... | 73 |
| 9.1.3. The relations between the KRI, Turkey, PKK, and HDP..... | 76 |
| 9.1.4. The relations between the KRI, Syria, PYD and ENKS..... | 80 |
| 9.1.5. The relations between the KRI, Iran, KDPI and PJAK..... | 82 |

| | | |
|------------|--|------------|
| 9.1.6. | The relations between the KRI and other regional actors - Saudi Arabia, Israel | 85 |
| 9.2. | Global actors - the United States of America, the Russian Federation, and China | 87 |
| 9.2.1. | The relations between the KRI and United states of America | 87 |
| 9.2.2. | The role of KRI in the US-Iran tensions | 87 |
| 9.2.3. | The relations between KRI and Russia | 90 |
| 9.2.4. | The relations between KRI and China | 92 |
| 9.3. | Reactions of individual actors on the Kurdish referendum of independence in 2017 | 93 |
| 10. | Interpretation of the results | 93 |
| 11. | Conclusion..... | 103 |
| 12. | Bibliography | 105 |
| 13. | Electronic resources | 111 |
| 14. | Appendix | 114 |

List of figures, graphs and tables

Map No. 1: Kurdistan region of Iraq: administrative delimitation and disputed territories.

List of abbreviations

AANES - Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
AKP - Justice and development party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AK Parti)
CDJ - Coalition for Democracy and Justice
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency
CHP - Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi)
CNOOC - China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CNPC - China National Petroleum Corporation
ENKS - Kurdish National Council in Syria (Encumena Niştimani ya Kurdi li Suriyeye)
GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council
HDP - People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi)
HPÊ - Yezidikhan Protection Force (Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanêor)
HPG - People's Defence forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel)
IRGC - Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISF - Iraqi security forces
ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Islamic state
IOC - International oil companies
KCK - Kurdistan Communities Union
KDP - Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan)
KDPI/PDKI - Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (Hîzbî Dêmuokratî Kurdistanî Êran)
KNC - Kurdish National Congress
KRI - Kurdistan region of Iraq
KRG - Kurdistan regional government
KSC - Kurdish Supreme Committee (Desteya Blind a Kurd)
LNG - liquefied natural gas
MENA - Middle East and North Africa
MERI - Middle East Research Institute
MHP - Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi)
NGM - New Generation Movement
PCDK - Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (Partî Çareserî Dîmuokratî Kurdistan)

PCMR - Prague Centre for Middle East Relations
PJAK - The Party of free life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana azad a Kurdistanê)
PMF - Popular mobilization forces, the same as PMU
PMU - Popular mobilization units, the same as PMF
PKK - The Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan)
PSC - production sharing contracts
PUK - Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yeketî Niştîmanî Kurdistan)
PYD - Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)
SAVAK - National Organization for Security and Intelligence (Sâzemân-e Ettlâ'ât va Amniyat-e Keshvar)
SDC - Syrian Democratic Council
SDF - Syrian Democratic Forces
SOMO - State Oil Marketing Organization
TSC - Technical services contract
UK - United Kingdom
US - United States of America
USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Soviet Union
YPG - People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel)
YPJ - Women's Defence Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of the Middle East geopolitical complexity is widely discussed in the diverse scientific literature, through sociological, political, economic, demographical, historical, and other types of relationships among states and non-state actors. This master's thesis operates with the geographical approach of the relationships, closely focused on the Middle East region and the geopolitical role of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) in it.

To be more specific, this thesis is looking at the geopolitics from the post-structural view, presenting it as a discourse created by certain texts and works, enshrined in the relevant institutions and defining a circle of people who are or may be involved in the discourse establishment (Daněk 2013). The ideas resulting from actions that have a certain influence on the formation of the discourse “performatively create” certain types of world regions. Thus, Iraq is seen as a source of danger not only for the nearby countries but also for the whole world (Daněk 2013). This approach allows a deconstruction of the geopolitical discourse made by critical geopolitics, which “is not looking for one big explanation, but small explanations, examining the operation of power, knowledge and space in specific contexts” (Luke 2008, Routledge 2008, cit. in Daněk, p. 133). The researched problem is divided into smaller research units (individual actors and their relationship with the KRG) which are, after a detailed analysis using the critical geopolitics, put together in the final chapter.

At the same time, this work attempts to understand, describe and explain the interests and efforts of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) as the official representative body of the KRI and its relations with selected actors. These issues are discussed in the chapter “8.1. Relations with Selected Actors”.

Following my bachelor's thesis “Analysis of the Geopolitical Relationships between Iraqi Kurdistan, Regional and Global Actors” which examines the statements of the top representatives of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and of regional and global entities, this study aims to deepen knowledge of these relations. At the same time, the methodological part of this master's thesis is enriched by a field research in the KRI that was held in late June and at the beginning of July 2019¹. The main reason for the study of this phenomenon of Iraqi Kurds and their autonomy area in northern Iraq was the motivation to get a deeper knowledge of this region, the people, the politics, the geography as well as all the relations and internal attitudes.

¹ The second field research was conducted at the end of February 2020. However, the interviews were focused on other topics (for example on large scale protests in the central and south Iraq and their possible impact on the KRI or the Turkish operations in northern Syria) which will be used in another research or scientific article.

My personal experience and the field research of these factors thus helped to make the baseline of this work and write it.

At the beginning, it is important to present the research area, specified as the thematic area in which the research will be carried out (Hendl 2005). There are two main subjects of this study. Firstly, KRI as a geographical, political, historical, and administrative entity within the state of Iraq and its complexity. Specifically, an examination of the entity from a historical-geopolitical point of view and the influence of significant events that shaped the boundaries and spheres of influence of the Kurdish political parties within this entity and beyond its borders. Secondly, the KRG as an official, representative political institution of the KRI which has gained more autonomy and leverage in Iraq than other regional political parties² in the surrounding states with the populous Kurdish minorities (Turkey, Syria, and Iran). The political institution of the KRG is divided into individual elements - Kurdish political parties³.

Specific events that shaped the KRI as an entity and influenced the relations with Baghdad, as well as with the regional and global actors include the creation of the Kurdistan region of Iraq in 1991-92⁴, the Kurdish civil war during the 1994 and 1998, the American invasion of Iraq with its beginning in 2003, acceptance of the new Iraqi constitution in 2005, the arrival of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and the war against it and the Kurdish referendum of independence and its effects on Erbil-Baghdad relations in 2017.

The researched time frame of this thesis starts in the year 2005 when the formal autonomous status of the KRI was enshrined in the new Iraqi constitution (Yoshioka 2015). The constitution also guaranteed real federalism and thus semi-independence of the KRG as a political institution (Gunter 2011). The Kurds got the role of the “kingmakers” in the formation of the government, determining the “extremely decentralized federal system for Iraq, wherein all powers not explicitly reserved for the federal government go to the regions” (Romano 2010, p. 1349-1350). The new constitution thus brought the official institutionalization of the KRG on the domestic and international levels. In addition, the Kurds

² For example, PKK, PYD, PDKI, or PJAK.

³ However, the issue of the Kurds is much more extensive and complex, with Kurdish-inhabited areas extending from Turkey and Armenia through Northern Syria and Iraq, Western Iran to the Kurds in Khorasan.

⁴ The history of the Iraqi Kurds before 1990 is not the main interest of this thesis. However, the issue of historical characteristics of the Kurdistan region of Iraq before 1990 is detailed in book “A Modern History of the Kurds” by David McDowall from 2004. Other scientific works that deal with this issue are mentioned in the following chapter.

see the constitution as “an almost holy text that, after eighty years of monarchy and dictatorship, finally guarantees their rights and autonomy in Iraq” (Kane 2011, p. 11).

Several scholars concluded that “the Kurdistan Region governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government manifests itself as a “state-like entity” (Stansfield 2013, 259-260), de facto state (Gunter 1992, 2011b), or a quasi-state (Natali 2010). Moreover, the KRG has control over its own security forces including a 100,000 strong Kurdish army⁵” (Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014, p. 4). As discussed in the following chapters, the security forces are divided between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan, KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yeketî Nîştîmanî Kurdistan, PUK). Speaking about the “political unit state concept”, it is interesting that there is not just one, but two separate entities within the KRI (KDP and PUK controlled) with their own security forces, government departments, and infrastructure in the area under their control (Hama, Ali 2020).

The Kurdish leaders performing in the KRG are recognized statesmen on the regional and international stage, establishing representations in Europe, the US, the Middle East, and the Far East (Stansfield 2013). The partial ambition of this work is to introduce and describe the political institution of the KRG, its characteristics, position in the diverse levels, definition, and history. Although the constitution brought a lot of positiveness in terms of the Kurdish issue, it opened a lot of questions, resulting from the wording of some individual points. The ambiguous definition led to disputes between the Iraqi Kurds and the central government in Baghdad.

The time frame is ended by the field research at the turn of June and July 2019. Some of the mentioned events important for shaping the KRI and the KRG (the Kurdish referendum of independence and its effects on Erbil-Baghdad relations or the Turkish presence in northern Iraq being the examples) resonated in a great part of the interviews conducted. The “normalization process” between the Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi central government was widely presented by the respondents, often with a belief in improvement of the relations during the premiership of Adil Abdul Mahdi who was more “friendly” to the Kurdish issue.

The KRG is trying to build and maintain healthy relationships with neighboring and other countries because of the numerous Kurdish diaspora residing at common borders. In this thesis, they are divided in two groups: the regional (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel) and the global (United States of America, Russian Federation, China) actors. The

⁵As written below, on the regional level the peshmerga forces are still controlled by the political parties or important political actors rather than the government as a whole.

reasons for choosing these actors are mentioned below. To fully understand the geopolitical picture and position of the KRI, this master's thesis also describes the relations between the KRG and other regional Kurdish political parties. These parties operating or governing in the KRI or surrounding countries (mostly Turkey and Syria) can cooperate or compete with Iraqi Kurdish political parties - KDP, PUK, and the Gorran Movement.

The motivation of the whole research based on an extensive and deep research of expert literature and the personal desire to understand the whole issue is described in conclusion of the following chapter. Further, it can serve as a basis for the decision-making processes made by people in higher positions in international relations.

2. State of art

The issues and challenges of the Kurdistan region of Iraq are widely and deeply discussed in the expert literature. There are many approaches that examine the Iraqi Kurds and their political institutions. From the historical point of view, one of the most known books related to this topic is “A Modern History of the Kurds” by David McDowall (2004). The author describes the history of the Kurds and Kurdistan before the 19th century, their division among four Middle East countries (Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria) and their existence and the struggle for independence during the 20th century. In addition, the general characteristics of the Kurds (for example the religion, the land, the people, and the local autonomy) are described therein as well. The history and culture of the Iraqi Kurds is described by the writer Barbara Robson in her book “Iraqi Kurds: Their History and Culture”. Another publication worth mentioning is “The Kurds in Iraq - The Past, Present, and Future” by Kerim Yildiz from 2004, characterizing not only the history of the Iraqi Kurds but also their current position and possible efforts in the future. The author also compares the situation and status of the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Wider historical and political delimitation of the Middle East countries and their position in bipolar world is examined in the article “Transitions and Regional Geopolitics of Arab World” from Senén Florensa.

There are also several expert works regarding the situation of the KRI and the KRG from various points of view. For example, “The Unravelling of the Post-First World War State System? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Transformation of the Middle East” from Gareth Stansfield, “Kurdish Future in a Post-Saddam Iraq” from Michael M. Gunter or “The Shifting Balance of Power in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Struggle for Democracy with Uninstitutionalized Governance” from Akiko Yoshioka 2015.

From the geopolitical aspect, there are a lot of studies discussing relations between the KRG and the central government in Baghdad as well as the main issues between these two parties that have to be considered and solved. The evolution of the entity of the KRI within Iraq, the problematics of the disputed territories, revenue sharing and control of oil resources and the integration of peshmerga⁶ forces are explained by Michael M. Gunter’s⁷ article “Arab-Kurdish Relations and the Future of Iraq”.

⁶ “Peshmerga, a Kurdish word roughly translated as *those who face death*, is generally only applied to Iraqi-Kurdish fighters (as opposed to Syrian or Turkish Kurds)” (Smith 2018, p. 251).

⁷ Michael M. Gunter is also the author of article “Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey”.

The regional authority of the KRG over the natural resource sector reviews the title “Kurdistan Regional Government: Petro-politics in the Post-2003 Era” by Saeed Mirtorabi. The issue of the disputed territories, Kirkuk being the most complicated, is described in “Iraq’s Disputed Territories, a View of the Political Horizon and Implications for the U.S. policy” by Sean Kane from 2011. The issue of the peshmerga status is dealt with in the article “Kurdistan’s Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces” by Wladimir van Wilgenburg and Mario Fumerton. Other authors dealing with key topics between Erbil and Baghdad are Hawre Hasan Hama, Othman Ali, Gallia Lindenstrauss and Adrien Cluzet.

The literature is not unified in terms of complex multilateral analysis of the KRG regional and global relations, it rather focuses on bilateral relations or relations with only a selected part of them. For example, there are many articles on the topic of mutual ties between the KRG (mostly KDP) with Turkey which is also highly influenced by PKK operations in the region. Moreover, the articles are often aiming attention at a specific sector, like the energy relations between the KRG and Turkey. Authors dealing with this topic are Remziye Yilmaz-Bozkus or John M. Roberts. The PKK factor is further described by Till F. Paasche and Howri Mansurbeg. There are also Czech authors - Tomáš Kaválek and Tomáš Šmíd - worth mentioning. The relations between the researched Kurdish political parties in the regional context are described in “The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship” by Kaya and Lowe and “The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East” by Gunes and Lowe.

There are also authors dealing with the KRG-Syrian actors, mostly represented by Syrian Kurds and their political parties such as PYD or ENKS. It is important to mention Ali Sarikaya or Bekir Halhalli. Further, Giulia Valeria Anderson also should not be forgotten in this topic.

The issues regarding the eastern actors operating in Iran (the political parties of KDPI and PJAK or the Iranian central government itself) are researched by authors mentioned above: Kerim Yildiz, Gunes and Lowe or van Wilgenburg and Fumerton.

The topic of the KRG-Saudi relations is elaborated by Marianna Charountaki (who is focusing on topic of the GCC impact on the Kurdish Politics) and Mushegh Ghahriyan with his work “The Kurdish Factor in Iraq-Gulf Arab States Relations”. Israel’s influence in the KRI is widely covered by Ofra Bengio in her article “Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds” and by Aldo Liga who is an author of “The *Israel Factor* and the Iraqi-Kurdish Quest for Independence and Israel” and “Iraqi Kurds in a Transforming Middle East”.

There are also actors focusing on the topic of relations between the KRG and international actors, such as the United States of America, the Russian Federation or China. Relations with the US are dealt with by Giulia Valeria Anderson's "US-Kurdish Relations: The 2nd Iraqi-Kurdish War and the Al-Anfal Campaigns", further by Stoni and Bin Yatiban's "The Relationship Between the U.S. and Kurdistan Region-Iraq Post Referendum", by Jamal's "United States and Iraqi Kurdistan: An Analysis on the Legacy of the US Support to the Iraqi Kurds After 1991" or Hama and Ali's "De-politicization of the Partisan Forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq". US security interests in the KRI are described in Barton's article "To Arm or Not to Arm the Kurds: A Look at U.S. National Security Interests in Kurdistan" (2018) and in Caetano's text "United States Interests in the Debate on Self-determination of Iraqi Kurds".

Delanoë elaborated the ties between the KRG and the Russian Federation in "The Kurds: A Channel of Russian Influence in the Middle East"; Salim and Murtuzaliev researched Kurdistan economic relations between the regional governments and Russia in context of developing mutual hydrocarbons industry; Mammadov and Karasik wrote "Arab Persian Gulf States' Investment in Russia"; Shakarian "Top Ten Origins: Russia's Relations with the Kurds"; M. Almaqbali "Russia's Relations with Gulf States and their Effect on Regional Balance in the Middle East" (2018). Another point of view on this issue is presented by Borshchevskaya and Wahab in their policy analysis "In Search of a New Patron, the KRG Turns Back to Moscow".

The next global actor, China, and its relations with Iraqi Kurdish political parties are the Dr Christina Lin's topic in her texts "Will China Support an Independent Kurdistan?" and "Al Qaeda and ISIS Have Declared War on China - Will Beijing Now Arm the Kurds?"

Regarding the theme of the Kurdish referendum of independence and its impact on the regional and global position of the Iraqi Kurds, there are several works: "Strategies to Gain International Recognition: Iraqi Kurdistan's September 2017 Referendum for Independence" and "The Development of Kurdistan's De Facto Statehood: Kurdistan's September 2017 Referendum for Independence" by Kamaran Palani, Jaafar Khidir, Mark Dechesne and Edwin Bakker. This topic is also discussed in the article "On the Independence Referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Disputed Territories in 2017" by Park, Jongerden and Yoshioka.

There are also other authors who have long been working with the topic of the Iraqi Kurds and their position in the Middle East represented by Iraqi Kurdish political parties (KDP, PUK, the Gorran Movement) and institutions (KRG). David Romano (and his "Iraqi Kurdistan: Challenges of Autonomy in the Wake of US Withdrawal", "Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey: Temporary Marriage?" being example) is worth mentioning here. Some of the articles focus

on the role of the ISIS in the Middle East and impact of its activities on the Kurds and other significant players in this region, for example “The Future of Iraqi Kurdistan: The *Islamic State* as a Catalyst for Independence?” by Silke Jungbluth and “Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting ISIS, Inviting Conflict” by International Crisis Group.

To sum up, the mentioned literature is the most important and most cited baseline for this thesis. However, there are many further sources dealing with this topic, or a part thereof, that are not listed in this chapter.

As written above, all of the mentioned sources are focused on a certain area, for example one or more actors and their relationship with the KRG, the two main political parties, or a part of one specific relationship (e.g. energy interconnection, security cooperation) between the KRG and the selected actor. The lack of works looking at complexity of the KRG (and KDP, PUK) position in term of historical, geographical, geopolitical, religious and other points of view as well as the lack of works dealing with all significant actors and their impacts on this position were a motivation to write this master’s thesis. It aims to present a comprehensive analysis and thus to fill the information gap. As a result, this thesis may well be understood as a monograph on the most important elements of the KRG’s foreign policy which includes comparative perspectives and mapping of major relations with regional and global players (represented by national governments) and regional Kurdish political parties. The objectives of this thesis are specified by the main research questions at the end of the chapter “4. Kurdistan Region of Iraq” on the page 22.

3. The Middle East

The region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a geopolitically unstable, unpredictable, and collapsing world region, whose events directly or indirectly affect a number of global processes, decisions, and elections (for example the US presidential elections or elections to European Parliament). This instability is externally manifested by anti-government protests, revolutions, and civil wars (Černý 2020). All these events cause vast migration from this part of the world and can disturb the population of target immigration countries or regions. Therefore, we should be interested in the situation in MENA as a whole, trying to understand and describe it. In addition, the MENA region is highly interesting and diverse in terms of factors that make the complexity of the current problems. To fully understand the complexity of this region, it is essential to summarize fundamental information about the Middle East, focusing on historical, religious, geopolitical and geographical aspects.

The Middle East region is one of the most diverse areas of the world. It is a place where three of the dominant religion in the world meet - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The ethnic and religious diversity, alongside with some historical events, leads to local, regional, and also global⁸ conflicts. A great deal of instability also springs from the fights between Shiite Islam, fundamentally backed by Iran, and Sunni Islam, supported by Saudi Arabia (Florensa 2014). The split between Sunnis and Shiites and the disputes arising from this “religious separation” is very important for understanding the broader context of (not only) the Middle East. The majority of Sunnis constitutes 80-85 % of the world’s Muslims and are present in Gulf states, namely Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, the ultra-extremist ideology of Wahhabism dominates there, much different from the Sunnism. On the other hand, the Shias represent only 15 % of the world’s Muslim population, which is mostly concentrated in Iran and Iraq. Some authors point out that the Sunni-Shia schism “has no religious basis, instead it is a game of political interests, the objective of which is to provoke a conflict between the Iranians and Arabs” (Almaqbal 2018, p. 537). Historically, politically and within the framework of minorities and religious arrangements. This diversification influences political stability in the states, mostly headed by autocrats or regimes which are loaded by corruption. The existence of the strong young generations which are the most numerous, best educated, and informed, ambitious, and globally connected one, deepen the generation gap between the young and progressive people and the ruling elite. The whole situation contributes to the fact that the young generation is unemployed (Černý 2020).

⁸ Mainly at the diplomatic level.

Despotic leaderships of the Arabian countries suppress any kind of political or other opposition. The reactions of the states on the revolts of the Arab Spring shows a direct message to the dissatisfied population: no changes of the system current existing regimes. The intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)⁹ forces in Bahrain in 2011-2012, not against a foreign aggressor, but rather to crush the democratic demands of its own people, can be a good example (Florensa 2014).

The issue concerning calling for socio-economic and political reforms, can be currently seen in Iraq, where mostly Shia Arab demonstrators in Baghdad and in southern governorates with Basra as a dominant, protesting against “penetration of Shia militias” and other topics like “lack of basic services, job creation and end to foreign interference” (Atlantic Council 2020). The younger ambitious generation is strongly against corruption in the government (Al Monitor 2019). So, there are wide demonstrations against it, strikingly reminiscent of the Arab Spring in the MENA countries since 2011.

And this is only one of the examples of the instability of this region. Post-war Syria is now the point of interest of the regional and global actors which were fighting against ISIS. North-eastern Syria is now subject to the Turkish military operation Peace Spring, which has a goal to establish a 30-km wide “safety zone” to relocate refugees from Syria, now located in Turkey. Another goal is to effectively eliminate Kurdish rebels in the region, including organizations like People’s Defence Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), Women’s Defence Units, (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ), recently covered by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Geopolitical Monitor 2019). Although these processes are not the main subject of this master’s thesis, they are helping to understand the complexity of the relations in the region of the Middle East.

Problematics of the minorities and religious arrangements rebuild the classic state system as we know. National, minority, and ethnics concerns give rise to new political clusters in the region. This master’s thesis is focusing on the problematics of the Kurds, mostly inhabiting “close boundary” areas of the four neighboring countries - Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq¹⁰. The constitutional concessions to the Kurdistan region of Iraq are much greater than in

⁹ Gulf Cooperation Council was established in 1981 as an alliance between Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, under Saudi hegemony (Florensa 2014).

¹⁰ The Kurds also live by the north-east borders of Iran, in the Khorasan province (Ali Madih 2007). Moreover, there is an important Kurdish diaspora in Europe (mainly in Germany) and North America and Asia (Mojab, Gorman 2007).

other parts of the Greater Kurdistan (see the appendix No. 3), especially the Kurdish regions in Iran and Turkey (Jungbluth 2015). The highest level of autonomy status was achieved in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) located in the north part of the Iraqi state. Semi-autonomy status is the result of the historical events, geographical location, and Iraqi Kurdish desire for an independent state. Compared with the Kurdish diaspora from the other states (Turkey, Syria, and Iran), the Kurds in Iraq have a stronger position not only in the state politics but also in international politics, as well as extensive cultural rights and recognition. The KRI is governed by the Kurdish regional government (KRG), mostly composed by Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partîya Demokrata Kurdistan, KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yeketî Nîştîmanî Kurdistan, PUK) and the Gorran Movement (in Kurdish "The Change"). Since 2006, the KRG has had its own department of foreign relations, acting independently of the Baghdad foreign orientation which deepens the gap between these two parties.

4. Kurdistan region of Iraq - defining the region and setting research questions

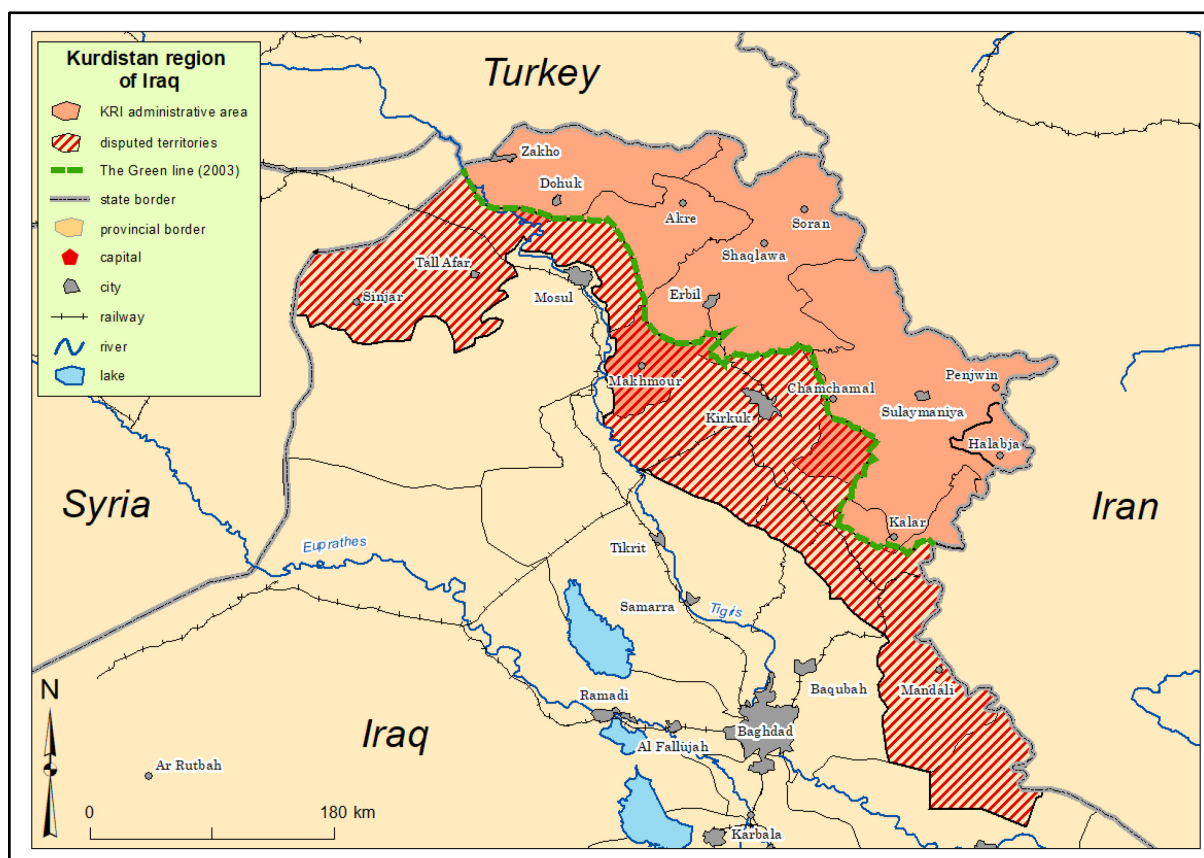
“We don’t have a state, because we don’t have a port and we don’t have sea. If we would have the sea, it would be better for us to negotiate with states of the EU. That’s the idea of our people. And that’s why Turkey controls Afrin. They don’t want Kurds to have the sea.”
(dr. Aziz Barzani, Erbil).

Kurdistan region of Iraq is located in the north part of the Iraqi state. The KRI is divided into four governorates: Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja (see the map No. 1 and the appendix No. 4) (Kurdistan Region Statistics Office 2015)¹¹. The last one was established on March 13th, 2014, after the KRG Council of Ministers approved the change of the Halabja district to province (Kurdistan 24 2018b). The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is an autonomous entity with a permanent population which has a territorially defined area and an own government (the KRG) that administers this entity (Stansfield 2013). The official borders are defined by the Green Line, which is captured in Article 53. of Iraq’s 2004 Transitional Administrative Law. The demarcation of the area makes clear that three governorates: Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah are under the administrative control of the KRG. On the other hand, there is an unclear definition of the position of Kirkuk, Diyala, and Ninewa governorates, which is one of the main unresolved issues between Erbil and Baghdad¹² (Kane 2011).

¹¹ *“Halabja is now an independent (the fourth) governorate. But it’s only administrative earmarking. It’s still managed by PUK.”* (001 A).

¹² And parts of which are often referred to as the disputed territories.

Map No. 1: Kurdistan region of Iraq: administrative delimitation and disputed territories.



Source: Author.

Territorial boundaries were formed by significant historical events. The first step of formation of this entity was a creation of the no-fly zone called a safe haven at the end of the Gulf war in 1991, and as a result, the Green Line was introduced (Yoshioka 2015). The 36th parallel and the area above made the dividing line served. The formation of the semi-autonomous Kurdish area was the result of the long period of the Kurd repression by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (Romano 2010).

The second step was the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, accompanied by the adoption of the new Iraqi constitution in 2005. This guaranteed real federalism and thus semi-independence for the KRG and KRI as a whole (Gunter 2011). It is also formally defined as an autonomous region named the Kurdistan region (Yoshioka 2015).

Since that time, the KRG has gained several successes in KRI's development, including restructuring infrastructure, building airports and proactive oil and gas policy, which led to the improvement of the relations with several actors on the international field (Murtuzaliev, Salim 2019). While Sunni leadership was overthrown, Shia and Kurd acquired a stronger position in

the Baghdad government. The Sunnis also rejected the newfound dawlat al-mukawanat¹³ system (state of components) and many of them refused to publicly use the word “Sunni” or “component” (Mansour 2016).

The third significant event that had an influence on the formation of the KRI as an entity was an invasion of the Islamist terrorist organization, the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria¹⁴ into the region in 2014. Fighting against this new actor in the region brought both international attention and help to the Kurds, and also the enlargement of the area under de facto control of the KRG to up to 40 %. Thus, the Iraqi Kurds and their armed force of peshmerga gained a crucial position in the territories of the disputed city of Kirkuk and oil fields around Kirkuk and Nineveh governorate (Jungbluth 2015). These areas were under the Kurdish control until October 16th, 2017. Almost a month later, after the Kurdish referendum of independence held on the 25th of September, the Iraqi army, backed by the Shiite militias, retook the considerable part of the disputed territories with the dominant city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oilfields (Eppel 2018).

All these events shaped and formed the KRI’s territorial boundaries and also the KRG position towards both the central government in Baghdad and regional and global actors. As some authors point out, “Kurdistan has no fixed borders and claims to the territory that it comprises vary between different organizations, groups, and individuals. No map of Kurdistan can be drawn without contention as for all practical purposes” (Yildiz 2004). There will always be pressure from the surrounding states that are afraid of establishing a Kurdish state near its borders or, in the worst case, on its own territory. In their point of view, the territorial integrity of these states would be violated and decomposed by this step. As Yildiz writes “Turkey will always deny Kurdistan’s independence, while Iran and Iraq remain reluctant to acknowledge that it is as extensive as many Kurds purport, and Syria denies that it extends into its own territory” (Yildiz 2004, p. 8).

As written above, this master’s thesis sets out to fully describe the KRI with its official political institution (KRG) by answering these main research questions:

¹³ Dawlat al-mukawanat system of division by the muhasasa system determines the political positions of Sunni, Shia, Kurd, and minorities. Thanks to that system, all the groups (Sunni, Shia, Kurd and minorities) can have their share of political power. They can also take part in the leadership of the whole country. “*According to muhasasa the prime minister is always Shia, president is a Kurd and the speaker of parliament Sunni since 2003*” (003 Aziz Barzani).

¹⁴ IS also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), its later variant ISIS, or its Arabic acronym Daesh. In Arabic Dawlat al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (International Crisis Group 2015).

1. What are the main characteristics of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) as a political institution?

This main question is supplemented by several important sub-questions:

- What is the internal structure of this representative institution?
- What is the Kurdistan regional government's position in Iraq?
- How is the KRG defined in terms of its internal composition? What are the main subjects of discussion between the KRG and Iraq central government in Baghdad?

2. What is the position of the Kurdistan region of Iraq in the regional geographical context?

This main question is supplemented by one sub-question, trying to broaden the knowledge of the dimensional characteristics of the KRI:

- How does the KRI region fit into regional spatial relations?

3. What is the position of the Kurdistan regional government in the global geopolitical context?

5. Methodology

At the beginning of this chapter, it is important to introduce the type of research as a whole. As this thesis brings a complex picture of the phenomenon of the Kurdistan region as a specific entity and Kurdistan regional government as a specific political institution, describing its structures, characteristics and geographical specifics, this is a descriptive type of research¹⁵. Descriptive research is focused on selected phenomena and questions: who, how, and how much (Hendl 2005). One of the techniques used in descriptive research is a case study, also used and applied in this thesis, focused on the political institution of the KRG, as mentioned above.

The aim of this thesis is to capture a certain configuration of the unique entity of the Kurdistan region of Iraq and its driving forces within a specific time period. It also attempts to make a connection with other “units” in the region and on the international level. In the research environment, it is called a descriptive inference. The descriptive inference shows a certain image of reality, focusing on the studied phenomenon and especially its most important properties. The following lines describe the methodological anchoring of the work more precisely. Firstly, it is important to mention that this work is of an interpretative nature. It seeks to understand a particular phenomenon in “its specific and historical context” (Denzin, Lincoln 2000, cit. in Ženka, Kofroň 2012, p. 22). Working with the concept of interpretative study brings much more space for the specific context to be taken into account. Secondly, this thesis operates with the idiographic approach which emphasizes the characteristics and explanations of unique phenomena, regions, or historical events (Ženka, Kofroň 2012). Other definitions describe that idiographic approaches “deal with the analysis of a particular phenomenon or geographical characteristic of the selected territory, without attempting to generalize the results” (Gerring 2012a, cit. in Ženka, Kofroň 2012, p. 46).

This work uses the methods of qualitative research which is conducted through long-term, intensive contact with the terrain, or the situation connected to an individual or a group of individuals (Hendl 2005). The main reason for preferring the qualitative research to quantitative research is that the qualitative one examines the phenomenon in the natural environment and operatively reacts to the local situations and impulses and also because the qualitative case study is highly personal research (Stake 1995, Hendl 2005). Firstly, for conducting this type of research, it is highly essential that the impulses and processes are examined in the research environment personally. Secondly, the process of qualitative research

¹⁵ As written in the introduction, the problematics of the Kurdish issue is more complex and extensive.

needs to be conducted based on a long-term intensive contact with the terrain or the situation of an individual or groups of individuals. The situations examined are usually banal or normal, reflecting the everyday life of individuals, groups, communities, or organizations. Thirdly, choosing qualitative research was made upon the fact that the main instrument of qualitative research is the researcher himself (Hendl 2005). Following these three key factors concerning the methods of qualitative research, this research was carried out in the natural environment of the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Most of the field survey took place in Erbil, the capital city of the KRI. A semi-structured interview (see in appendix No. 2) was chosen to be the method of data collection. The first part of this interview focused on the basic information about the respondent, specifically name¹⁶, age, and profession. The second part focused on describing the external look of the respondent on the relationship between the KRG and the regional and global actors and regional political parties. At the beginning of the first field research, this external look was measured by “wider” Likert scale from 1 to 10¹⁷, where number 1 represented the best relationship and number 10 meant the worst possible tie between the KRG (or KDP and PUK) and selected individual actors. For extreme values, the respondents should justify his or her answer whether the relationship is that best (or worst) because of political reasons, economic reasons, safety and security reasons or other reasons (water resources, human rights etc...).

After some time (exactly after 5 interviews) there was awareness in this research that the Likert scale is not giving the best understanding of the situation. For example, the number “2” does not fully reflect the relationship between the KRG and Iran. Additionally, it showed the difficult reality of accurate measurement of force or degree of attitude, in our case the relationship (Hayes 1998). From that time, as an alternative, questions were asked on a much more qualitative scale, enriching this research to a greater and deeper extent and focusing on each of the cases.

The second part has been supplemented by specific issues such as “*How do you assess Turkey’s role in the region?*” in the case of relationships with regional actors, “*Do you see significant influences of the US or Russia that could influence the formation of the region?*” in

¹⁶ The semi-structured interview could be conducted also anonymously.

¹⁷ Likert scale „consists of statements that always have a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” through “I don’t know”, which is the midpoint of the scale, to “strongly disagree” at the opposite end. “(Hayes 1998, p. 112).

the case of relationships with global actors or “*What do you think about the presence of PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan?*” in the case of relations with regional political parties.

The third part of the semi-structured interview was directly on the Kurdish referendum of independence which was held on September 25th, 2017. The questions asked about the timing of the referendum and about the individual evaluations of the reactions of Baghdad, regional and global actors on the organization of this referendum. In these interviews, there was an attempt to identify the factors that influenced the decision to hold the referendum and its timing. The fourth and last part focused on the internal relationship between Baghdad and the KRG. This part aimed at spreading awareness about these relationships mentioned and discussed in the second part of the semi-structured interview (Iraq is concerned as one of the regional actors there).

This thesis employs a qualitative methodology, as discussed above, including 20 interviews with journalists, academics, politicians, scientists, and people working in business in the terrain field study (see in appendix No. 1). Most of the respondents were the Iraqi Kurds. The rest of the respondents were not the Kurds but they had lived and worked in the KRI for some time and monitored the political and economic situation there. The selection of the individual participants was made by the snowball method, firstly establishing contact with the one certain key individual or a gatekeeper, through which another relevant group of individuals was approached.

In the preparatory part, the goal was set for 15 interviews. However, the final number of respondents (and therefore the interviews) was changed during the research until there was sufficient amount of data. According to Hendl, theoretical saturation is “a state where further data collection and analysis do not contribute to the development, clarification of categories, and their relationships in grounded theory” (Hendl 2005). On a more comprehensible level, the field study was carried out by repeating answers from the respondents. Thanks to good language skills of the respondents, the interviews about the domestic and foreign political orientation of the KRG could be done in English. The first interview (001) had to be divided into two parts: the first part took place in Erbil, the second one in Sulaymaniyah. Two of the interviews (number 004 and 005) were made along the way from Erbil to Sulaymaniyah, the second largest city of the KRI. The rest of them took place in Erbil.

6. Using the case study

From a methodological point of view, this thesis uses principles of the case study, trying to focus on one single case. Not only its description but also the study of the complexity and particularity of this single case in political reality (Stake 1995). To truly understand the concept of the case study, we can take a look at some of the popular definitions. For example, Merriam-Webster dictionary's (2009) definition, a case study is "an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment" (Harrison et al. 2017). According to Hendl, the case study is focused on a detailed description and analysis of one or a small number of cases. The basic research question is trying to answer what characteristics of the case or group of cases are being compared¹⁸ (Hendl 2005). Other perspectives and definitions come from Drulák with his book "Jak Zkoumat Politiku: Kvalitativní Metodologie v Politologii a Mezinárodních Vztazích", that case is: "a sufficiently limited aspect of a historical episode or a sufficiently limited historical episode itself", adding that it's not clear what "sufficiently limited" means. Drulák also states that the "boundary", whether temporal or thematic, has to be significant. According to this author, the case study is a detailed analysis of the case which was chosen as an object of the study. The aim of the case study is to provide a deep understanding of the causal explanation of the selected case. It also has to take into account the overall context of the object (social, political, historical, etc...) and provide a complex picture of it (Drulák 2008). One of the other authors dealing with the problematics of case studies is Gerring who describes case studies as the research that investigates a single phenomenon, instance or example (Gerring 2004).

To explain the reality of these regional circumstances and relationships better, the case was studied in the natural setting and context. Just like in other forms of qualitative research, in the case study the researcher seeks to explore, understand and present the participants perspectives and get close to them in their natural setting (Creswell 2013, cit. in Harrison et al. 2017). It shall be noted here that the aim of this thesis is not to verify a predetermined theory or to generate a new theory focusing on the chosen case but to accurately capture and synthesize all significant aspects of the selected phenomenon. The main purpose is to describe the structure and anchor position of the political institution of the KRG. For this reason, I have chosen the concept of atheoretical case study due to the Lijphart classification of case studies. An atheoretical case study captures a certain phenomenon, event, or object to provide information for further research which then focuses on theoretical questions (Ženka, Kofroň

¹⁸ In case that we talk about comparative case studies.

2012). Atheoretical case studies are traditionally single-country or single-case analyses (Lijphart 1971). As it is discussed below, this work deals with one country (single-entity Kurdistan region of Iraq) and also on a single-case of Kurdistan regional government operating in this region. Once more, the reason for selecting these types of studies is because they are neither guided by established or hypothesized generalizations nor motivated by a desire to formulate general hypotheses. It is more about collecting data to make basis-data gathering operations¹⁹ (Lijphart 1971).

Some authors divide atheoretical case studies into more specific subdivisions. For example, Stake defines intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies. For the purpose of this master's thesis is the first one - intrinsic - the most suitable. The intrinsic case study deals with the case only for its own sake, trying to truly understand the case, not using results on a general level. This type of case also wants to follow the functioning of a particular part of the chosen institution or entity²⁰. The advantage of the intrinsic case study is also the fact that the researcher can deal with only one selected case, exploring it deeper (Hendl 2005).

Speaking about collecting specific data that can fully describe our case of the Kurdistan regional government and all its characteristics and relations, data needed to be generated by triangulation of the research sources. The theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis is based on three different types of sources: own interviews, media, and scientific literature. Diversification of needed information helps verify their relevance and actuality. It also guarantees greater objectivity of the whole project. This study collected a large amount of data from a few individuals, which is also, according to Hendl, one of the features of the case study (Hendl 2005).

¹⁹ Basis gathering operations can be indirectly used for theory building (Lijphart 1971).

²⁰ This thesis focuses on the political institution of the KRG and geographical entity of the Kurdistan region of Iraq and its specific characteristics, position, and relations with other actors as discussed above.

7. Kurdistan regional government and its relations with selected actors

This research is trying to investigate a single phenomenon of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG). More precisely, to understand and explain the internal political structure of the KRG and its own foreign policy. The first part of the semi-structured interview focuses on the perception of regional, global actors, and regional political parties by individuals. Point scales have been used for understanding the viewpoint of respondents. These point scales are trying to capture the personal view on relations between the KRG (KDP and PUK) and regional actors, global actors, and regional political parties. The selection of individual actors and parties is discussed below.

7.1. The KRG and its internal structure from 1991 to 2017

At the beginning, it is important to explain the political structure of the KRG and its regional political specifics and perspectives. The KRG is formed by two main Kurdish political parties: KDP (Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan, Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Yeketî Nîşîmanî Kurdistan, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). The Kurdistan regional government cannot be seen as one representative unit, clearly divided between these two political parties. While KDP is dominating in the Erbil and Duhok regions, PUK governs in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja governorates²¹. Either of the parties developed a strong political and economic partnership with the important regional partners - KDP with Turkey and PUK with Iran, largely influenced by the geographic position and historical events and circumstances (International Crisis Group 2015). As an example, the split of the KRG was obvious during the conflict with ISIS. The western military aid supplied mostly the KDP. Arms was routinely delivered to the Erbil airport, giving the KDP full control over it. The KDP relations with “the West” have pushed PUK further into Iranian arms (International Crisis Group 2015). Despite that is the KRG represented by these two political parties.

On the other hand, there is an obvious dominance of KDP. This fact pushes the KRG more into the hands of Turkey. According to Hama and Ali, “*KDP has been accused by the other parties, including the PUK and the Gorran Movement, of using the KRG institutions to further its own interests and at the expense of the other parties*”. To this party division, the

²¹ The territory under the KDP dominance is sometimes called the Yellow zone and under the PUK dominance the Green zone. This designation comes from the civil war between 1994-1998 when there was a frontline between the KDP and PUK peshmerga forces and which separated their zones of influence on the Yellow and Green zone (according to the color of their flags) (MERI 2016).

authors added that: *“Therefore, the PUK will never accept an independent Kurdish state if there is the real possibility that the state apparatus is exclusively controlled by the KDP, especially in reference to the security sector.”* (Hama, Ali 2020, p. 114).

While the KDP, founded in 1946 by Mullah Mustafa Barzani, is based on tribal and conservative principles, PUK, established in 1975, is more cosmopolitan, and following a social-democratic line²². The secession of the PUK by prominent member Jalal Talabani²³ had a clear reason - protest over the Barzani tribe's (party's) dominance (International Crisis Group 2015). In addition, the KDP prefers the presidential system inside its control part of the entity, while PUK promotes a parliamentary system of ruling in the area under its control (Hama, Ali 2020).

A political instance of the KRG has its “roots” in 1991 since emerging from the shadow of Saddam Hussein's regime. The first presidential and parliamentary elections were held in 1992 in the Kurdish autonomy zone to fulfill the political vacuum created by the withdrawal of the Iraqi army and institutional coverage in the north of Iraq. Thus, the first KRG was built in the de facto autonomous enclave (Yoshioka 2015). Baghdad designated these elections as illegal, and yet offered nothing to replace them (Yildiz 2004). The first cabinet of the KRG was built, based on the agreement of sharing the power equally between the two parties, managing KDP and PUK half to half votes each (Jungbluth 2015). Unfortunately, in 1994, the civil war between these two parties started. The main reasons were land disputes and the allocation of tariff income. The struggles between opponent parties divided KRI into an Erbil-based KDP-controlled area and a Sulaymaniyah-based PUK-controlled area, where they each formed their own the KRG and also almost destroyed the gained autonomy (Romano 2010, Yoshioka 2015). In 1998, both parties agreed on peace, confirmed by the Washington Peace Accord, negotiated by the US.

After 9/11, Kurds were encouraged to meet the negotiated agreements with more responsibility, preparing for taking their role in future Saddam possible overthrow. In addition, PUK offered its own territory for US/UK forces to invade Iraq from, in 2002. Jalal Talabani, a leader of the PUK, stated in the interview for CNN: *“I explained to the United States officials here that the Iraqi opposition, Kurds included ... have tens of thousands of armed people. These forces can liberate Iraq with the support of the US, with cooperation and coordination with*

²² The different confession of ideology has also impact on the relations with other Kurdish political parties operating in the region. This problematic is widely discussed later.

²³ And one of the main leaders of the PUK, who became the president of Iraq in 2005 (Stansfield 2013).

American forces.” (Yildiz 2004). The role of the Iraqi Kurds in the US invasion in Iraq is discussed in chapter “9.2.1. The Relations between KRI and United States of America”. The KRG’s Head of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir, described what was achieved after 2003: “*We were a de facto entity without international recognition, almost independent. We gave up some of our power and independence [in 2003] to rejoin Iraq. This was difficult for the Kurdish parties and many of the Kurdish people. We did this for legal and international recognition. When we travel abroad, we are received officially as Kurdistan Regional Government delegations now. We are part of Iraq, but we are the Kurdistan Regional Government.*” (Romano 2010).

So, the United States came down like a *deus ex machina* that changed Iraq’s historical paradigms (Kane 2011). After the deposition of the autocratic Saddam’s regime, the new changes started to be clearer²⁴. In 2004, the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (shortly the Transitional Administrative Law, TAL) was implemented with its guarantees for the Iraqi Kurds. The gained rights were further extended by the constitution approved in 2005 (Jungbluth 2015). As written in the introduction, the new Iraqi constitution gave the KRI the formal recognition within a federal state of Iraq in 2005 (Stansfield 2013, Yoshioka 2015). Although the new constitution secured some of the long-awaited rights and efforts of the Iraqi Kurds, it resulted in long-lasting disagreements between official representatives of the KRI and the central government in Baghdad. As Jungbluth writes in her article “The Future of Iraqi Kurdistan: The *Islamic state* as a Catalyst for Independence?”, the constitution remained unclear about the status of peshmerga forces, administration and ownership of the oil fields and disputed territories. These issues are discussed in the chapter “8.1.1. Position of the KRI in Iraq”. The two main political parties, KDP and PUK, put away their disturbances and announced a reunion of the unified (fifth) KRG cabinet in May 2006. Leaders of the two main political parties signed the KRG unification agreement which reestablished the 50-50 power-sharing system between them (van Wilgenburg, Fumerton 2015). They also came to an agreement that they should share ministerial posts (Yoshioka 2015). However, the partial division of KDP-PUK remained, especially at the level of security forces (Gunter 2011, Abdullah 2018). These parties also share out the key positions in the KRG and Iraqi government. Masoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP became the president of the

²⁴ From 1991 to 2003 KRI enjoyed the autonomous status, but it was not legally independent from the rest of Iraq (Smith 2018).

Kurdistan region in 2005, and Jalal Talabani, the leader of the PUK, became the president of Iraq in 2006 (Yoshioka 2015).

The end of a bipartisan era came in 2009 when the new political party was formed. The Gorran Movement was born to offer a more liberal option to the two existing parties, profiling itself as an opposition party (Helfont 2017). The new party called for anti-corruption, institutionalized government, and de-politicization of armed forces (Yoshioka 2015). After its creation, the political balance in the KRG between KDP-PUK was undermined (Palani et al. 2019b).

The Gorran Movement was created by detachment from the PUK by Nawshirwan Mustafa, after his resignation from the PUK. After its creation, the Gorran Movement participated in the regional elections and won 25 seats in the 111-seat Kurdish parliament. In addition, the party won 8 seats in the Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2010 (Abdullah 2018). Gorran also participated in forming the government in June 2014, gaining key portfolios like the ministry of finance and peshmerga affairs (International Crisis Group 2015). As a part of the national revolutions of Arab Spring (discussed in the introduction), the Gorran Movement started to demonstrate in the Sulaymaniyah governorate in 2011 “and demanded political, social, and economic reforms as well as an end to rampant corruption and nepotism” (Hevian 2013, p. 2). KDP subsequently accused Gorran of organizing the protests. The mutual relationship got worse after the KDP took action against Gorran. On 12th October, 2015, the KDP-allied security forces prevented the entry of the Speaker of the Parliament Yousif Mohammad, a member of Gorran, from entering Erbil. In addition, the Gorran members of the KRG cabinet were removed and replaced by the KDP politicians (Abdullah 2018). In 2016, when the KDP-PUK relations were at a “freezing point”, the PUK and Gorran signed a cooperative agreement, both accusing KDP of holding too much power within the KRG (Hama, Ali 2020).

Another important occasion, shaping KRI as an entity and expanding the influence of the KRG, was the rise of ISIS and seizing a significant part of Iraqi (and Syrian) territory by this terrorist group. This problem is discussed in chapter “8.1.5. ISIS as a *Game-Changing Actor in the Regional Relations*”. Another significant event having an effect on the Iraqi Kurdish political scene and relations both between Kurdish political parties and between the KRG and regional and global actors was the Kurdish referendum of independence in September 2017. Before analyzing the referendum itself, we have to look at the problems of the presidential crisis in the KRI. President Masoud Barzani took over this function from his father

Mullah Mustafa Barzani in 1975²⁵. It was confirmed after the deposition of Saddam's regime and the adoption of the new Iraqi constitution in 2005. Masoud Barzani, as a president of the KRI, should have ended by the year 2013, after serving two four-year terms. Subsequently, however, there were two extensions of Masoud Barzani presidential term, either of them for two years, one in 2013 and another in 2015. By 7th June, 2017, the KDP, the PUK, the Islamic Union of Kurdistan and other smaller Kurdish political parties announced that Kurdistan would hold an independence referendum on September 25, 2017 (Palani at al. 2019b). Some of the opposition leaders marked this try as "...last, desperate attempt by the Kurdish leader (Masoud Barzani) to reclaim legitimacy by playing the independence card". There were no parties supporting the referendum, in the lead with Iraq and the surrounding countries (Turkey, Iran, and Syria) which were concerned that the gaining independence could lead to the secessionist sentiment among their own Kurdish populations (The Washington Post 2017).

Besides these actors, Europe and North America did not support the referendum, too, arguing that this is not the right time as all parties are still fighting against ISIS (Reuters 2017b). Despite all rejections, on the 25th September, 2017, "voters from the Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja and KRI-controlled areas of the Kirkuk, Diyala and Nineveh governorates voted "yes" or "no" to the question: "*Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?*" (Palani at al. 2019b, p. 1). More than 92 % voters chose the option "yes" (The Guardian 2017). The reactions of Iraq and other countries, not favoring the independent Kurdish state, were expected. On the October 16, the Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi immediately started the offensive, using the cooperation with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, Arabic Hashd al-Shaabi²⁶) and retook a significant part of the disputed territories and its oil fields. Iraqi armed forces with PMF also re-gained a very strategic position in Kirkuk and around it which has been under the control of the KRG since 2014 because of an offensive against ISIS. In addition, the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority closed the Kurdish airspace and thus foreign airlines began suspending the flights to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports (Reuters 2017c). The failure of the

²⁵ After the signing of the Algiers agreement between Iraq and Iran followed by a vicious campaign of reprisal of the Kurds (Yildiz 2004).

²⁶ Hashd al-Shaabi is an Iraqi paramilitary force, created in 2014 by Iraqi top Shiite religious authority Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his fatwa (a religious call to action) appealing to all young Iraqi men to stand and fight against ISIS (International crisis group 2015, Rudaw 2020a).

referendum also led to the resignation of Masoud Barzani as a president of KRI due to pressure from the US and other regional and international actors (Abdullah 2018).

The reactions of other countries, regional and global actors, and regional political parties on the Kurdish referendum of independence are discussed in chapter “9.3. Reactions of Individual Actors on the Kurdish Referendum of Independence in 2017”.

To fully describe the whole political system in the KRI, other Iraqi Kurdish political parties and actors need to be mentioned. These parties were more or less involved in the political processes but currently their actions are irrelevant. One of the actors is the New Generation Movement (NGM) which was formed in January 2018 as an alternative to main political parties in the KRI. This political platform, led by Shaswar Abdulwahid, had a strong voice during its “No for Now” campaign in 2017 which proclaimed that the time was not right to hold a referendum on independence because not all the requirements of a legitimate state were fulfilled (Middle East Institute 2018, The Arab Weekly 2018). Moreover, according to the statement of the Spokesman of “No for Now” Movement, Rabun Maruf, declared on August 8, 2017: *“A “No for Now” vote means “No” to the failure of the experience of the Kurdistan Regional Government. “No” to a kleptocrat government of political businessmen. A “No” vote means “No” to selective politics of authority, the selectiveness by which they have proven they do not have anything to serve us except vulnerability and self-destruction. “No for Now” means no to poverty, military conflict, vulnerability, war, destruction and bloodshed. We as the “No for Now” movement call upon our nation to support the campaign for the sake of the future status of our generation, to secure our lovely nation from disaster and oppression.”* (Ekurd Daily 2017). NGM also won 4 seats in Iraqi parliamentary elections, and 8 seats in Kurdistan regional parliament (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2018).

Another actor is a “one year” political project of the current Iraqi’s president Barham Salih, the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) established as a new political coalition in September 2017 (Niqash 2017). The party also took members of the main Kurdish political parties “under its wings” and made an alliance with the opposition parties of the Islamic Group (Komal) and Gorran (Rudaw 2018). However, entering the political scene was neither spectacular nor shocking. In Iraqi parliamentary elections, CDJ won only 2 seats (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2018). Additionally, one year after the establishment, the CDJ accepted the resignation of its leader and key figure Barham Salih who at the same time proved to be a candidate for Iraq president nominated by the PUK, which he later became (Kurdistan 24 2018a).

8. The KRG, KDP and PUK and their orientation in the foreign policy

In the following analysis, it is important to understand these terms - the KRG, KDP, and PUK. Although the KRG is the official political institution of the KRI, as discussed above, there are two levels of the foreign policy and relations in this entity. Firstly, the KRG as a whole with the selected actors, where the interests of the KDP and PUK are connected and covered by this political institution. Secondly, different orientations of KDP and PUK due to their geographic position and historical ties.

There are significant differences in preferences of the KDP and the PUK in foreign relations. KDP is oriented on Turkey and by many Sunni countries is viewed as a buffer from Shia influence coming from Iran (Ofra 2017, cit. in Hama, Ali 2020, p. 116).

On the other hand, PUK prefers to cooperate with Iran, largely influenced by its geographical position and historical development of individual relationships. In addition, PUK also has better ties with PKK (Gunes, Lowe 2015). These issues are widely discussed in the relevant chapters on the relationship between those political parties (hence institution) and selected regional and global actors.

8.1. Relations with selected actors

To avoid any misunderstandings, it is essential to define the right meaning of the word “actor”. Firstly, it is important to divide actors into states and non-states players, controlling and managing the specific areas, pursuing their political goals and territorial claims. As state actors are considered the central governments of the selected states. Central governments are more or less involved in foreign relations pointing to KRI. In addition, some of the foreign governments prefer to meet with Kurdish leaders as representatives of the individual political parties rather than as representatives of the autonomous region within Iraq as a whole. On the other hand, non-state actors are represented by Kurdish political parties from the neighboring countries, operating in Middle East. Relations between the KRG and other political parties are highly influenced by the position of the KDP and PUK towards the central governments. The KDP and PUK have to balance between these actors, representing the role of a mediator. The relationships between the main parties and regional central governments are very important for oil and gas business, electricity, goods, food supplies, dealing mainly with Turkey and Iran. These two countries are the largest external trade partners of the KRG. Even in these circumstances, however, KDP and PUK host members of the regional political parties, who fight for independence in the surrounding countries, on its own territory. An example can be

used PKK, actively operating in Qandil mountains, one of the most inaccessible parts of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Stansfield 2013).

Selected actors can be sorted into three main groups and subgroups:

a. Regional actors

a.a. Iraq

a.b. Surrounding countries - Turkey, Syria, and Iran

a.c. Other regional actors - Saudi Arabia, Israel

b. Global actors - the United States of America, the Russian Federation and China

c. Regional political parties - PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, ENKS and KDPI

Relationships between KRI political institutions and regional actors can be better understood by merging the groups a. (Regional actors) and c. (Regional political parties). Firstly, the regional context will be better described and secondly, the possible division or repetition of the explanation of the individual relationships will be reduced. There will also be a better capture of the complexity of selected regional relations. This applies in particular to Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Relations with Turkey are described in connection with PKK and HDP actors, Iran is connected with PJAK and KDPI and KRI-Syrian relations are spoken of in connection with PYD and ENKS.

8.1.1. Position of the KRI in Iraq

This chapter focuses on the KRI as a specific entity of the state of Iraq. The first “group” is considered Iraq because the KRI is a direct part of this country. Even though the KRI has its government and independently administers its territory, it also participates in representation in the Iraqi government. After the overthrow of the Saddam’s authoritative regime, a system called muhasasa was established in Iraq. It determines the political positions of Sunni, Shia, and Kurd. With this system, all the groups (Sunni, Shia, and Kurd) are entitled to a share on political power²⁷. They can also take part in the leadership of the whole country. Ethnically, Iraq is divided into various components - Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian. It is also divided religiously to a Christian and a Muslim part and to Muslim sectarian basis, between Sunnis and Shias. Three of the represented and mentioned groups are the most significant in Iraq: Arab Muslim Shias (55-60 %), Arab Muslim Sunnis (20-25 %), and the Kurds (18-20 %) (Saouli 2019).

²⁷ Discussed above in the chapter “4. Kurdistan Region of Iraq”.

Moreover, the geographic position of Iraq, lying in the middle between Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, with its enormous untapped oil and gas potential, makes the KRI a very lucrative area and the KRG a notable partner, compared to other Kurdish political parties in the region.

Between the KRG and the Iraqi government, there are still many unsolved issues. The first one is the status of peshmerga forces, which is not only a concern of negotiations between the Iraqi Kurds and the central government but also among the Iraqi Kurds themselves. After the establishment of the no-fly zone and the first elections in the KRI in the 90's, the KDP and PUK agreed on uniting their peshmerga forces under the authority of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, these plans failed, however, because of the civil war between 1994-98. The KDP party even called the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein for help to force the PUK out of the Erbil, which put PUK and their peshmerga forces more under Iranian influence. The units of peshmerga forces are thus now linked to the army forces of the neighboring states. While PUK peshmergas cooperated with Iranian Shia militias in Diyala province, the KDP evolved relationships with the Turkish Special Forces which provided a training in the city of Zakho (van Wilgenburg, Fumerton 2015). The status of peshmerga is unanswered not only by the Kurds but also by the western countries which supported their fight against ISIS. By the federal Iraqi law, the peshmerga status is less clear but many foreign governments accept that the peshmerga is a legal entity under Article 121(5) of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution that: *“[t]he regional government shall be responsible for all the administrative requirements of the region, particularly the establishment and organization of the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces, and guards of the region.”* (Smith 2018, Constitute 2020). On the regional level, peshmerga forces are still controlled by the political factions or important political actors²⁸ rather than the government as a whole. The political division of the armed forces, given mostly by the historical development of the KRI and the KRG, made troubles in the unity on the battleground. For example, in the fight against ISIS, the forces of PUK only took orders from the PUK commanders and leadership, even when the local commander was from the KDP. To prevent these “problems”, the Ministry of Peshmerga should be a member

²⁸ For example, Kosrat Rasul Ali, which is a leader of the PUK has its own protection brigade called Hezekani Kosrat Rasul, which is made up of between 2,000 and 3,000 peshmerga fighters. Another example is Bafel Talabani (the son of Jalal Talabani) commands its own counter-terrorist forces, which is not under any ministry (van Wilgenburg, Fumerton 2015).

of Gorran that does not have its own peshmerga forces and thus can be the neutral mediator (Helfont 2017).

The second important topic is the problem of exporting oil with considerable oil deposits. A good example can be Kirkuk which has significant oil revenues in its administrative area. The first battleground between the KRG and Baghdad was the constitution. Article 112 is written that: *“The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields, provided that it distributes its revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution in all parts of the country...”* (Constitute 2020). There is also an important part, saying that governorates and regional governments shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields. This is not clearly defined and thus makes disputes between these two parties. The long, non-solving process led the KRG to withdraw from the negotiations and introduced the regional Petroleum Law in 2007 (Petroleum Law of the Kurdistan Region, June 29, 2007, in full) ratified as a Hydrocarbon Law in May 2009. This enabled the KRG to start making deals with international oil companies (IOC) through production share contracts (PSC). PSC’s are more favorable and open to oil companies. When a certain oil company signs a deal and invests in the oilfield, where oil or gas proves to be present, the company gets a large percentage of all revenues as a result of taking the risk of exploring the field. On the other hand, if there is no oil, the company has to deal with the losses (Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014). The agreements were signed with major oil producers such as Chevron, Gazprom Neft, Total and ExxonMobil²⁹. Attracting these companies helped gain more international attention, with possible political implications for KRI’s independence (Mills 2016, cit. in Palani et al. 2019a, p. 7). On the other hand, doing business with international actors, without the approval of the central government, made the relations even worse (Mirtorabi 2016). Baghdad’s reaction was clear: marking these partnerships illegal, representing the “choose-your-side policy”, cancelation of the research licenses, and blacklisting some of the involved oil companies³⁰ (Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014). In addition, the Iraqi Ministry of Oil demands that all hydrocarbon contracts have to be signed with the national central government and all of the Kurdish oil has to be transferred via the State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO), Iraq’s oil official exporting arm (Mirtorabi 2016). Problems related to oil production raise other issues that are worsening

²⁹ The PSC signed with ExxonMobil was more controversial, due to two of the six blocks given to Exxon were actually located in a disputed part of the Kirkuk governorate (Mirtorabi 2016).

³⁰ For example, Turkish Genel Energy (Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014).

relations between Baghdad and Erbil. Some authors point out that the territory under de facto control of the KRG (without Kirkuk) estimates reserves of about 45 billion barrels of crude (Gunter 2014, cit. in Handy 2018, p. 186).

The first problem related to the previous one is the budget. As the KRG decided to export oil on its own, directly through its new pipeline to Turkey without seeking Baghdad's approval, the central government began to withhold the annual budget allocation to the KRG. Cutting off 17 % of the state budget during the premiership of the Nouri al Maliki brought the KRG to the budget crisis that led to inability to pay civil servants (International Crisis Group 2015). At the end of 2015, the salary cuts influenced nearly 1.4 million employees; but not the security forces to ensure security and order in the entity (Mirtorabi 2016). In addition, the KRG is struggling with the financial crisis caused by many factors. The most significant is the cut of the share of the state budget (as discussed above) from the Iraqi central government, which is underlying the debt and length of this dispute between Erbil and Baghdad. Secondly, the crisis is deepening by low global energy prices as well as by the fight with ISIS, which is over. Thirdly, KRI hosts over 1.8 million Syrian refugees and Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDP) and has its own problem with corruption. The actual number of the debt is not known, due to the non-transparency policy of the KRG (Lindenstrauss, Cluzet 2017, Hama, Ali 2020).

The second issue, related to the “hydrocarbons problem”, which is widely discussed on the internal state level, are the disputed territories. The Iraqi constitution is not fully defining which parts of the country can be marked as territories with “unresolved governance” and areas without clear political connection (Yoshioka 2015). Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution speaks about the “...normalization and census and concludes with a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens, by a date not to exceed the 31st December, 2007.”, with oil-rich Kirkuk as the strategic and geographic center of the dispute (Kane 2011, Constitute 2020). The term normalization means the return of the Kurds after the Baathist regime expelled them from the disputed areas by 1960, known as the process of “Arabization”, and voluntary departure of the Arabs to their homeland of origin (Robson 1996, Kane 2011). The article also determines the date of the census and a local referendum to decide whether to become a part of the KRI or stay under control of the central government on 31st December, 2007 (Romano 2010). Now in 2020, the deadline has long passed. Normalization has not been completed, a national census was postponed four times and no particular procedures were taken by any side (Kane 2011). As discussed in the previous lines, the disputed territories are also a significant reservoir of crude oil.

Finally, it is important to mention the reaction of the central government in Baghdad to the Kurdish referendum of independence in September 2017. As mentioned above, Baghdad responded sharply but not surprisingly. Iraqi security forces (ISF) backed by the Popular mobilization forces (PMF) retook a significant part of the disputed territories, gained by the Iraqi Kurds in their fight against ISIS in 2014 (BBC 2014). In addition, Baghdad banned international flights to the Kurdish airports in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and made pressure on the Kurds to hand over crossing points and border controls (Palani et al. 2019b). Another punitive measure was cutting the Kurdish share of federal budget from 17 % to 12 % (Al Monitor 2017).

8.1.2. Surrounding countries - Turkey, Syria, and Iran

The second group is formed by the surrounding countries - Turkey, Syria and Iran, which share borders with the KRI. The geography divides the Kurdistan region of Iraq under the Turkish and Iranian influence and “their close existence” determines political and economic ties with the central governments as a most significant regional partner (International Crisis Group 2015). Governorates along borders with Turkey (Duhok, Erbil) are enjoying more of Turkey’s influence than other governorates (Sulaymaniyah, Halabja). Several major border crossings are not only for personal purposes but also for importing goods from Turkey. Ibrahim Khalil’s transition is considered to be the most frequent. On the other hand, Iran has a considerable influence in governorates Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. Nevertheless, the reliant and reconciled KRG is a great ally for these states which have their own domestic problems with the Kurds (Romano 2015).

As far as Syria is concerned, there is not that many resources dealing with the KRG - Syrian relations. This actor has been chosen nonetheless to gain more information about this relationship and optionally find out how this relationship is understood by inhabitants of the KRI.

8.1.3. Regional political parties - PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, ENKS and KDPI

To understand the geopolitical aspect the Middle East and the position of the KRI in it in full detail, this thesis also includes the description of the relations between the KRG and other Kurdish political parties in this region, namely PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, ENKS and KDPI. The PKK, PYD, and PJAK are members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), pursuing the ideology and goals of the PKK. The KCK was founded in 2005 with the main goal of “making

an umbrella” above these parties and in order to unify ideology, principles, and organizational structures proposed in Öcalan’s confederation model (Gunes, Lowe 2015, Kaya, Lowe 2017)³¹.

8.1.3.1 The relations between the KRI, Turkey, PKK, and HDP

Turkey has played a very significant role in the history of the Iraqi Kurds and their way of self-determination, and its currently a key partner for the KRG. In 1923, the new Turkish state was born, preaching an idea of one nation, one religion, one people, establishing Turkish nationalism. Creation of the new Turkey carved out the Turkey Kurds from the Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Led by Mustafa Kemal “Ataturk”³², the founder of Turkey, the new system ignored the existence of the several minorities living there, including the Kurds (Chittenden 2016). Turkey statesmen always feared that national claims of the Turkish Kurds could lead to destroying the Turkish territorial integrity. For this reason, Ankara crushed three great Kurdish uprisings and refused the recognition and self-determination of the Kurds and labeled them as “mountain Turks” (Gunter 2015). All the more interesting was an unprecedented step when Turkey supported creating the no-fly zone called safe haven in 1991 and even participated in the patrolling airspace (together with US, Great Britain, and France) above it (McDowall 2004).

The complex relationship between the KRG as a whole and Turkey can be explained by three factors: firstly, the mutual economic relationship, including the energy ties, secondly the cooperation between Turkish government and the KRG, using the Iraqi Kurds as a mediator in the peaceful solution of Turkey’s Kurdish problem with PKK, thirdly, the KRG’s position and possible leverage in northern Syria, where PYD (affiliated with PKK) operates.

These factors are further described one by one. The economic ties between Turkey and the Kurdistan region of Iraq started in the 1990’s when the no-fly zone safe haven was established. The Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and development party, AKP), having come to power in 2002, changed its policy toward Kurds and the Kurdish question. With the growing Turkish economy, seeking new markets and new energy sources, it has seen the KRI as a very possible choice (Pusane 2016). From another point of view, the Iraqi Kurds are shown as those able to “cross” their borders and negotiate on the international level, since the oil and gas sector of KRI expanded (Stansfield 2013). Some authors declare that the KRG is a highly

³¹ The KCK also involves the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (Partî Çareserî Dîmokratî Kurdistan, PCDK) which was established in 2002 in Iraq (Kaya, Lowe 2017).

³² Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, also called Mustafa Kemal Paşa. The name Atatürk means in Turkish “Father of the Turks” (Britannica 2020).

dependent entity, focusing on export of oil and gas to Turkey. To uphold this argument, it is important to bring up the fact that the KRG does not have any alternative route to export oil (Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014). The dependence on Turkey's export route is absolute because other alternatives are represented only by a small-scale oil delivery by tanker trucks to Iran and federal Iraq (Roberts 2018). Moreover, from 2009 to 2013 there was a rise of the Turkish companies functioning in KRI, approximately from 485 to 1,500, bringing a lot of Turkish brands to the region. According to Natali, around 1,150 foreign companies, which is more than a half of all the companies operating in the KRI, are owned by the Turks (Natali 2013, cit. in Handy 2018, p. 185). Mutual need led to the expansion of energy relations between these two "entities" and by 2013, the KRG became Turkey's third-largest export market, with \$5.1 billion exports in that year (Pusane 2016). Turkish investors are also playing a significant role in the development of the hydrocarbon's resources in the KRI (Roberts 2018). While Turkey needs the KRG's oil to become more independent on Russia's and Iran's imports³³, developing into an energy hub in the region, the KRG needs to find export sources for its outlets. Turkey seems to be a very good choice for the KRG exports due to geographical proximity and large oil and gas sector in Turkey, which can be therefore a good market. In addition, the Kurdish gas sector is also an attractive field of interest for Turkey, because it is cheaper in comparison with other gas resources from exporting countries (Yilmaz 2017).

To fully reflect the energy ties between the KRG and Turkey, it is also important to mention the position of the central government in Iraq, which cannot be underestimated. In 2014, Erbil and Baghdad agreed on the supplies of 550,000 barrels of oil per day from the KRG which should be exported through SOMO to Ceyhan. To meet this requirement, Baghdad has promised to send 17 % of Iraq's federal budget to the KRG in monthly payments. This agreement was suspended in June 2015 when the KRG began sending oil directly to Ceyhan without Baghdad's approval, presenting an argument that the central government is not paying the exact amount of the federal budget (Pusane 2016). Further, contracts in the KRI are often more attractive and advantageous for IOC's, using the production-sharing contracts instead of technical service contracts (TSC's) used by Baghdad. Some argue that the close relations between Ankara and Erbil will also push Shia-dominated Iraq under Tehran's influence (Yilmaz 2017).

³³ The KRG oil and gas revenues started to represent an ideal venue for the growing Turkish economy, becoming an alternative source for the country's increasing need for energy supplies (Pusane 2016).

The form of the mutual cooperation between Turkey and the KRG is also highly influenced by another Kurdish political party operating in the region - the PKK. Despite the different ideologies of the Iraqi Kurdish and Turkey Kurdish parties, there is a field for diplomatic negotiations between KDP, PUK, and PKK. While the KDP and PUK ruling system is based on tribal and clan principles, the PKK professes the ideology of Marxism-Leninism mixed with the ideology of Maoism (Kolářová 2006, Helfont 2017, Amalyan 2018). Their relationship, especially before the war with ISIS, can be described as a passive intolerance³⁴, mostly blaming each other in the rhetorical way (for example, KDP and PUK blamed PKK for provoking Turkish military attacks against Kurdish civilians in Iraq). Nevertheless, the KRG remains tolerant of the presence of PKK's camps in northern Iraq (Amalyan 2018). Leaving aside passive intolerance, there always will be a contrasting vision of the Kurdish future and competing over pan-Kurdish leadership between KDP and PKK (Gunes, Lowe 2015).

The Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) was formed in 1978 at the Istanbul Law Faculty, as an organization representing the Kurdish proletariat in the fight both in the class struggle and the national resistance against Turkish oppression. In the 1960's, Kurdish nationalism was supplemented with another socio-economic element shifting the Kurdish parties to the left side on the Turkish political spectrum. The main reason was a growing gap between rich western "center" (mainly Istanbul and Ankara) and poor periphery of eastern Anatolia. The whole situation was exacerbated by systematic exploitations of the poor parts of the country, which shifted some Kurdish political groups and parties (and Turkish also) closer to the Marxist-Leninist ideology (Kolářová 2006, Delanoë 2015). From 1984 to 1999, the PKK has entered a violent separatist war against the Turkish state, with more than 40,000 dead on both sides. The conflict also caused the displacement of over two million people (Sommer 2005, Delanoë 2015). PKK (and also affiliated PYD) symbolize an existential threat for Turkey and its territorial integrity. These clashes ended with the capture of the leader of PKK Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya in 1999³⁵.

As written above, since the political party AKP came to power, there has been a turnout in the Kurdish question in Turkey and the surrounding countries. In 2009, AKP introduced

³⁴ Alliance of the KDP and PKK lasted only until the year 1987 after the KDP refused to accept violent practices of PKK. For the same reason, the PUK ended its cooperation with PKK. Official statements were posted only by Iraqi Kurdish parties, not commented by the PKK. Another reason why the mutual collaboration ended was the PKK did not want to have anything in common with the US, which was started to view as a possible partner for KDP and PUK in the 1990s (Kolářová 2006).

³⁵ With the military assistance of the United States of America (Sommer 2005).

a new campaign with the goal to integrate the PKK militants into the Turkish society, which the prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself called Kurdish opening, with the understanding that PKK cannot be beaten by military power (Bilgin 2015, cit. in Sarikaya 2018, p. 82, Çandar 2009. cit. in Kaválek, Šmíd 2018, p. 10). This step was accompanied by “coming down from the mountains³⁶”, a gesture of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of PKK members (Kaválek, Šmíd 2018). The main Turkish opposition parties, namely Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) and Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) accused Erdoğan of establishing peace with the Kurds and strongly opposed to this process for “abandoning Turkey’s traditional policies towards Kurds in general, and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq in particular” (Sarikaya 2018, p. 83). The peace process between PKK and Ankara failed after the steps of the marginalization of the Kurdish organizations affiliated with PKK which accompanied the Turkish policy of the Kurdish opening. This was followed by a calm period, occasionally interrupted by armed clashes between these two parties. PKK is presented as a political party, having its own forces of the People’s Defence forces (Hêzên Parastina Gel, HPG), conducting armed and military operations (Kaya, Lowe 2017).

The role of the KRG in this conflict cannot be underestimated. Now it is important to remember that KDP and PUK prefer and cooperate with foreign partners at different levels and partially with different interests. For KDP, Turkey is the most significant ally in its foreign relations. In 2011, the Turkish prime minister Erdoğan paid a visit to the Kurdish Region for the first time (Yilmaz 2017). Two years later, in 2013, there was an important meeting between Masoud Barzani, president of the KRI, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Diyarbakir, which was seen as a breakthrough in Turkish-Kurdish relations. Another meeting took place in 2017 when Kurdistan’s flag flew right next to the Turkish and the Iraqi. This move was again condemned by Turkish nationalists, namely MHP (Lindenstrauss, Cluzet 2017).

Involvement of the KDP in peace processes has made it a mediator in the conflict. The position of the Iraqi Kurds can be used for possible peace talks with PKK, and also have a possible impact on the Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria³⁷. The Kurds are not seen as a homogenous group by Turkish politics when the KRG is presented as a supportive institution and PKK as their historical as well as contemporary enemy (Gunter 2008; Natali 2013b, cit. in

³⁶ The term “coming down from the mountains” is connected with the peaceful solution of the Kurdish question in Turkey (White 2015, cit. Kaválek, Šmíd 2018, p. 17).

³⁷ Discussed in the following chapter “8.1.3.2. The Relations between KRI, Syria, PYD, and ENKS”.

Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014, p. 13). For this reason, Ankara policymakers and politicians addressed Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq with a request for assistance in overcoming obstacles in negotiations with the PKK³⁸. Ankara also wanted to fulfill the vacuum, created by the US withdrawal in 2011, in order to prevent a possible expansion of Iran into the area.

The position of the PUK towards Ankara is also highly influenced by PKK. PUK and PKK are close allies, deepening ties that boost the counterbalance to KDP-Turkey influence in the region (International Crisis Group 2015). After 2013, PKK moved closer to PUK, Iran and Russia. PKK also helped PUK during the civil war between KDP and PUK in 1994-1998, which deepened the intra-Kurdish struggle between KDP and PKK. Undoubtedly, PUK has more close relations with PKK, which can be justified by its higher popularity in PUK-dominated areas than in Erbil and Dohuk, controlled by KDP (Kaválek, Mareš 2018). Thus, PUK ties on PKK and Iran can influence the overlook of the Turkish side on this Iraqi Kurdish political party, strengthening connection with the KDP.

Another important actor, worth mentioning, is the People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP). HDP is a Kurdish left-wing political party, founded in 2013 as the political wing of Peoples' Democratic Congress. The HDP party, with its leader Selahattin Demirtas, is together with PKK another actor defending the political and cultural rights of the Kurds in Turkey (Delanoë 2015). However, either of these actors uses a different way to improve the position of the Turkish Kurds. When PKK started to return to the Turkish cities, it established the political platform of HDP. HDP is a left-wing oriented political party representing the rights of Turkey's Kurdish minority. Although HDP and the PKK are not very close at present, many Turks see HDP as the political wing of this, by some "terrorist" organization (Grigoriadis 2016).

In June 2015, HDP called and lobbied for possible support for the PYD during their fight with ISIS, not only on domestic but also on the international level. There is a strong connection between HDP and PYD; the first one is trying to uphold the other on a political level. HDP for example criticized the Turkish government for blocking aid to the YPG and also issued several statements to justify and legitimize Kurdish autonomous rule in Rojava (Kaya, Lowe 2017).

³⁸ The direct clash between the KDP and the PKK is unlikely because the Iraqi Kurdish population is opposed to the brother-killing violence between the Kurds and therefore it would not be a good political step on the part of the KDP (Amalyan 2018).

Since the announcement of the Kurdish referendum of independence in September 2017, the mutual relationship has changed. The possible establishment of the Kurdish state along Turkish borders is unimaginable for Turkey's foreign (and also domestic) policy. Turkey saw this step as a direct threat to its own territorial integrity. The Turkish reaction was even stronger when the KRG revealed that the referendum will include Kirkuk which is to a large extent inhabited by a minority of Turkmens (Yilmaz 2017). It also sidelined the mutual agreements from November 2013 which included Turkish support for KRI oil exports via the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, participation by a state-backed enterprise of the Turkish Energy Company, in 13 exploration blocks in the KRI and construction of a new pipeline to enable the KRI to export as much as one million b/d³⁹. The suspension of the joint agreements was accompanied by rhetorical statements by the Turkish president who proclaimed that: *"It will be over when we close the oil taps, all (their) revenues will vanish, and they will not be able to find food when our trucks stop going to northern Iraq."* (Roberts 2018, p. 104). Despite all the obstacles, Turkey remains the KRG's economic gateway to the rest of the world (Pusane 2016).

8.1.3.2 The relations between the KRI, Syria, PYD, and ENKS

To fully understand the geopolitical picture of the KRG's foreign policy, dominated by KDP and focused on cooperation with Turkey, it is meaningful to describe other levels of alliances between the KRG and actors operating in Syria. The expert literature does not provide as much information about the KRG-Syrian relations as about the KRG and other regional actors. The position of the Iraqi Kurds towards Syria is usually reflected in the way of the relationship between Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish political parties.

Syrian Kurds are probably between 1.1 and 1.5 million, living mainly in the northern part of the country. The Syrian Kurds were (as well as Iraqi Kurds) highly discriminated in the past, especially under the reign of Hafiz Al-Assad, who came to power in 1971 (Anderson 2019). Various degrees of ethnic discrimination like denial of Syrian citizenship to an estimated 200,000 Kurds, exclusion from the echelons of the military, government, and other institutions, or non-recognition of the Kurdish language are just a few examples of the Kurdish position in Syria in the second half of the 20th century. Syrian territory also played a significant role in the evolution of the PKK, providing shelter for Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK following the Turkish military takeover in 1980 (Yildiz 2004). Support of the PKK's leader lasted until

³⁹ Barrels per day.

Turkey directly jeopardized Syria over its backing of the PKK. Under these threats, Syria ousted him from the country, which led to his arrest in 1999 (Spyridon 2015, cit. in Chittenden 2016, p. 34). However, the Kurdish question has persisted to the present day and still has a strong echo in the state-to-state affairs, to some extent influential in Syrian-Turkish relations (Halhalli 2018).

The Syrian Kurdish political parties form two groups. The first one professes the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan and thus is close to the PKK. The best known is the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD). PYD was established in 2003 as an offshoot of the Turkish PKK (Gunter 2015). After a year of Syrian civil war, Assad's forces withdrew from the north of the country. To fulfill the vacuum, PYD occupied three provinces in northern Syria: Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin and declared the autonomous republic of Rojava⁴⁰. PYD unified these cantons under its control and named it Rojava, representing Western Kurdistan (Gunes, Lowe 2015).

As discussed above, PYD is closely aligned with the Turkish PKK, having its own armed forces - People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). The close affiliation of the PKK and PYD, the conflict between Turkey and PKK could be potentially entering a violent phase (Paasche, Mansurbeg 2014). For example, in July 2015 PKK encouraged the PYD success in Syria, which ended the ceasefire and peace process between PKK and Turkey. In late 2015, PYD merged with other groups, especially Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, and Arabs under the organization called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This multi-ethnic armed force played a significant role in the war against ISIS, also backed by the world super-power of the United States of America (Chittenden 2016). This role is widely discussed in chapter "8.1.5. ISIS as a *Game-Changing* Actor in the Regional Relations".

In addition, strengthening the position of the PYD and its linked forces make KDP more engaged. Gaining control over this territory caused tensions between PYD and Syrian Kurdish political parties in alliance with the KRG (Sarıkaya 2018). Kurdish political parties, close to Masoud Barzani, are the second type of Kurdish political group in Syria. In 2011, Masoud Barzani, president of the KRI, encouraged the idea of Syrian Kurdish groups, not affiliated with the PYD, joining together under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Congress (KNC).

⁴⁰ Currently is this area, multi-ethnic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) administrated and Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) a political arm of SDF (Rudaw 2020b, North Press agency 2020).

KNC is therefore composed of the twenty Syrian Kurdish parties and factions, ideologically closer to the KDP and PUK, instead of PYD and PKK. The main purpose of this organization was to increase the KRG's leverage in northern Syria among the Syrian Kurds (Delanoë 2015, Gunes, Lowe 2015). One of the Syrian Kurdish political parties, opposed to the PYD, is the Kurdish National Council in Syria (Encumena Niştimani ya Kurdi li Suriyeye, ENKS), which accuses the Democratic Union Party of cooperating and making secret deals with the Syrian regime. ENKS is a close ally of the Barzani KDP in Iraq, receiving support from it. Through this support, KDP tries to gain more leverage in northern Syria, attempting to strengthen the counterbalance of PYD (Halhalli 2018).

In 2012, KNC and PYD signed the power-sharing agreement (called Erbil agreement) about spheres of influence in northern Syria. The signing should also lead to the creation of the Kurdish Supreme Committee (Desteya Blind a Kurd, KSC). However, this agreement was never implemented (Pusane 2016). After joining forces against ISIS, the relations between PYD and the KRG improved strikingly. Positive development was brought upon a new agreement (Duhok agreement), re-engaged sharing power between PYD and KNC in the north of Syria. According to Bekir Halhalli, "*the Kurdish politics in Syria is shaped by deep rifts and competition between the PYD and ENKS*" (Halhalli 2018, p. 47). The role of the KRG and its approach towards PYD (directly or through KNC) is highly influenced by its relationship with Turkey (Gunes, Lowe 2015). The KRG will try to achieve its goals and leverage in northern Syria, supporting ENKS within the organization KNC, and on the other hand, protecting its relations with Turkey. That is the reason why it should be seen in the broader context of the regional alliances and divergences and politics.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, relations between the KRG and Syria, possible alliances, or divergences between Damascus and Erbil are unknown. However, with regard to Syria's response to the referendum, Reuters reports that the Syrian foreign minister strongly rejected this act (Reuters 2017a). It, therefore, remains unknown to what extent they communicate with each other and what they cooperate on. Some of the attitudes of Iraqi Kurds towards Syrian government are mentioned in the analytical part of this thesis.

8.1.3.3 The relations between the KRI, Iran, KDPI, and PJAK

Iran is the fourth country with a populous minority of the Kurds (between 8 and 10 million), currently representing about 10 percent of the Iranian population (USIP 2020). Iranian Kurds inhabit the north-west part of the country, bordering with eastern Iraq, southern Turkey, and

Azerbaijan, in particular the Iranian provinces of Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan and Ilam (USIP 2020).

The economic strength of these provinces cannot be compared with the Iraqi Kurdish governorates. The Iranian part of Kurdistan is characterized by unemployment, social problems, and drug abuse. The “smuggling economy” helps the border towns to survive. Iranian Kurdistan is marginalized from the rest of Iran, disconnecting the Iranian Kurds from the rest of the country (Yildiz 2004). The marginalization of the Kurds in Iran took place in the past, either during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi or later in the Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Gunter 2003). In comparison with the Kurdish issue in other above-mentioned countries, the Kurdish aspirations in Iran are more static (Gunes, Lowe 2015).

The history of the Iraqi Kurdish political parties is linked to Iran to a large extent. After fleeing from his house arrest, charismatic and powerful Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani found his temporary refuge in Iran. His arrival in the country is connected with the creation of the Republic of Mahabad, which was supported by the Soviet Union (Ünver Noi 2012). Despite the fact that the republic existed only between January and December 1946, before destroyed by the Iranian regime (Sinkaya 2018), it was the first self-declared Kurdish entity that ever existed. Moreover, this place gave birth to the Iranian Kurdish party KDPI/PDKI (Hîzbî Dêmuokratî Kurdistanî Êran, Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan) from which the Iraqi KDP was created. KDPI, together with another Iranian Kurdish political party Komala, symbolized the official platform which represented the Kurdish aspirations in Iran (Yildiz 2004). The fact that the Iranian regime sees the KDPI as a possible threat can be underlined by an act of double bomb attacks against KDPI's offices in Erbil in December 2016, of which Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were accused (Lindenstrauss, Cluzet 2017).

During the Iraq-Iran war (1983-88), the Iraqi Kurds played a role of an important ally of Iran against Saddam Hussein. This alliance led to a crucial campaign of the Iraqi government and between February and August, more than 200,000 Kurds were killed, and hundreds of Kurdish villages razed to the ground. This process called the Anfal campaign, where the chemical weapons against civilians were used, and left a rough scratch in the thoughts and history of the Iraqi Kurds (Robson 1996). This long period of repression led to the establishment of a no-fly zone safe haven in northern Iraq with the purpose of protecting Iraqi Kurds.

In 1988, Iran was the first country that opened a consulate in the KRI (Romano 2015). Iranian influence in the KRI dominates in the eastern part of this entity, which is under control

of the PUK. There are several reasons for cooperation between PUK and Iran. Firstly, there is a spatial proximity of these actors. Secondly, this alliance stems from historical events. For example, both parties collaborated during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's, helping each other in the military operations on the Iraqi territory. Iran was also supporting the PUK, when KDP peshmergas were upheld by Iraqi soldiers and drove them out of Erbil during the Kurdish civil war in the 1990's (van Wilgenburg, Fumerton 2015). Thirdly, the connection between PUK and Iran tries to counterbalance the close ties between KDP and Turkey. In the geopolitical and historical broader perception, the antipathy between the KDP and Iran dates back to the 1960's and 1970's when the then-KDP leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani began bonding with Israel. These connections last to the present days. KDP's alliance not only formed with Israel but also with Turkey and the US, moving it away from Iran and its way of seeing the world.

Tehran uses the PUK for gaining more leverage in the KRI and the rest of Iraq. For this purpose, both parties also unite Kurdish peshmergas and Shia militias loyal to Iran in Diyala province (van Wilgenburg, Fumerton 2015). However, Tehran arms are trying to use other (already mentioned) Kurd political parties in the region. For example, the Iranian government is using PKK (and also PYD with its YPG forces) to gain more leverage in Turkey's territory and to tilt the regional political balance. The PUK, representing and supporting Iran's goals, has a similar position vis-à-vis these Kurdish political parties (International Crisis Group 2015). Iran is also massively investing in the KRG's "green zone", financing universities, and supporting the exchange of the students between the KRG and Iran. The Iranian goods also dominate in the "green zone", coming from the border gates of Bashmakh, Parviz Khan, and Haji Omran. The religious closeness is also one of the ties between PUK and Iran. In 2016, the Iranian consulate and the Kurdish religious scholars, supported by an official of PUK, organized a "Shafi Conference" in Sulaymaniyah. In addition, this event was visited by Ayatollah Khamenei's personal envoy (Ali 2017).

There is another Kurdish political party worth mentioning. The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK) is considered to be a sister party of the Turkish PKK. As discussed in the chapter "8.1.3. Regional Political Parties", PJAK is a part of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), pursuing the ideology of the Öcalan's PKK. PJAK was founded in 2004 in Iran as an armed guerrilla movement, currently operating in the eastern Kurdistan or Rojhilat (Gunes, Lowe 2015). The ambition of this political organization is the democratic autonomy for all people in the region, playing on the string of Kurdish nationalist agenda and lobbying for a greater political and cultural autonomy for the Iranian Kurds (Delanoë 2015). According to Kaya and Lowe (2017), PJAK would try to find some

compromise with other Iranian Kurdish political parties, namely KDPI or Komala⁴¹, as it has done PYD with KNC. The position of PJAK on the domestic field is hampered by rejection by a part of the Iranian Kurdish population, because of its violent methods and “triggering increased repression by the Iranian state” (Kaya, Lowe 2017, p. 283).

The attitude of KDP and PUK towards PJAK is not deeply covered in the expert literature, as it is in the case of PKK or PYD. Thus, these ties are partially reflected in the analytical part of this thesis⁴².

There is, however, also the other side of the coin. PJAK, like PKK, is present in the Qandil mountains located in the KRI. Military camps serve as a base for the fight with Iranian (optionally with Turkish) regime. The guerrilla attacks are aimed at Iranian security forces and officials, whereas PJAK forces are estimated at 3,000 militants (Sinkaya 2018). Attendance of these political and military groups complicates the relationship between the KRG and Iran (or Turkey) which have different views on the problems of military intervention against PJAK and PKK inside the KRI. However, there are undeniable and occasional airstrikes and artillery bombardments on the position of both mentioned groups in the Qandil mountains. Nonetheless, large-scale ground military intervention in KRI is unlikely (Yildiz 2004). Despite PJAK initiation of a ceasefire with the regime in 2011, the central government continued with its armed operations in Kurdish-inhabited areas (Sinkaya 2018).

As for the position of Turkey, the point of Iran’s view was strongly against the Iraqi Kurdish referendum of independence. The independent KRI could be a driver for the Iranian Kurds (which in Iran is something around 10 million) to aspire for its own autonomy or, for Iran’s worst case, its own Kurdish state in Iran. Tehran also warned Barzani that any independent Kurdistan is a red line for the central government (Ali 2017).

8.1.4. The relations between the KRI and other regional actors - Saudi Arabia and Israel

The third group is composed of Saudi Arabia and Israel. Although these countries have no common border with the KRI, involving them in the analysis is important due to the impact of

⁴¹ Komala (the Organization of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan) was a Maoist party “consisting of educated urban young people trying to organize peasant resistance against feudal landlords” (Sinkaya 2018, p. 842).

⁴² The relationship between KDP, PUK and PJAK is not fully examined topic. Therefore, there is an incentive for further possible research.

the complexity of regional and global relations and foreign policy of the KRI. For example, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region has a clear purpose of gaining regional dominance. The rivalry between Sunni and Shia leading countries has an influence on other countries in this region, at most then on Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Both leading countries are trying to gain allies in central governments, military (or paramilitary) groups or civilians. As discussed in the introduction, the Sunni-Shia conflict does not origin so much in religious diversity, but it is more about competing over the regional geopolitical dominance.

The presumption is that Saudis are more interested in KRI politics because the leading party KDP is not so bound to the Iranian regime as it is in Baghdad⁴³. Secondly, the religious needs to be mentioned as in both units, Sunni Islam dominates in the KRI as well as Saudi Arabia. Such as the United States, Saudi Arabia sees Iraqi Kurds as a medium, partly neutralizing Iran's influence in the region. According to their views, the KRI (to be more specific and exact - the KDP) can be considered as a possible partner out of so-called Shia Crescent, which is uniting areas under the Iranian influence, namely Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon (Liga 2017). For Saudis, the Kurds represent the Sunni element in Shia-dominated Iraq (Charountaki 2016).

Some decades ago, the KRI was not the priority of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, as it was for Turkey and Iran. But nowadays, Riyadh is becoming more active in Middle East foreign policy, including Iraq. Saudis balance their policy, deepening relations with Erbil and shifting away from Baghdad. The regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is putting Iraq and also the KRG's foreign policy between two blocks of pressure (Ghahriyan 2018). Now we know that KDP and PUK have their own different preferences about the regional partners, and PUK being closer to Iran. These circumstances pushed KRI and foreign policy to the position of "making balance" between individual actors. It shall be noted here that there are historical ties between those actors - there was an exchange of many letters between King Faisal and Mullah Mustafa Barzani in the second half of the 20th century. After 2005, the mutual relations were based on sporadic visits between political leaders of both countries. For example, there was an official visit of President Masoud Barzani to Riyadh in March 2007, and President Barzani's visit to Riyadh in November 2015. The importance of the KRG in fighting with ISIS increased the activity of Saudi Arabia in the KRI, opening a Consulate on 23rd February, 2016

⁴³ Before 2003 Iraq had antagonistic relations to both the countries - Iran and Saudi Arabia. After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraq became a battlefield between these two regional powers (Ghahriyan 2018).

(Charountaki 2016). According to Marianna Charountaki, the KRG-Saudi Arabia relations, or in wider context the KRG-GCC relations, depending on the “great deal on Riyadh’s willingness to come closer to Erbil. A GCC-Kurdish rapprochement does not clash with the interests or international alliances of either Riyadh or the GCC states as a whole.” (Charountaki 2016, p. 212). Saudi Arabia, as well as other regional and global actors, was against the Kurdish referendum of independence and urged Kurdish leaders to call it off (Ghahriyan 2018).

Israel has a very specific position in the Middle East due to historical, political, and cultural circumstances. The relation between the KRG and Israel has to be seen in its complexity. According to Ofra Bengio, it is also necessary to differentiate the mutual ties between these on a personal level (“people to people”⁴⁴) and official relations between the KRG and Israel government (Bengio 2014). As seen by Saudi Arabia, the KRG presents the Sunni (and non-Arab) buffer against Iranian influence in the region, making disunity inside Shia Crescent, for Israel too.

There is also a connection based on Israel’s demand for oil which is flowing from the KRI through Turkey, specifically via the Taq-Taq oil field, connected to the Kirkuk⁴⁵-Ceyhan pipeline. During the fight with ISIS, exporting oil helped the KRG to fulfill its war efforts and also Israel oil demands (Liga 2017). On the other hand, there are also voices against possible cooperation between the KRG and Israel. For example, fifty years ago, the Iraqi defense minister Abd al-Aziz al-Uqayli (1965-1966) accused the Iraqi Kurds of trying to establish a “second Israel” in the Middle East region (Liga 2017). Currently, some Arab media report that Kurds are following the steps of “Yahudistan” or “Land of the Jews” (Bengio 2014). As the author Aldo Liga writes in his article “Israel and Iraqi Kurds in the Transforming Middle East”: “there is no official relationship between the two nations, they have been pursuing a discreet relationship at the government and business levels since the 60s.” (Liga 2016, p. 3). There are also some historical Israeli-Kurdish relations worth mentioning. Before the state of Israel was created, Iraqi Kurdistan hosted about 120,000-130,000 Jews. After the establishment of the new Jewish state, most of them moved there. The rest of the Jews (probably 5,000) followed this majority after the reprisals from the Iraqi state (Sachar 2000, cit. in Minasian 2007, p. 19). Iraqi Kurds are for the Jews an ally as a non-Arab actor in the Middle East. This security policy is part of the “peripheral strategy” determining the cooperation with non-Arab

⁴⁴ By “people to people” is meant a non-institutional connection between the citizens of both entities.

⁴⁵ Kirkuk is often referred by the Kurds as their Jerusalem, which is by some a very interesting comparison (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019).

states and players. In the second half of the 20th century, Mossad together with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Iranian Shah's intelligence agency National Organization for Security and Intelligence (Sāzemān-e Ettlā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar, SAVAK) backed the Kurds against the central government in Baghdad (Marshall, Scot, Hunter 1987, cit. in Minasian 2007, p. 23). However, after the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, these actors changed their geostrategic (and geographical) position, operating against Iran from the KRI. In addition, there are also reports that the CIA and Israel are supporting KDPI against Iran and also providing training to the Kurdish peshmerga fighters. These news were denied by the Kurdish officials, mainly by Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani (Zhigalina 2006, cit. in Minasian 2007, p. 24).

8.1.5. ISIS as a “game-changing” actor in the regional relations

The Islamic State as a non-state actor in Iraq and Syria and its increased activity in the Middle East since 2014 filled the vacuums of various types - from the spatial to ideological one. Its presence significantly stirred up regional and global relations⁴⁶, as well. ISIS challenged not only the Iraqi Kurds but also, for some time, turned dysfunctional relationships into temporary alliances. For example, the Iraqi (and Syrian) Kurds took advantage of it and have strengthened their position on a regional scale and become more visible on a global scale. Some authors even consider ISIS to be one of the main factors having changed the Middle East political map (Gunter 2015). After Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former leader of ISIS, proclaimed a neo-caliphate in the Great Mosque of Mosul, it aroused concerns of regional governments, non-state actors as well as of international middle eastern players (Delanoë 2015).

ISIS attacked both rival Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria - KDP and PYD (PKK) and thus brought them together. Mutual cooperation helped them to overcome the possible existential crisis. In August 2014, the PKK fighters from Qandil mountains together with PYD militants from Rojava helped the KRG peshmergas⁴⁷ to defend Erbil (Gunter 2015, Gunes, Lowe 2015). Turkey Kurds with their armed forces also operated in Iraq, cooperating with the Yezidikhan Protection Force (Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanêor, HPÊ) to defend the Yezidi religious sect inhabiting Sinjar and helping them to defeat ISIS (Helfont 2017). PKK fighters

⁴⁶ The attitude of the global actors towards ISIS and the role of the KRG in the war against this self-declared state is discussed in the individual relevant chapters focusing on the relations between KRG and global actors, namely the United States of America, Russian Federation and China.

⁴⁷ The PKK cooperated mainly with PUK forces against ISIS (International Crisis Group 2015).

successfully beat the terrorists. After this local victory, there were occasional armed clashes between pro-KDP and pro-PKK, both trying to maintain control over Sinjar. These disputes ended with peace negotiations between both parties (Amalyan 2018).

On the other hand, Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga, with the approval of the KRG parliament and president of the KRI and Turkey, supported the Syrian Kurds in defense of the town of Kobani in 2014 (Smith 2018). The complexity of regional relations is also evident in this case when Turkey allowed the KRG peshmerga to cross its territory to help the Syrian Kurds (Sarıkaya 2018). Turkish troops, present the Bashiqa army base in Nineveh governorate, also collaborated with the KRG's peshmerga against ISIS forces in northern Iraq (Handy 2018).

The existence and presence of Islamic jihadists also changed relations between Erbil and Baghdad. As jihadists started threatening the southern parts of Iraq, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Shiite world's paramount leader, called for establishing armed forces which should have consisted of thousands of Shiite volunteers. Their task was to be prepared for defending not only the area under Shia control, but also fight against Sunni extremism ideology (International Crisis Group 2015). These forces, named Popular Mobilization Forces, also helped ISF to retake a significant part of the disputed territories with Kirkuk from the Kurdish hands after the referendum of independence in 2017. Iran is also backing the armed forces of PMF, which might be seen as a growing Iranian influence in Iraq. Although PMF is not under the direct control of Baghdad, it uses state institutions and resources (Caetano 2019).

There were quite different attitudes of the state actors towards ISIS. While Turkey allowed jihadists to use its own territory as a transit route to Syria, Iran was the first country that helped Iraq and the Kurds to fight against them⁴⁸ (International Crisis Group 2015). The alliance between Tehran and PUK helped the weapon and intelligence support of PUK peshmergas from Iranian side and strengthened their positions in Kirkuk, Diyala and Salaheddin governorates. As for KDP, the ISIS attack on Sinjar and Makhmour governorates forced Barzani to military help, too (International Crisis Group 2015).

Turkey wanted to use Islamic radicals to support Assad's opposition and weaken the Syrian Kurds. Despite that Turkey is an important ally of the KRG, it did not directly⁴⁹ help the Iraqi Kurds and its armed forces to fight Islamic terrorists (Gunter 2015). According to the

⁴⁸ The Shia militias and Iranian advisers were indirectly helped by the US airstrikes targeting ISIS positions in Iraq and thus the US and Iran became an unlikely ally against radical Islamists (Krieg 2016).

⁴⁹ Turkey set aside 25 tanks and around 150 troops to train Kurdish peshmerga and Arabs to fight against ISIS (Pusane 2016).

famous Kurdish journalist Hiwa Osman, the arrival of ISIS challenged the KRG-Turkey relations: “...When they [ISIS] attacked Erbil the night of the 15th of August, as Iraqi Kurds, and I was one of them, I was expecting the first plane that hits ISIS would be a Turkish plane. I was expecting that the first phone call of help that the President [Masoud Barzani] receives would be from President Erdoğan.” (Pusane 2016, p. 25).

Nevertheless, the successful actions against ISIS brought the Iraqi Kurdish peshmergas more international attention and thus secured more international support, namely from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany⁵⁰ (Smith 2018). It shall be added that the Iraqi Kurdish fighting against ISIS contributed to the further division of KDP and PUK, which is explained below in the analytical part of this work in chapter “9.1.1. Relations between KDP and PUK”.

8.1.6. Global actors - the United States of America, the Russian Federation and China

Global actors have focused on Middle East since the 19th century. European countries and the US during the world wars and later the US and Russia during the Cold War were dominating in this region. World War I brought a secret accord between Great Britain and France, known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, signed on 16th May, 1916. The agreement divided the vanishing Ottoman Empire to British and French spheres of influence and largely shaped a political map of the Middle East, forming the basis for new countries, namely Lebanon, Mandate Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq (International Crisis Group 2015, Delanoë 2015).

There is no doubt that these global actors had great shared information about newly created countries lying in this region. Great Britain and France, which were dominating global powers in the Middle East, were replaced by the US after World War II. This fact was, for example, confirmed after the Suez Crisis in 1956, when these “former powers” were forced to withdraw from the area not only by Washington but also by Moscow, confirming the bipolar division of the world (Florensa 2014). This thesis aims to understand the involvement of three global actors in the Middle East, respectively in the KRI. These actors are the United States of America, the Russian Federation and China. Two of them have historical ties with the Middle East countries, especially from the period of the Cold War, namely the US and Russia, which has also its own geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the KRI⁵¹. These actors also played

⁵⁰ These states were major supporters of the Kurdish forces in their fight against Daesh (Smith 2018).

⁵¹ The Middle East region is also often taken as a field where Russia can gain influence against the US (Dannreuther 2012).

a significant role in the war against ISIS or the Syrian civil war, which was the event that largely influenced Iraq and Syria. The third actor, China, is a growing superpower on the global scale, representing a new approach and possibility for the governments in the Middle East.

The US's deeper engagement in the Middle East countries started after World War II when American President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, the founding monarch of Saudi Arabia. The meeting took place on the USS Quincy in February 1945 and secured the American protection and military cooperation with Saudi Arabia exchanged for exploitation and oil supplies to the US through global markets. Another example of, especially US, involvement in the middle eastern countries, was the orchestrated of the coup in Iran; the CIA arranged a replacement of Mohammed Mossadegh. Mossadegh, prime minister elected by democratic principles, was deposed and the power was given back to the hands of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (Jones 2012). Other interventions in the region, like the USSR's encroachment in Afghanistan in 1979, the US participation in the First Gulf war in 1991 or the US invasion in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, led to a serious crisis in the Muslim and especially in the Arab world (Florensa 2014). In addition, the frustration of these long-term wars influenced the domestic issues of the Cold War global superpowers. The fall of the USSR was to some extent influenced by Soviet expansionary foreign policy (not only in the Middle East). On the other hand, the two massive US invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq led to a systematic reduction of American influence in the Middle East, especially under the Obama administration. Further, "US or western ground troops will always be seen as foreign invaders in the Middle East, even if their objectives are humanitarian in nature" (Walt 2014, cit. in Krieg 2016, p. 109).

These circumstances also created a "global actor presence" vacuum which is nowadays to some extent fulfilled by Russia and China. Russia's steps are nowadays seen as a great return to the Middle East since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thus, there is presented a misguided approach of current Russian policy in the Middle East through the Cold War paradigm. Of course, Russian policy is largely focused on anti-western actors such as Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, or Hamas, but also increasing connections with traditional western and US allies like Israel, Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Generally, Russia achieved a good relationship with every state in the region and also with major non-state actors, except Al Qaeda and ISIS, and became one of the key Middle Eastern actors (Katz 2018, Russel 2018). Moscow's flexibility and standing on every side underlined the Russian foreign opportunistic policy (Blank 2018). When other global actors, such as the US, make a mistake, Moscow is ready to represent an

alternative for the Middle Eastern countries⁵². It also does not bring on the table the problems of violating human rights, which is a frequent dispute between the US and the middle eastern governments. For example, human rights concerns forced Washington to withhold from the arms sales in Bahrain and Egypt (Wolf 2011, Gordon, Landner 2013, cit. in Wasser 2019, p. 5). Shortly afterward, Russia took the opportunity and offered arm deals to these actors (Meyer, Arkhipov 2011, Dorrel 2014 in Wasser 2019, p. 5).

The Russian efforts also largely stem from the prevention of possible radicalization of the Russian Muslim minority and the threat of North Caucasus secessionism (Dannreuther 2012). To build a bridge between Europe and the Islamic world, Russia uses the Chechen government led by Ramzan Kadyrov (Blank 2018). Last but not least, it is necessary to mention the economic interest in the region, mostly in the oil and gas sector. Russia sees the Middle East as a new market for not only its own exports but also for the investments and share in oil and gas extraction. In addition, these achievements helped Russia to undermine Europe's endeavors to diversify its own natural gas supplies to become less dependent on the gas supplies from Russia (Blank 2018).

The third important global actor is China. China's position in the Middle East has increased since the 1990's, which is closely linked to Chinese state-owned companies, namely the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the China National Petrochemical Corporation (Sinopec), and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) which were searching for a new oil and gas market. The energy demands have grown rapidly since the 1990's, which makes Middle East's resources more and more important. Beijing also started to build up ties with Saudi Arabia, which is a key ally of the US in the Middle East. Further, China has taken advantage of the anti-Saudi moods in Washington's political institutions after the 9/11 attacks. Other Chinese significant partners in the Middle East are Iran and Iraq (Leverett, Bader 2006). As mentioned previously, the Arab states, often disappointed by the US foreign policy, started turning their looks to East, seeing China as a new possible strategic partner. China is nowadays representing another geostrategic actor, for many middle eastern countries, trying to diversify their alliance even because of unpredictable and illegible American foreign policy during the Trump administration.

Looking at similarities, autocratic regimes dominating in the Middle East have a lot in common with the Chinese ruling system that does not criticize their human rights violations.

⁵² However, Russia is not trying to replace the US as a regional guarantor of stability and dominant power (Wasser 2019, Kaválek, Sommer 2019).

In addition, China is strengthening its ties by pointing to common historical relations from the Silk Road era, investing in the infrastructure and maximizing the economic gains through the Belt and Road Initiative (Zambelis, Gentry 2008, Wasser 2013).

8.1.6.1 The relation between the KRI and the United States of America

The Middle East region has a great, strategic location for the US. The position of the region is also based on historical events when the Middle East was a field of proxy struggles between the US and the USSR during the Cold War (Anderson 2019). According to Senén Florensa, American foreign policy in the Middle East has three basic elements: “a guaranteed oil supply and the stability of the crude oil market; the US interest in the Jewish population of Palestine followed by the security of the State of Israel as of 1948; and the general stability of the Middle East area” (Florensa 2014).

The United States of America is a significant ally for the Kurds and their existence, even though American foreign policy and rhetoric are often turned against them. The mutual relationship is led by the world hegemon, using the Kurds for its purposes and goals. Although the Kurds need the US by their side, Kurdish leaders do not trust American policies⁵³ (Noack, 2014, cit. in Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019, p. 308). The historical relationship between the US and Iraqi Kurds can be dated to the second half of the 20th century. During the Cold War, the American foreign policy saw the Iraqi Kurds as an “instrument” against the USSR and Ba’ath regime leverage in the region. This shift in US foreign policy was made in 1972 when Iranian Shah and American president Nixon made several meetings in Tehran (Anderson 2019). The backing of the Kurds by Iran and the US against Saddam’s regime changed quickly in 1975 to betrayal when U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger gave an “unspoken” approval of the attack to the Kurds when US supported the Iranian sign of the Algiers Agreement. This agreement ended a conflict between Baathist Iraq and Iran and pushed the Kurds to the Baathists hands. After Saddam’s attack, paradoxically almost 200,000 Kurds fled to Iran (Barton 2018, Erlich 2017, cit. in Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019, p. 314). The United States remained silent in other events when the Kurds were suppressed or marginalized. For example, during the process of “Arabization” when nearly 250,000 Kurds were relocated during the 1970’s or when the Iraqi regime used chemical weapons against the Kurds in Anfal campaigns in 1988 (Caetano 2019).

⁵³ This argument is also mentioned in the analytical part of this thesis.

After defeating Saddam Hussein in the Gulf war in 1991, a lot of revolutions broke out in Iraq, especially Shia in the south of the country and Kurds in the north, which was encouraged by the US. The US wanted to use the Kurds to weaken Saddam, realizing that Saddam is a threat and no longer a guarantee of stability in the region (Jamal 2018). Seeing both of the uprisings, the Bush administrations began to fear the possible breakup of the Iraqi state and distanced from the backing of the Kurds (Caetano 2019). Thus, the rebellion was crushed, and after that, the Iraqi army turned its look to Kurdish inhabited areas.

Great repressions of Kurds have ended after the intervention of Coalition led by the US and creation of no-fly zone called operation “safe haven” north of the 36th parallel⁵⁴. Thanks to this step, the Iraqi army left the Kurdish area and the Kurds could focus on the creation of their own autonomy area, which was fulfilled by Kurdish institutions, political parties, security forces and services for the inhabitants. The no-fly zone stayed active until 2003 when the Kurds played an important ally during the US invasion in Iraq⁵⁵ (Anderson 2019). During the 1990’s the US managed their policy towards Kurds, seeing them, once again, as a possible ally against Saddam Hussein who was seen as too unpredictable and dangerous for the US Middle East policy as it is discussed above.

Starting to prepare the alliance with the Iraqi Kurds against Saddam, the US policy turned to the interests of the Iraqi Kurds. For example, the Clinton administration was the mediator in the KDP-PUK civil war, which ended in 1998 by signing Washington Peace Accords (Romano 2010, Jamal 2018). The same year, the US Congress supported the “Iraq Liberation Act” which had the goal of deposition of the Saddam regime in Iraq, which was also in the interest of the Kurds, after the long suppression of the Kurdish people by Saddam’s regime (Jamal 2018). The American invasion in Iraq, through the US-led coalition, brought significant changes not only in the Iraqi Kurdish question but also in the whole Iraqi political system. Planning the invasion, the US needed to cross over with more than 60,000 soldiers on Iraqi-Turkish border

On the 23rd of March, the US invaded Iraq from Kuwait, under the name of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Kurdish peshmerga helped American soldiers to occupy and control the north (Anderson 2019). The PUK peshmergas also cooperated with the US special forces to search

⁵⁴ The second operation which should provide humanitarian aid by land and by air to the refugees named “Provide Comfort”. It brought 15,500 tons of relief supplies (Yildiz 2004).

⁵⁵ The Bush administration believed that the Iraqi government sponsored terrorist organization Al Qaeda and used chemical weapons against civilians (Anderson 2019).

and destroy Ansar al-Islam (small, radical, Salafi group linked to Al-Qaeda) nearby Halabja by the Iranian border (Romano 2010). Turkey played an important role here. At the beginning of the Iraqi invasion, Turkey wanted to send its own troops inside KRI. Turkish minister at this event declared: *“The Turkish army will enter the region to prevent an exodus, to prevent the Kurds from establishing a free Kurdistan, to prevent them entering Kirkuk and Mosul, and to protect the Turkomans. We don’t want a clash between Turkey and the Kurds, and for that reason, we are sending lots of troops to the region as a warning. The US request to use Turkish military bases as an entry point to Iraq was refused by Ankara.”* (Yildiz 2004, p. 106). But the Iraqi Kurds disagreed. They were concerned that Turkey soldiers would never leave the KRI claiming control over Mosul and Kirkuk cities⁵⁶. After that, the US stopped negotiations with Turkey and continued consulting with the Kurds (Yildiz 2004, Jamal 2018).

After the liberation of the big cities, the US put pressure on the Kurdish peshmergas to fall back to the Kurdish territories (Barton 2018). Nonetheless, the Kurdish support of the US army during the invasion of Iraq was another turning point in American-Kurdish relations. Creating a “new Iraq”, the Kurds were invited to the negotiation table to debate the new Iraqi constitution. In 2005, there was an official recognition of the new president of KRI Masoud Barzani by G. W. Bush himself. This narrative was supported by Condoleezza Rice, former US Secretary of State, which landed in the KRI on her first visit to Iraq in 2005 (Jamal 2018). The US presence in the KRI held some degree of certainty for the Kurds, so it was logical that they became concerned about the future of Iraq when the US troops started to withdraw in 2007 (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019). These concerns were underlined by the Baghdad actions as soon as the Americans announced the “exodus” of their armed forces.

In 2014, after ISIS took power in many areas inside Iraq, the US returned to the KRI with more armed forces. The US and the Kurds were striking together in the war against ISIS when American air support helped Iraqi Kurdish peshmergas and Syrian Kurds as YPG⁵⁷ to

⁵⁶ Anyway, Turkey was ready with 70,000 troops on the Turkish-Iraqi border to intervene Iraq, if Kurdish peshmerga occupies Kirkuk and Mosul for a long time, arguing that they wanted to protect the Turkmen minority (Yildiz 2004).

⁵⁷ American foreign policy saw YPG as an ally in the war against ISIS. However, YPG is a military wing of the PYD, which is often considered as an offshoot of the Turkish PKK. PKK is on the US list of terrorist organizations. The different views of these regional non-state actors making the relationship between the US and Turkey worse (Barton 2018, Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019). As it is written earlier in this thesis, in late 2015, YPG merged with other groups (Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, and Arabs) under the organization SDF, which gained a significant international support from the US.

retook large areas from the Sunni jihadists. In 2014, the US president Barack Obama helped the Iraqi Kurds and secured American interests in the region by authorizing large-scale bombing of ISIS positions. Another reason for the American action was that the minority of the Yazidis and Christians, located in the Nineveh governorate in Iraq, was largely onslaught by ISIS⁵⁸. Thus, the humanitarian level was added to the economic, pragmatic, and military levels of the US foreign policy against ISIS. In that time, the Kurds were seen as the only possible choice and stable actor in Iraq that could push back and defeat ISIS. Thanks to that, Iraqi Kurdish peshmergas were supported in logistics, receiving, and using US weapons and vehicles (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019). The US soldiers also directly trained the Iraqi Kurdish peshmergas to be more successful in their fight against Sunni extremists operating in Iraq and Syria (Krieg 2016). In addition, the US-led coalition helped the peshmergas retake 25-30 % of the area held by the radical Sunnis organization (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019).

The American and Kurdish counter-terrorism units made a new Joint Operation Center which also contributed to a significant improvement in mutual relations. In 2016, both parties signed a memorandum of understanding speaking also about direct military cooperation (Hamdil 2017, cit. in Hama, Ali 2020, p. 126).

Despite the US support to the Iraqi Kurds in the war against ISIS, American foreign policy opposes the independence of the KRI, which could lead to the breakup of Iraq, and thus it would bring a greater instability of the Middle East (Gunter 2015). In 2014, the US asked the Iraqi Kurdish leaders to postpone the referendum, because, at that time, the fight with ISIS was in a “full swing”. However, in 2017 the US did not support the referendum either, standing up for an idea of united Iraq (Caetano 2019).

Looking at the KRG in the geopolitical larger picture from the “American eyes”, it can be seen as a trustworthy and pro-US ally in the unpredictable, unstable, and “wild” Middle East region. The geographic position is quite important as the region has a common border with Iran is close to Syria and Turkey and relatively close to Saudi Arabia. The energy potential of the KRI is of great importance, as well, which can host a lot of IOCs including the American ones, namely ExxonMobil or Chevron drilling for oil and gas (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019). In addition, both sides have to maintain the balance among various actors. While the KRG has to have good relations with the US and also with Iran, which is located closer and is also an important regional ally of the KRG, the US has to make a balance between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey, an

⁵⁸ The Obama decision to strike against ISIS was largely based on the need to stop the genocide of the Yezidis, which were surrounded and massacred on Mount Sinjar (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019).

ally within NATO⁵⁹ (Rafaat 2007). Uniting the Iraqi Kurds (KDP and PUK administrations), which are one of the most significant and visible non-state actors in the region, could have more influence on the US foreign policy in the Middle East in the future (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019).

Needless to add that the Americans classified the Kurds in Iraq as “good Kurds” and the Turkish Kurds as “bad Kurds” and categorized PKK as a terrorist organization (Stoni, Bin Yatiban 2019). The mutual relations between the US and PKK affiliated Kurds in Syria - PYD is discussed above. Nevertheless, generally, it can be said, that the US policy toward the Iraqi Kurds is quite different from the policy dealing with the Syrian, Turkish or Iranian Kurds.

8.1.6.2 The relation between the KRI and Russian Federation

The Russian foreign policy towards the KRI is based on economic interests, especially in the energy sector as Moscow is expanding its own gas requirements. As written in the chapter “8.1.6. Global actors - the United States of America, the Russian Federation and China”, Russia sees the Middle East region serves as a new market for its own economic policies and efforts. Thus, the KRI with a huge reservoir of oil and gas represents a logical choice for the Russian foreign energy policy. The Russian involvement in the KRI energy sector is discussed below.

Support for the Kurds came from the Soviet Union soon after World War II⁶⁰, when in 1946, the autonomous Kurdish republic Mahabad was created. This republic lasted only one year, and after the Soviet withdrawal⁶¹ from the Iranian territory, Tehran destroyed this Kurdish short-term dream of its own country. After the Iranian army retook the territory, the Kurdish leaders had to flee to the Soviet exile. Mullah Mustafa Barzani used the “Soviet shelter” and spent 12 years there (Delanoë 2015). After the establishment of the new Iraqi regime in 1958, when general Abd al-Karim Qasim and his group of Free Officers overthrew the Hashemite monarchy, Mustafa Barzani returned back to Iraq (Yildiz 2004). The historical ties, underlined

⁵⁹ For example, the step when Trump supported YPG against ISIS pushed Turkey more to the East. Ankara made a deal with Russia, purchasing an anti-aircraft missile system S-400. These acts deepen the chasm between the US and Turkey within the NATO alliance (Barton 2018).

⁶⁰ During the process of Sovietization of the Caucasus, the Kurds of Soviet Azerbaijan were inhabiting the area between Soviet Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast. This entity was known as a Red Kurdistan, however, it had not formally autonomous status and was not supported by the Soviet Azerbaijani government (Shakarian 2017).

⁶¹ The Soviet Union withdrew from Iran after Moscow gained an oil concession from the western countries (Shakarian 2017).

by Mustafa Barzani's presence in Moscow, laid the foundation for the Russia-Kurdish friendship that continues to the present. After 2000, Russia was one of the first countries that opened a Consulate General in Erbil (Delanoë 2015).

According to Salim and Murtuzalieva, "the KRG claims that its oil reserves are 45 billion barrels, which, if true, is "the sixth largest" oil-rich country" (Salim, Murtuzalieva 2019, p. 1097). In addition, the KRI is gas-rich, having "100-200 billion cubic feet of natural gas without oil" (Gunter 2012, cit. in Salim, Murtuzalieva 2019, p. 1097). Seeing the large deposits of oil and gas in the KRI, the Russian energy companies became more active in the region. In 2012, Gazprom Neft started to develop two oil blocks, namely Shakal and Garmian and is also operating in Halabja ever since (MERI 2018). Gazprom Neft, together with other Russian state-owned energy companies, Lukoil and Bashneft are also "acting" in the Iraqi fields (Tass.com 2017, cit. in Salim, Murtuzalieva 2019, p. 1103). The presence of the Russian energy companies both in Iraq and the KRI shows a clear example of Russian "ideological blindness" and strategy of "making friends with everybody"⁶² (Blank 2018, cit. in Karasik, Blank 2018, p. 168).

However, Russian growing influence and dominance in the KRI's gas sector are attributed to another Russian energy company: Rosneft. Between 2017 and 2018, the KRG made several deals with this company and "Rosneft decided to invest up to \$5.3 billion in the KRI, including pre-financing Kurdish oil in 2017-2019 period (\$2.1 billion, February 2017), investing into the gas pipeline to Turkey (\$1 billion, September 2018), overtaking 60% stake of the KRG's pipeline to Turkey (\$1.8 billion, October 2017), and developing five oil blocs (\$0.4 billion)" (Kaválek, Sommer 2019, p. 91). It shall be noted here that the long-standing disputes between Erbil and Baghdad over the shares and exports of oil in KRI to some extent shaped the KRG's relations with Moscow. The signing of the contracts and making the decision to cooperate with Rosneft was largely influenced by the KRI's financial crisis, which was caused by Baghdad's refusal to send part of the federal budget to the KRG. In addition, the KRG's financial debt has been deepened by the war with ISIS, corruption, and the reduction (and instability) of global oil prices (Salim, Murtuzalieva 2019).

⁶² On the one hand, Russia is using its historical ties from Soviet-era and building partnerships with "traditional Soviet allies", namely Egypt, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen (Makahleh 2018 in Karasik, Blank 2018). On the other hand, Russia is also creating bridges with pro-western countries in the region like Israel or Saudi Arabia (Dannreuther 2012). The ideological blindness of the Russian foreign policy is underlined by the fact that these sides (states) have often competing agendas.

The willingness of Moscow to sign a deal with Iraqi Kurds not only saved Erbil from bankruptcy but also provided Russia another area for its gas policies. Further, in greater geopolitical picture, Russian involvement in the KRI's gas sector is undermining European efforts to diversify gas supplies, with the aim to become less dependent on Russian natural gas⁶³. On the other hand, Russia is trying to build a monopoly on the European gas market, which is approaching thanks to the agreements with the KRG (Borshchevskaya, Wahab 2018). Thus, Moscow can also have more leverage in the long-standing disputes over the Eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Kaválek, Sommer 2019).

During the fight against ISIS, Russia was not the great ally that would supply military assistance to the Kurds like the US or other western countries did. However, both sides cooperated on operational intelligence and Moscow also provided some humanitarian aid (Delanoë 2015). The interesting point is that Russia began to perceive that the Iraqi (and also Syrian) Kurdish need to help fight ISIS only after the Russian-Turkish crisis in 2015 when Russian fighter Sukhoi Su-24 was shot down by Turkey. The ties between Russia and the Kurds lasted even after the amelioration of the relationship between Moscow and Ankara (Shakarian 2017).

The Russian attitude towards the Kurdish referendum of independence in September 2017 was more reticent than that of other regional (Turkey and Iran) or global (US) actors. Nevertheless, it did not support the independence of the Iraqi Kurds. Moscow “respected the national aspirations of the Kurds” and promoted the “peaceful dialog between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurds” (Shakarian 2017). The Russian “more neutral” diplomatic rhetoric regarding the Kurdish referendum differed considerably from the US position, which was strongly against it. Giving more flexibility to the Kurds, Moscow strengthened its position in the KRI, when the Iraqi Kurds felt betrayed by the West's refusal of the possible KRI's independence (Borshchevskaya, Wahab 2018, Blank 2018). However, Russia is trying to protect the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria (Delanoë 2015).

The attraction of the KRI for Russia brought the Iraqi Kurds another possibility in which they can diversify its own foreign policy and alternative to the United States and also balance the American influence in the region. The mutual relationship between Erbil and Moscow is built on historical events, which are dated to the period shortly after World War II. The Russian footprint in the KRI lies mainly in the energy gas sector and shows the clear example of the

⁶³ The same approach is used by Turkey, which is trying to reduce the dependence on Russian natural gas by signing agreements with the Iraqi Kurds (Delanoë 2015).

Russian Middle East policy with gas as one of the key elements. In addition to KRI, Moscow is cooperating and coordinating with other gas-rich countries, namely Iran, Qatar, Algeria, and Libya (Chaika 2007; Grivach 2007; Weir 2008, cit. in Dannreuther 2012, p. 553). The two first-mentioned countries - Iran and Qatar are, together with Russia, three top world producers of the liquefied natural gas (LNG). Controlling and managing the gas routes can strengthen not only Russia's geopolitical position in Europe but also in the whole world (Makahleh 2018, cit. in Karasik, Blank 2018, p. 76).

8.1.6.3 The relation between the KRI and China

Chinese policy towards the Middle East is driven by its oil efforts, because China with its growing economy, became the world's largest oil importer⁶⁴. More than 50 % of the Chinese imports come from the Middle East region (Arango, Kraus 2013). The beginnings of the relationship between the Kurds and China date back to the end of the 1950's when China backed the Kurdish rebellion against the central government. Over time, however, China has converged with the central government, backing Saddam Hussein with weapons, which were also often used against the Kurds. After the deposition of Saddam's regime, China once again turned back towards the Iraqi Kurds, realizing that the autonomous KRI possibly hides enormous deposits of oil. After 2005, the mutual relationship was strengthened by visits of the Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani, to China. Further, in 2014, the Chinese general consulate was opened in Erbil (Global-e 2018).

As discussed in the chapter "8.1.5. ISIS as a *Game-Changing* Actor in Regional Relations", the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish fighters were by most international actors seen as very proactive, taking the prominent role in the fight against Sunni extremism. China was one of these international players, worried about ISIS threats to occupy Xinjiang and using Chinese Uyghur jihadists against China (Lin 2014). There also have been reports speaking about Chinese volunteers joining the YPG militias (Ni 2015, cit. in Lin 2016, p. 3).

China's growing interest in the KRI can be seen in several cases. For example, in 2009, Chinese energy Sinopec bought Addax Petroleum (Swiss Canadian oil company) which had extensive investments in the KRI, specifically operating in the Taq Taq field (Lin 2016, The Diplomat 2017). China also took the opportunity after the withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq in 2011, institutionalizing a partnership with Baghdad and focusing on the oil industry

⁶⁴ According to the International Energy Agency, Chinese demands of oil will rise up to 10 million barrels per day by 2030 and 80 % of this oil will be imported (Leverett, Bader 2006).

agreements in 2015 (The Diplomat 2017). In addition, Chinese economic interests in the region are projected in the political rhetoric.

Although Chinese statements were against Kurdish call for independence, securing its own domestic separatist tendencies in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, Beijing could find out that independent Kurdistan (of Iraq) would be the best for the Chinese national interests (Lin 2016). As Nurettin Akçay wrote in his article “An Independent Kurdistan: Will China Overhaul its Non-intervention Policy?”: “While opposed rhetorically to separatist views, China, the world’s largest oil importer, is trapped between pragmatism and non-interference as regards Kurdistan’s independence because of this geostrategic feature of the Kurdish region” (Global-e 2018, p. 2).

9. Analyzing the data

It shall be pointed out that the narratives on the KRI's foreign relations of individual respondents serve to verify the information from theoretical chapters of this thesis, to answer the main research questions and to meet the goals of this thesis. Interviews are also used to find out some information that cannot be found in the expert literature. Last but not least, it serves as one of the peaks of triangulation (together with media and professional literature) which can describe the examined case in reality.

During the process of analysis of the data collected from the interviews in the KRI, it is needed to capture the essence of the answers on individual questions. To underline the mainstream of the answers, the similar discourses will be given higher weight. The analysis focuses on the narratives contained in the individual answers of the respondents. To hold the same line, the structure is the same as in the theoretical part of this thesis, gathering the geographically close actors into the same chapters. For example, the KRI relations with Turkey are supplemented by "third actors": PKK and HDP, as they have a great impact on this country. The analysis shows configuration of KRI's foreign relations with individual actors, making connections with other important units in the region. The presentation of the whole mosaic is included in the summary and conclusion.

The analysis is trying to describe the structure and anchor the position of the political institution of KRG, its attitudes and policy towards surrounding countries, global actors active in the region and other Kurdish political parties. There is also a great influence of geography in these relations, which is described in individual chapters of this thesis. Furthermore, the analysis is also focused on attitudes of individual actors towards the referendum of independence, a theme that primarily colors the relations between the KRG and Baghdad and secondarily between the KRG and other actors.

This part is used to supplement the information, analyzing the interviews. At the same time, it tries to highlight both the general trends that appear in the answers and to record the so-called outliers in the form of completely different opinions on the topic under discussion. The aim is both to explain the basic relationships among selected actors and to introduce the occasional nuances that appear in these relationships. It shall be pointed out here that questioning while working in the field is a very subjective research.

It is also important to mention that in the analysis of the interviews, the maximum effort was made keep the fragments of the interviews in context, and at the same time, to make sure that equal representation of all answers is maintained.

Further, the trends used in the analysis shall be explained. As written in the chapter “5. Methodology”, the answers are not sorted according to the Likert scale built on qualitative measures of the relations among chosen actors. The relationships are thus captured by selecting the most numerous trends in the responses, with an effort not to forget the significant deviations to illustrate the situation. The time frame of research is subordinated to the frequency of occurrence of individual responses.

Excerpts of interviews are marked in italics and at the end always marked with the interview number and the name of the respondent. If the respondent wished to be listed anonymously, the number is followed by the letter A. Among the respondents, there were also two non-Kurds participants, one as a researcher on civilian protection issues and former academic lecturer at local university, and the other on the position on Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kurdistan, Hawler.

Only four of the twenty respondents were willing to give their full name. First of them is dr. Aziz Barzani, a political history teacher and expert on the KRG relations with the US, Turkey and Russia. The second is Mr. Tomáš Kaválek, director of the Prague Centre for Middle East Relations (PCMR) of CEVRO Institute, who was in the KRI at the time of the research. The third was Kamaran Palani, PhD., a student at Leiden university and a research fellow at MERI (Middle East Research Institute), who teaches political sciences at the Salahaddin university in Erbil. The fourth was Mr. Falah Mustafa Bakir, KRG’s Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Additionally, the meaning of some designations shall be defined. Firstly, by Erbil is meant the official political institution of the Kurdistan Regional Government that is dominated by the KDP. The relations of PUK with selected actors are also explained through this institution and are supplemented by separate paragraphs devoted to this political party.

9.1. Internal issues and relations with Iraq and regional actors

9.1.1. Relations between KDP and PUK

“The KRG is supposed to do diplomacy in the term of as a government, but what happened is that the KRG was monopolized by KDP and PUK. So, we have separated diplomacy to all of these countries. Right now, what I see is that Saudi Arabia and Turkey somehow, they are

applying their agenda with KDP and Iran now is applying its agenda with PUK. That's the big picture and it's clear for everyone.” (017 A).

Before analyzing external or “foreign” policy of the KRG, it is necessary to focus on internal dynamics of this political institution, mostly represented by the two largest and strongest Iraqi Kurdish political parties KDP and PUK. The geographical division into the “yellow” and “green” zone have its roots in establishment of PUK in 1975 deepening during Kurdish civil war in 1990's and also from 2014 during the fight against ISIS. According to the political analyst Tomáš Kaválek, there is an irreplaceable role of clans and tribes and their relations across the whole KRI and beyond. *“In 1975 PUK originated from KDP. So, why did they fall apart? One of the main reasons was that many people within the KDP did not agree with the dominance of the Barzani clan, they did not like the way they (KDP - author's note) were going. There were voices orientated on the leftist tradition (at that time very popular among some of the Kurdish groups, for example PKK - author's note). And so, they fell apart. The Talabani clan is just as important in the PUK side in the green zone, they have a lot of control over it in terms of security forces and so on in terms of economy, access to oil and gas etc. The Talabani clan has everything under control there. Nevertheless, in the yellow zone the KDP clan play a much bigger role when you compare it with the PUK and the Talabani clan influence in the green zone.” (016 Tomáš Kaválek).*

Some of the answers which can be marked as “outliers⁶⁵” are dealing with the KDP - PUK division and their endeavors to unify their administrations after the mentioned Kurdish civil war. *“After 2003 they attended to unify the two administrations. In 2005 they reached the argument called Strategic argument that's PUK and KDP. The core of the argument was to institutionalize their relations with regional powers, with Baghdad and share powers internally and also in Baghdad. So, the argument was to really unify the two administrations. So, they created the new government.” (018 Kamaran Palani).* Despite efforts to unify both legislations, there are spheres which remained under the control of the dominant parties. *“...they (KDP and PUK - author's note) still have significant independent control of the security sector, so that's Asayish security but also the army peshmergas and control of their border.” (018 Kamaran Palani).* Despite efforts of unification, to play a stronger role in the newly created Iraq, the

⁶⁵ The answers of Tomáš Kaválek and Kamaran Palani deal with this topic in more detail. In order to complete the relations between KDP and PUK developed in the theoretical part, these answers are given more space in this part of this thesis.

parties began to distance themselves. The gap has widened by the establishment of a new Kurdish party called Gorran in 2009. *“The parameters in the Iraqi constitution from 2005: the KRI, which has one representation, its government, which has its prime minister and its president, etc. There has been a positive shift in this for some time. However, the political problems between the KDP and the PUK began, essentially with the formation of the Gorran Party, in 2009. In 2009, they already had quite decent election results. Gorran consisted essentially of people who had split off from the PUK.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

To explain sentences at the beginning of this chapter about division of KDP and PUK during the fight against ISIS from 2014, the main causes of this process shall be explained. Completely different orientation of foreign policy of Iraqi Kurdish political parties played its role in the war against ISIS, especially on the psychological level, where both parties relied on other foreign assistance as well as material. *“...while the KDP relied heavily on the Americans and in some ways on the Turks, the PUK began to rely very heavily on Iran. Western states, as well as other members of the coalition, who supported (in the form of instructors, weapons, ammunition - author’s note) the fight against IS, supported the Kurdish security forces. The problem, however, was that the supplies went through KRG, means KDP, which dominates here. For Gorran, who has no armed forces, this was irrelevant. So, the KDP took a lot more than it had. Of course, they wanted to give more to their units. Because, as you know, the peshmergas are, despite their best efforts, fulfilling the parameters of party militias rather than some armed component of a semi-state unit. And so, the PUK got much less than it had, which contributed to further hostility and cooling of relations between the two parties.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

All of these mentioned circumstances subdivide and isolate Iraqi Kurdish political parties from each other. Not only does it weaken their position in Baghdad, but it even pits them against each other in this political space. *“I think that the relations have improved, there is a supposedly technocrat prime minister and technocrat president, the Kurds are back in Baghdad with full force, with employees and with ministers. Actually, the two Kurdish parties who were behind the referendum, were actually at some point fighting who gets the president and the best ministries in Baghdad. It shows you that Baghdad has reclaimed the center of power, center of gravity. The Iraqi constitution doesn’t say from which political party should be the Kurd to the president post. KDP for the first time wanted to take this presidency spot from PUK. They fielded Fuad Hussein as a candidate for president. He is the finance minister now. But Barham Salih from PUK won.”* (012 Shivan Fazil). The main perspectives and

attitudes of the Iraqi Kurds (represented by the KRG) towards Iraqi central government are discussed in the following chapter.

9.1.2. The position of the KRG in Iraq

“The Kurds never felt themselves as part of Iraq, partly because they have their own language and dialects of Kurmanji and Soranji. It’s something like the difference between English and Welsh.” (002 A).

This chapter focuses on describing attitudes of the Iraqi Kurds, to be more specific a political institution of KRG⁶⁶, towards Iraqi central government in Baghdad, represented by the prime minister who is according to muhasasa (which determines the political positions of Sunni, Shia, Kurd, and minorities - see page 21) since 2003 always Shia. At the time of this field research, Adil Abdul-Mahdi⁶⁷ was the prime minister of Iraq. It should be remembered that, as the response to the Kurdish referendum of independence, the ISF and PMF retook almost all of the disputed territories and the central government banned Kurdish airspace in October 2017 (as written on page 38) and thus the relations have fallen to the point zero. The first part of this analysis focuses on answers of individual interviews primarily including the “normalization process” of the relations between Erbil and Baghdad, represented by the new prime minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi. The second part concentrates on the main topics between the KRG and Baghdad, more precisely, on what the respondents see as the main topics between these two entities.

After the appointment of the new prime minister and president of Iraq, one of the interests of the Kurdish parties was to improve the relations with Baghdad. *“Iraq has a new prime minister (Adil Abdul-Mahdi - author’s note) and new president (Barham Salih - author’s note), so both sides are pushed to change a communication. They have to leave what happened in 2017 behind. Now they are trying to focus on rebuilding their relationship. There is a lot of pressure on both sides to common dialog.”* (006 A). *“And KRG’s relations with Iraqi*

⁶⁶ Which is (as it is mentioned in previous lines) dominated by KDP. However, PUK is represented here as well. For example, the deputy prime minister of KRG is Qubad Talabani from PUK (GOV.KRD 2020). The detailed description of individual differences of KDP and PUK towards Baghdad is not is not the purpose of this chapter and is therefore not included here.

⁶⁷ Adil Abdul Mahdi has resigned after one of the harshest days, when about 40 protesters were killed and after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called for the new Iraqi government (BBC 2019). His successor, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, became prime minister in early May 2020 (The New York Times 2020).

government is only good at the moment, because of the Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdul Mahdi. Because he is considered to be very friendly to the Kurds and the Kurdish issue. It's because I think the relationship is not institutionalized, it's based on a personal relationship between him and KRG leaders.” (014 A). “Therefore, we have a constitution between us and Baghdad, we believe now, we have established a new era in our relations and if there is political will in Baghdad to make it work, it can work because federalism is a system of governments that respects and recognizes our identity, characteristics of the region, but also we are empowered to have some of the powers that are there. So therefore, the Kurdistan region has got its own institutions, presidency, government and parliament. It has its own peshmerga forces, which are regional guards recognized in the constitution and to be partners in Baghdad. But unfortunately, so far this partnership has not been implemented fully as required. Now we have this opportunity, if this opportunity works and if we can bring about genuine partnership, definitely that will make a huge difference.” (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir). Needles to add, the normalization of mutual ties was largely built on the agreement that the KRG will send oil to Baghdad and the central government will send salaries and an agreed portion of the Iraqi federal budget. Nevertheless, while Baghdad began sending money, the KRG did not fulfill its part of the agreement. “Baghdad now sends salaries, but KRG doesn't send oil to Baghdad. “(020 A). “Baghdad still sends money, despite the fact that the Kurds simply do not sell the oil, through SOMO, as the agreement says. However, the question is how long it will take. Simply, no other agreement that would address this in the long run has yet been reached. But the relationship is comparatively better than with Haider al-Abadi, as without debate.” (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

As mentioned above, the second part is directed to the main topics between Erbil and Baghdad⁶⁸. For most of the respondents the oil (and gas) management between Erbil and Baghdad was the resonant problem. For more clarity, the discrepancy is regarding the sale of Kurdish oil. The problem of exporting oil is detailed in the theoretical part of this thesis, in the chapter “8.1.1. Position of the KRI in Iraq”. The oil management is related to the agreement between both parties which is described above. “*At the moment for example there are talks that KRG should be giving 250,000 barrels of oil per day to the Iraqi government, and in return Iraq should be sending salaries to the KRG employees.” (014 A). “The main problem is buying oil. KRG wants to sell our oil by itself. But because we are part of Iraq, the central government*

⁶⁸ What do you think is the most important theme to deal with this government? What should be talked about? What are the main topics between Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad? These questions are focused on the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad, operating with most important themes that these two actors would negotiate.

wants to have this right.” (008 A). “It’s the right of KRG to have natural resources. KRG and KRI would be powerful entity if the problem of oil and resources would be solved.” (010 A). “It’s very important for KRI to export oil on its own.” (009 A). There are also more negative perspectives on this issue. “We’ll never deal with the government. They have their own rules. KRI didn’t have salaries. Any or less salaries from 2016. Now it’s better, but it’s not the best. People thought that it would be better after the referendum, but it was worse.” (011 A). “They are not sending us our money according to our rights. Even if we are good and do everything they want. They are sending us less than they should. That’s why our government is not sending oil to them.” (002 A).

Another topic that appears with a higher frequency is the budget (and salaries), connected with the previous one, more precisely, the cutting of the KRG’s budget by Baghdad as a geopolitical tool for making pressure on this autonomous entity. On the other hand, one of the reasons for reducing the budget for the Iraqi Kurds is their unwillingness to send its own oil to SOMO according to the agreement. “Another topic is budget. Baghdad cut its budget in the last three years. In 2016, 2017 and 2018 it was terrible. People almost died in poverty. But now it’s getting better.” (009 A).

The geographical issue of the disputed territories is also widely included in the answers of individual interviews. Unsolved governance over these areas, with Kirkuk⁶⁹ as “the heart” of this problem, creating no-control zones, which are often used as a refuge for many radical Islamist organizations⁷⁰. “As I said, it’s not only about Kirkuk, it’s also about other provinces like Salahadin, Diyala, Ninawa, because the disputed territories lie all over these areas. As for the well-being of all the people living in these areas, not only for the Kurds. There is a lack of investment and policy of marginalization by both governments for these areas. Since 2003, not since ISIS. The reverberations of these marginalization and lack of investment is the displacement within these provinces where people move from one area to another. For example, they can move from the countryside of the province to the centers of districts. And that brings demographic change because it can be Arabs, Turkmen, Kurds or Yazidis” (012 Shivan Fazil). “Security cooperation is very important in the disputed areas because as a result of the vacuum that was created, ISIS was able to benefit. And in some areas, it’s about 30 km, and that’s too much. So therefore, the peshmerga and Iraqi army have to cooperate with each

⁶⁹ Among others Ninawa, Kirkuk, Salahadin, Diyala, Wasit and part of the Erbil governorate. In addition, some of the areas like Sinjar or Khaniqin district play a significant strategic role for both sides (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

⁷⁰ ISIS can be used as a most known example.

other, it means that we will have a safe, stable area. It's in their interest, it's in our interest and also, we have sacrificed a lot. The international community, the US led coalition did a lot to help us defeat ISIS. We should not allow the re-emergence of it. “(019 Falah Mustafa Bakir). *“In Iraqi constitution there is article 140 about Kirkuk. It says that the government has to prepare a statistical census to count how many Arabs and Kurds are in Kirkuk. Arabs are from south of Iraq; they have to go back. Then another step should be an elections and referendum to which part - KRI or Iraq, the Kirkuk want to belong.”* (009 A).

There are also some outliers concerning other topics to resolve between Erbil and Baghdad. Firstly, some of the respondents point to the status of peshmerga forces, their payments and cooperation between Kurdish and Iraqi security forces⁷¹. Secondly, the introduction of electronic administration for citizens. *“Government should electronize “political processes”. So that people don't have to come to the office because of one paper every time. And that they could pay by credit cards.”* (004 A). Thirdly, they should discuss improvement of the state of electricity supplies in households. *“We pay for bad electricity. Now we have it for 1 minute and 2 minutes not.* (011 A). According to one interview, it is important to rebuild trust between both sides at the psychological level.

9.1.3. The relations between the KRI, Turkey, PKK, and HDP

“Turkish policy tries to control this region. They (Turkey - author's note) are trying to control the region surrounding Turkey, that means Kurdistan, Armenia, Gulf countries and Azerbaijan. They are trying to control the economy. And there is also a problem with PKK.” (009 A).

The division into KDP and PUK within KRG is a crucial factor in the orientation on the regional actors. It is also important to look at the role of geography and division of power between the two largest Kurdish parties in the KRI. While KDP has majority of power in the governorates near Turkey, namely Dohuk and Erbil, PUK control governorates near Iran and its borders, specifically Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. Impact of geographical closeness between the individual states (mostly Turkey and Iran) and political parties (KDP and PUK) is also one of the arguments of the political analyst Shivan Fazil: *“Turkey have a better relationship with KDP, because of geography and cultural significances and all of that, while PUK has managed to geographical dimensions that they have managed to strike good relations with Iran as well.”* (012 Shivan Fazil). Most of the respondents confirmed that the geographical closeness predicts

⁷¹ Mainly in the disputed territories.

economic and security ties between KDP and Ankara and added that these ties are driven by energy interests on both sides. *“Turkey is more related to KDP than PUK. Turkey and KDP invested a lot in this relationship driven by individual ties. KDP - Turkey relationship is not institutionalized. It’s a more personal relationship”* (006 A). To underline the last words, the relationship is actually based on personal ties in the highest political levels as well.

The narrative of geographical and spatial closeness has a high frequency among respondents’ answers that Turkey is a gate for KRG’s oil to the world: *“Turkey is the only connecting country to send oil to the world. It’s sending oil to Athens (Greece)”* (004 A) *“Turkey is only way to exploring oil to the world”* (005 A). *“With Turkey is relationship built on companies and infrastructure. There is a Ceyhan pipeline leading to Turkey. From all oil fields in Iraqi Kurdistan, they transfer oil to Turkey. This relationship is very important.”* (009 A).

It shall be noted here that, except for this importance of Turkey as a transferring energy hub for KRG, the KDP is hosting many Turkish (mainly construction) companies and almost all of the goods, clothes and food comes from Turkey to KDP controlled areas. Important is also that Turkish airlines are active in the region. However, the only option of exporting oil via Turkey on one hand and importing goods, services, clothes or electrical appliances on the other, making KRG, specifically KDP and its control areas, highly dependent on Turkey:” *Turkey has strong economic investment and economic ties with Kurdistan, and it is in that way like Erdoğan plays a very good foreign economic policy of making Kurdistan relying on Turkey. So, most of the imports in Kurdistan, here, come from Turkey and most of the construction companies are Turkish construction companies. So, in that way, it was a very smart move from the Turks to create this economic dependency. And then like the oil, which KRG is selling most of the oil to Turkey with then again, in sure, that Turkey will have always a say what’s happen here, because of the economic dependency. And because the KRG has not developed the economy of the region as they should have. I mean, given the years that they have to have strong development and they haven’t done a quite good job in the diversifying of their economy.”* (013 A).

Another aspect of the mutual relation between KDP and Ankara is the similar attitude towards PKK, which is seen as a common enemy and a long-term competitor. As written in the theoretical part, KDP and PKK are different entities, both politically and ideologically. Ankara is seeking all the possibilities to stop PKK actions in Turkey and has no problem to go behind the borders to the area of KRI. Another problem is the presence of PKK in Qandil mountains near the Turkish borders. Some of the respondents see the PKK as a threat. It can have an

explanation in the respondents' political affiliation or closeness to the KDP, due to their background in the Erbil area⁷². Nevertheless, the Turkish airstrikes in the northern part of the KRI (especially in Qandil mountains) are threatening Iraqi Kurdish civilians living in the villages there. These events cause a negative perception of the PKK and Turkish presence in northern Iraq by the Iraqi Kurds. *“That’s the problem between Turkey, KRG and PKK. Turkey said to KRG: This group (PKK - author’s note), you have to take them out. KRG tries to get them out, but PKK are in the mountains. And they won’t leave. Planes are bombing places of PKK in mountains, there are air attacks. And also, many, many villages, so the civilians are dying.”* (009 A). *“...growing tensions from some people’s perspective point of view which is presence of Turkish forces in some parts of Kurdistan with the pretext that PKK are here which is to some extent is valid but at the same time it creates a lot of problems and sometimes it has catastrophic and tragic results or outcomes for the people in KRG and in Kurdistan region. We have seen that Turkish strikes have killed lots of people, damaged the livelihoods of lots of people and also led to reactions from the people in these areas that the Turkish forces are not welcome there.”* (012 Shivan Fazil).

The KDP-PKK relations also influence the Baghdad attitude towards Turkey. Its military presence in the northern part of the country undermines the territorial unity of Iraq, a thorn in the side of Baghdad. An interview with the KDP official, KRG’s minister of foreign relations Falah Mustafa Bakir shows the official stance of KRG (mostly KDP) towards PKK and its presence in the KRI’s area. *“...the presence of PKK in the mountainous area and also in Sinjar is creating a problem for us, because Turkey takes action, Turkey asks Baghdad and Erbil: either we take action, or they have to take action themselves. We are not part of this problem, because PKK is an internal Turkish problem. It has spilled over to the Iraqi Kurdistan to become a problem for us and as a result we are paying a price. Our areas have been bombarded, infrastructure have been destroyed, population has been displaced and this is not in our interest. So, we are in between the actions of PKK, which regard our authority and our demand and Turkey’s response which is not under our control. So therefore, our public message and public request for PKK has been: “please do not use Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan author’s note) as a base for your military operations, your arena of struggle is Turkey and whatever you do inside Turkey. We are not responsible for that, so why should the people of Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan, author’s note) pay a price for a problem which is not of their*

⁷² As written earlier, most of the interviews took place in Erbil. This circumstance can have an impact on the particular attitudes towards individual states and political parties.

creation". Second, we do not believe that there is a military solution of this problem, because this is a problem which is politically natured. It needs a peaceful approach, diplomatic approach and dialog in order to address it." (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir).

An interesting argument came from an anonymous respondent in Erbil; they pointed out the same nationality and the sense of "kurdishness" in this theme, comparing the situation between KDP and PKK to Czechia internal relations: "*I don't see any Kurdish party can really forbid the PKK from using Iraqi Kurdistan as a base. Due to geography and due to nationalistic feels. Not many people will accept. For me, for example, as a Kurd I speak, I see PKK belong here as much as I belong here. They are Kurd, I am Kurd, they are from Kurdistan, I am from Kurdistan. Our homeland is divided, I have no right to tell them to go away, leave my city. I cannot, because I feel they are the Kurds. They are just from different cities, from Diyarbakir, Ahmedi and so on. And I think this feeling is shared by a lot of Kurds. They say yes, you can call them Kurds from Turkey, but they are still Kurds. And we are from the same nation. It's like you in Czechia, when you go back home in Czechia you cannot really tell the person from a neighboring city to go out of your country.*" (014 A).

The role of PUK in these relations is quite different. As written in the introduction, the PUK controlled governorates of Sulaymaniyah and Halabja enjoy more attention from Iran due to its geographical position. The PUK-Turkey relation is quite different from the KDP-Turkey relation and it is also highly influenced by stance towards PKK. PUK enjoys closer relations with PKK and can use it to make pressure on KDP. These circumstances are creating two regional alliances. KDP and Turkey on one side and PUK, PKK (PYD in Syria) and Iran on the other⁷³. However, these lines are marked by occasional fluctuations of PUK and Iran, especially in the times when they want to improve the relations with Turkey. "*The KDP and the PKK don't have a very good relationship and they are sort of antagonists, in sort of the PUK is closer to the PKK. And now PUK is trying to be not that close to PKK to have a better relationship with Turkey.*" (013 A). The dynamics of the mutual relationship between these Kurdish parties was confirmed by other respondents. For example, one of them mentioned that in 1990, both KDP and PUK clashed with PKK. "*PUK and KDP in 1992 they started war*

⁷³ One of the respondents also mentioned that Jalal Talabani, then leader of PUK, stated about the attitude of PUK towards PKK and about military presence of the PKK in the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan that PKK presence there is "like Chinese wall, big wall against Turkey" (017 A). Nevertheless, this information was not confirmed by scientific literature.

against PKK, and they fought against PKK, both of them. And PUK was playing a big role in this fight and dramatically their policies changed, now they are aligned with PKK” (017 A).

When it comes to relations between KDP, PUK and HDP, most of the respondents expressed themselves from neutral to positive. HDP is precepted as a voice of Turkish Kurds who want the change for the Turkish Kurds by political way in Turkey. Mostly, the HDP is not seen as a political part of PKK. Some of the respondents even confirmed that there are mutual meetings between HDP, KDP and PUK representatives. *“They (HDP - author’s note) are trying to fight with Turkey not with weapons, but in a political way.” (008 A).*

As written above, HDP represents the opposition political party, a voice of the Kurds in Turkey which is opened to negotiate with AKP. The different attitude of KDP and PUK towards PKK and HDP can be explained by the position of mentioned Turkish Kurdish actors to negotiations with AKP and other Turkish political parties. *“HDP is the real voice and kingmaker represents the Kurds in Turkey, for negotiations with AKP, not PKK. HDP has a 10 % in elections - so that’s the limit to be in parliament, while their head is behind the bars. If the Kurds would vote for the AKP in Istanbul or elsewhere, they would have won Istanbul, but they didn’t. The leader of HDP, which is behind bars, encouraged HDP voters to vote for CHP candidates. And other opposition parties too, didn’t field any candidates. So, there was a CHP candidate against an AKP candidate. And the CHP candidate won.” (012 Shivan Fazil).* However, one respondent mentioned an effort by AKP to cooperate with HDP. *“AKP wanted to be with HDP in government, HDP was in opposition and said no, because of many issues. Mostly because joining AKP in government would not be with HDP issues.” (006 A).*

9.1.4. The relations between the KRI, Syria, PYD and ENKS

In comparison to the other chapters, this part of analysis, aiming attention on the “western neighbors and regional actors” of KRG, does not cover the topic of relationships as with other actors. Some respondents were unable to describe the relationship between the KRG and Syria (as a state actor, Syrian government), also due to a lack of public and expert information. Other questions on this topic vary widely.

However, by some is the position of KRG towards Syria understood in the geopolitical bigger picture. *“There are several orbits in the Middle East. There is western orbit, which is presented by KDP. They (KDP - author’s note) have good relationships with the UK, USA, Germany and France. Then there is another orbit, represented by Iran, Syria and groups like Hezbollah and PKK. The third orbit is defined by Arab countries like Egypt, also including the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia. KRG is trying to find itself in the first orbit.” (010 A).* Some

of the answers to questions about KRG-Syrian relations were in a more negative direction. *“I don’t think that this relationship is good. In fact, recently, Syria has put KRG’s nominated prime minister Masrour Barzani on a terrorist list of Syria. And in fact, one or two weeks back, there was a quarrel between KRG leaders, especially KDP leaders and Syrian government regarding this issue. Syria says that some people in the Kurdistan region, including the nominated PM, support terrorists.”* (014 A). However, other responses indicated that Syria, as a partner, was not crucial in the current situation. Syria is also seen as an actor who is overwhelmed by many of its own problems. *“If we are talking about a relationship with the Syrian government, it is more or less a business. But it’s not a priority. This is not such a crucial issue for either PUK or KDP.* (016 Tomáš Kaválek). *“Syria is an important neighbor for us, but unfortunately now the situation in Syria is different. We want to see stability, we want to see prosperity, we want to see democracy around. Because if there is stability, security, democracy, there would be prosperity, there would be well-being and there would be good cooperation among all the players.”* (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir). According to Shivan Fazil, a political analyst, the relationship between KRG and Syria *“... will be mostly within the framework of relations of Baghdad. So, if Iraq would be ahead to normalize ties with Syria, which I think they would, they have to agree to extend because they need to manage the huge border line between Syria and Iraq. This border is always a tricky part for capturing and eliminating ISIS and other militant organizations to carry out and switch attacks. I think the KRG will follow suit in terms of Baghdad.*

The answers to the questions concerning the relations between the individual Kurdish parties operating in Iraq and Syria (with an extension to Turkey) are more comprehensive. Relations between KDP and PYD are widely shaped by the third, already mentioned actor, PKK, which is affiliated to the PYD. *“KDP has no good relationship with PYD. Because PYD don’t need other parties in Syria to grow. They are not democratic party. PYD have weapons, they are threatening others. KDP said to them: “We will be friends, if you will be democratic”.”* (009 A). A diplomatic stance of the KDP towards Kurdish situation in Syria is presented by Falah Mustafa Bakir, the minister of foreign policy in KRG: *“They are seen as an offshoot of PKK and it has created problems for them with Turkey. While they claim that they are not, they have portraits and banners of Öcalan and PKK behind them. They carry the banners of PKK. So, you can’t deny your own actions.”* (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir). Additionally, we have to account Iraqi Kurdish internal political scene. *“KDP and PUK have extended their internal problems and internal rivalry to their relationship with other Kurdish parties in the region. When PUK sees that KDP is not happy with PKK, they see an opportunity to support PKK and*

PYD.” (018 Kamaran Palani). “PUK is absolute opposite of KDP policies with these parties. So, they have good relationships with PKK, PYD, PJAK.” (009 A). “PKK enjoys a relationship with PUK, they have historically good relationships, it’s a political issue, PUK provides some support not directly to PKK, but to PYD and other forces in Syria.” (006 A). As mentioned in the theoretical part hereof, in case of Syrian Kurdish parties it is valuable to point to ENKS and its ties to KDP. “ENKS was created by the Barzani’s. So that was a way for the KDP to have a foot on Syria, against the PKK and PYD. So, KDP has a very good relationship with the Kurdish national council (KNC - author’s note), which by de facto creating (KDP - author’s note) confronting interest of the PYD.” (013 A).

Although the relations between KDP and PYD (and PKK) are not well, the direct armed conflict would be politically unattractive. Syria thus serves as a place for proxy conflict, with the PYD on the one hand and the ENKS⁷⁴ on the other. “There is still some consensus here. They definitely don’t want (neither the PKK, nor the KDP or the PUK) an open armed conflict to break out between them. Even small intensities, this is simply a thing that is very unpopular. They always say: “we do not want to repeat Birakujji”, (in Kurdish the murder of brothers and sisters). That would be a terribly unpopular move, not only for the KDP, but also for the PKK.” (016 Tomáš Kaválek). This chapter concludes with the position presented by the KRG Foreign Minister towards the Syrian Kurdish Parties. “It’s in the interest of the Kurds in Syria that they would be united. PYD, the KNC and all the other groups, they need to be united because their future is important. When they are divided, they are weak and manipulated. Our message to the Syrian Kurds is this: PYD plus KNC work together, to unite, to have an understanding so that they can secure better for the future of the Kurds in Syria.” (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir).

9.1.5. The relations between the KRI, Iran, KDPI and PJAK

Iran is next to Turkey a key regional player for the Iraqi Kurds as mentioned in the theoretical part of this thesis. Iran shares a long border with KRI and it is geographically close to both important Kurdish political parties in KRI. However, the ties are closer between Iran and PUK which is controlling the governorates Sulaymaniyah and Halabja sharing borders with Iranian territory. Geography is a significant factor in explaining the alliance and links between the PUK

⁷⁴ According to Tomáš Kaválek, the role of ENKS in Syria was directly reduced by PYD. “Now there they have a very small role. PYD gradually pushed them out through combination of repression, threats, murder and confiscation of property.” (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

and Iran in accordance with the respondents. *“Iran has something similar with the PUK (like KDP with Turkey - author’s note). Iran is importing their goods, food, clothes, there is an energy relation with electricity. Especially after the sanctions, the only way out for Iran is Iraq. Through federal Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. The steam has to get out, throw somewhere always in geopolitics. If you pressure me, I will find my way out.”* (015 A). *“Iran has traditionally better relations with the PUK and the Talabani family. Because the PUK did not manage to build such good relations with the Americans as the KDP, they did not try to do so.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

On the other hand, according to the respondents, it cannot be said that the KDP had bad relations with Tehran. It shall be added that, after the referendum of independence, the KDP wanted to change and improve its battered relationships with Iran. This issue is widely discussed in the chapter “9.3. Reactions of Individual Actors on the Kurdish Referendum of Independence in 2017”. *“We have a lot of good relationships. Not only with Turkey, but also with Iran. We buy a lot of food, clothes, and goods from them. They are near, their companies are here, and the quality of their products are acceptable. If we wouldn’t buy everything from them, we cannot buy it somewhere else, for example in Saudi Arabia. It is not that good quality.”* (002 A). *“Well, in terms of global powers it’s no secret that the main political parties in Kurdistan have good relations with Turkey and Iran, especially KDP have good relations with both - Turkey and Iran. Turkey has a better relationship with KDP, because of geography and cultural significances and all of that, but also KDP has managed to geographical dimensions that they have managed to strike good relations with Iran as well. When it comes to KRG vis a vie these countries, KRG is working on improving relations with Turkey and with Iran.”* (012 Shivan Fazil).

In this network of mutual ties, Iraq plays a crucial role as its policy is largely influenced by Iran. These two countries are, besides economy, largely connected by culture and religion dominating by Shia Islam. *“Now, there is a good relationship. Iran has its influence in Baghdad and from Baghdad money goes to Erbil. That is the reason why Erbil doesn’t want to make “some troubles” to Iran. “(003 dr. Aziz Barzani). “And Iraq as a whole and KRG including cannot afford to have bad relations with Iran, politically, security and especially trade ones. Because the economic volume or trade volume between Iraq and Iran is 12 billion dollars every year. So, if you ask, for this to be cut overnight, that affects the livelihoods and wellbeing of huge segments of Iraqi population including the KRG. Because that’s about their livelihood, their income which is a live road. In terms of energy - petrol, oil derivatives or gas and gasoline, but also importing electricity for southern provinces like Basra, Iraq relies heavily*

on Iran. So apart from the economic volume, they have signed packs to, for example, left visas to have easier access to their people and for their businesses. There is a lot of significant cultural exchange between the Shia population in Iraq and Iranian people.” (012 Shivan Fazil).

On the other hand, some of the respondents saw Iran with negative perspectives whether from an economic or cultural point of view. “*In Iran there is a financial crisis. That is the reason why Iran is not that stable as Turkey is.*” (008 A). “*In Iran they are Muslim. But they don’t understand the religion right. For example, 5 years ago they started to wear hijab. You have to wear it, if you live there. Not like here, here (in KRI - author’s note) it is personal choice.*” (011 A).

To cover all mentioned actors, the KDPI (PDKI) is another Iranian Kurdish party included in this analysis. According to the reactions of some of the respondents, KDPI is connected to the Iraqi KDP that is hosting them in the yellow zone. These circumstances shape relations with Iran as the KDPI has long fought for the rights of the Kurds in Iran. “*A few years ago, of course with the consent of the KDP, KDPI resumed a low-intensity armed campaign in Iran. They were in armistice with Tehran for a very long time and a few years back they announced the resumption of the armed struggle. Sometimes they kill a few soldiers. The Iranians sent missiles to Soran’s headquarters in Iran. The fact that they can do something in Iran is definitely with the consent of the KDP, they are dependent on the KDP which is hosting them. They are in exile here, they have their bases here, so it had to be with the consent of the KDP, but their campaign was very little intensive. They do not have the capacity.*” (016 Tomáš Kaválek). “*The Iranian political parties have bases in Koya and now they are also in Erbil (as it is mentioned in the theoretical part - author’s note). Last year Iranians stroked the camp and they killed 20 leaders of KDPI. It’s a political party in exile, they don’t have so much leverage here to be honest.*” (012 Shivan Fazil). To capture the objectivity, it’s necessary to add the position of KDP official towards KDPI. “*KDPI and other Iranian Kurdish opposition groups have been more respectful of the authority of KRG. They do have a political activity, but they don’t carry out cross border operations. And we are grateful, because they understand our situation, because we are a government. We have responsibilities. And neighbors are expecting us to act responsibility therefore we support the Kurdish rights in Turkey, in Iran, in Syria. We believe that the right approach is through peace, dialog and political means. Times have changed. The world has changed. Today there is a very thin line between freedom fighter and terrorism. Unlike before in the past, many nations were fighting for freedom, they were carrying weapons and then they were resulting in weapons, but today this is not a welcome thing. That’s why KRG believes in peace, in stability and in dialog.*” (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir).

However, although they have similar goals, KDP and KDPI⁷⁵ stand on one side while PKK and PJAK on the other.

PJAK is almost by all of the respondents seen as a “disguised” PKK and thus the reactions are very similar to this Iranian political party. As it is in the case of PKK, the attitudes of Iraqi Kurdish political parties towards PJAK are highly influenced by their relationship with Turkey and Iran. PUK with PJAK relation can be described as a passive intolerance, while KDP-PJAK ties are hostile due to PJAK affiliation to PKK. *“KDP has no good relationship with PKK, PYD and PJAK, because they are against Turkey. PUK is the absolute opposite of KDP policies with these parties. So, they have good relationships with PKK, PYD, PJAK.”* (009 A). Finally, these relations have their nuances depending on the position towards significant regional actors like Turkey and Iran. *“It’s an agreement to not attack Iran, unless Iran would attack them (PJAK - author’s note). Things calmed down for them. This is why the relationship between KDP and PJAK is not very bad, not like the PKK.”* (014 A).

9.1.6. The relations between the KRI and other regional actors - Saudi Arabia, Israel

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy has a significant impact in the Middle East, competing with its rivals in the form of Turkey and Iran. Ambivalent geopolitical circles were mentioned at the first place in the answers of respondents, especially contrasting the Iran influence in KRI and Baghdad. *“Saudi Arabia has interest in the region for its own rivalry with Iran. So, when they look at Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan - author’s note), they look at the parties that are untied.... So, for this reason they haven’t invested a lot in Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan - author’s note), because they didn’t see they have influence over the political parties.”* (018 Kamaran Palani). *“With Saudi Arabia it’s an interesting relationship. When KRG’s relationship with Baghdad wasn’t going well, KRG was getting closer to Riyadh. But it’s not based on any deeper relations.”* (006 A).

Despite this competition between the “big rivals”, Saudis influence in the country is not significant like in the case of Iran or Turkey. Again, the great role of geography and the distance of the Saudis from the KRI. *“Saudi Arabia does not have an immediate direct border with Kurdistan (KRI - author’s note), so the relationship is a little distant. More based on good will and respecting.”* (014 A). However, there is religious line of Sunni Islam connecting both

⁷⁵ The relation between PUK and KDPI is not discussed much in the interviews and therefore there is no mention of this relationship.

actors and bringing them to some extent⁷⁶ closer to each other. *“We are close to Saudi Arabia because of religion. A lot of people from here are going to Mecca. They (Saudis - author’s note) are Muslim so we don’t have a problem. But it’s not the closest ally.”* (002 A).

The second actor included in this analysis is Israel. As it is in the case of Saudi Arabia, Israel does not share a border with the KRI (and even does not with Iraq). The answers dealing with the case of Israel vary considerably. As written in the theoretical part, in the instance of Israel it is essential to distinguish between “people to people” relations and the ties between governments of both entities. By “people to people” are meant non-institutional connection between the citizens⁷⁷ of both countries as it is explained in the theoretical part of this thesis. Answers focused on the first level of mutual ties are diverse, from “we have good relationships” to *“They (the Israelis - author’s note) hate Muslim people too much. They don’t respect Muslims.”* As for the relationship between governments, the geopolitical position of KRI in the region again plays a role. Here are also important fragments of historical ties. *“In 1967 and 1969 Mullah Mustafa Barzani visited Israel. In that time Iran had good relations with the US and Israel. There wasn’t problem that Israeli people came to KRI through Iranian-KRI borders”* (003 Aziz Barzani). *“There is a good historical background. In 1970 was the start of the relationship between the Kurds and the Israeli people.”* (010 A).

The current intergovernmental relationship must also not be forgotten. *“KRG and Israel have friendly relations. Both sides realize the cost of public opinion, so it’s more a political relationship, than a relationship between common people.”* (006 A). *“KRG and Israel, this is a very secretive relationship as you know. You know that they keep it very secret. Obviously, there is nothing in the news on this.”* (014 A). The stance of Israeli government on the Kurdish referendum of independence in 2017 is pretty relevant in this intergovernmental relationship exceeding to the wider regional geopolitical network. This topic is discussed in more detail in the chapter “9.3. Reactions of Individual Actors on the Kurdish Referendum of Independence in 2017”.

⁷⁶ *“The Kurdish government, in Erbil and in Sulaymaniyah, is wary of Islamism and of religious figures and structures that would not be entirely under their control. Everyone remembers Ansar al-Islam (an offshoot of Al Qaeda in northern Iraq, those who fled Afghanistan came here to Halabja via Iran - author’s note) in Halabja, which hosted al Qaeda, and that was a big problem. Here, in the end, the Americans helped them get rid of them.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

⁷⁷ In this thesis represented only by the attitudes of KRI’s citizens towards the Israelis.

9.2. Global actors - the United States of America, the Russian Federation, and China

9.2.1. The relations between the KRI and United states of America

“The US presence in the region has been critical to the survival of Kurdistan as an entity. So, the Kurds in general and the Kurdish parties look at the US as an ally, as a partner, as the party that supports their existence.” (018 Kamaran Palani).

The role of the US not only in the KRI but also in the whole region is irreplaceable. The presence of the US in the region is by many Kurds seen as a guarantee of security and stability. In addition, the US represent a counterpart to Iranian, Russian and Chinese growing leverage and as a leader of the western orbit, it is perceived in a more positive way. By many respondents, the US played a significant role in the fight against ISIS, together with the UK and France. *“The US is forced to have a good relationship with KRI and KRG. Iraqi Kurdistan got the political sort of de facto independence because of the no-fly zone in 1991. In 2003 when they (the Iraqi Kurds - author’s note) got more autonomy, it was because the Americans invaded Iraq. So, the American will use that card always to say, “guys you are here because of us”.”* (015 A). *“Just as Americans guaranteed the establishment of KRI in 1991, they are still here. They guarantee security, they guarantee that someone in Baghdad will not decide that it might not be completely wrong to occupy Erbil at least for a while.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek). *“The US saved our people many times. They save us from terrorists and other groups. They helped our army. In terms of safety and security America did the best. They work very hard to have good positions here and in Iraq. They want to solve problems.”* (002 A).

However, some of the respondents point to the vigilance against the US policy and their promises, also due to negative historical experiences. *“The Kurds believe that Uncle Sam is helping them, and the Americans are behind them and supporting them. And it’s true. Americans see this region as a stable region inside of Iraq, and a place where they can have military bases or like a pro-American asset in a Shia dominated Iraq. But then at the end of the day, the US is not going to jeopardies its relationships with Iraq or other governments in the region, just because of the Kurds. It is the same what is happening in northern Syria. The US wants a one country policy where they see Iraq as one country.”* (013 A). *“Historically, the Americans, pursuing some of their national interests, often left the Kurds at the mercy of someone, so there is some mistrust from the Kurdish side. But still without debate, it is the most important actor for them, given that it is a guarantee of security and a guarantee of political survival to a large extent.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, one of the breaking points in the mutual relationship between the Kurdish parties, mostly KDP, was war against ISIS. While KDP received support from the western states with the US in the lead, PUK had to rely on Iran. This problem is detailed in the chapters concerning relations between KDP and PUK.

Given that the majority of respondents were from Erbil, the answers usually find a positive attitude towards the USA and mention their help in the fight against Islamic jihadists. *“KDP - US relations are stronger than PUK - US relationships. But the US has to play with all the actors because when you are a hegemon and that’s what you have to do.”* (015 A). *“KDP has a better relationship with the US. If you look at how KRG’s foreign representation in Washington is occupied, there are people primarily from the KDP.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

Despite good relations with Iran, PUK also has good relations with the United States. *“PUK and US, I am not aware of any problems existing between these two. Some current or former PUK officials have served in America or have American citizenship. For example, the former governor of Kirkuk Najmiddin Karim (before Hashd al-Shaabi came and threw him out) was a PUK member of politburo and he is also an American citizen. He has worked in America as a neurosurgeon, so he had a very good relationship with the US military and US advisors in America.”* (014 A). *“PUK during the time of Jalal Talabani had a very good relationship with the Americans. There are still people like Lahur Talabani who lived in America and have American citizenship. As it is known, the PUK has relied more on Iran for the last decade. But that doesn’t mean they don’t talk to the Americans, or that the relationship isn’t there at all, certainly not.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

To sum up, the US has played and is playing an irreplaceable and dominant role in the KRI foreign policy. The Kurds remember many occasions when the US helped them to make their dream about autonomy true or saved them from Sunni jihadists from organizations such as ISIS or Ansar al Islam. Nevertheless, some Kurds also remember that the US was strongly against the Kurdish referendum of independence in 2017, in order to preserve the territorial unity of the Iraqi state.

“After 1991 the US led coalition did provide protection of the region and no-fly zone safe haven so that we built this democratic experience. In 2003 it was the US led coalition that liberated Iraq from the terror of Saddam Hussein regime. In 2014, the US came to help us deal with the terrorism of ISIS. Which means that the nature of the relationship with the US is very strong. We look forward to a strategic, long term partnership with the US.” (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir).

9.2.2. The role of KRI in the US-Iran tensions

“So, the Kurds are very worried about the escalation, because they don’t see that there is any partner that they can take side with, because there is also risk: when you’re with the US, then you will be directly and immediately attacked and influenced by Iran. Also, Kurds cannot take the side of Iran, because without the international and the US support they couldn’t survive for so long. There is always risk of taking sides. The word balance is key to understanding the Kurdish position.” (018 Kamaran Palani).

Due to the combination of good relations between the KRG and the US and the close geographical distance of the KRI to Iran, this area represents an advantageous geostrategic position for Washington. Some of the respondents see the US as a counterbalancing power of Iran in the KRI and also in the whole Iraq. The presence of the US soldiers in the region on one side and the direct (through relations between Iran and KDP and PUK) and indirect (through the central government in Baghdad) influence of Iran on the other, puts the Iraqi Kurds in a difficult negotiating position. Almost all of the respondents see a threat of using the area of KRI as a proxy territory in potential conflict between the US and Iran and in consequences that this conflict would have. *“There would certainly be an impact of the potential conflict. If the US would attack Iran, there would be a great influx of refugees, especially from Iranian Kurdistan. KRG has no salaries for them, no places for them. The refugees would rent a place to stay. They would not want to stay in camps, because when they would be in there, they wouldn’t find a job. So, the renting prices would get higher. A lot of women would be doing escort here. That would be bad for the region, because it could spread diseases.” (004 A).* *“There are so many American troops. If they (the US - author’s note) will attack Iran, I am sure that Iran will attack the US here in the KRI. And of course, there will be so many refugees from Iran. Economically it won’t be safe, and the big companies will leave.” (007 A).*

These circumstances force the KRG to take a neutral stance and balance between these two actors and by some even taking the role of mediator between the US and Iran. *“The conflict will continue until the next elections in the US. After that there could be some turning point in this relationship. Either real conflict or final political solution. It’s going to affect the region. Everywhere Iran loses power, KRG and people in KRI will gain more power. Because Iran is responsible for all the instability in the Middle East. If Iran will be stable and powerful, it will continue to destabilize the region. And vice versa.” (010 A).* *“...it would have a significant impact on Iraq and KRG and also the region, but actually I don’t think Iran and the US want war either. Certainly, American public doesn’t want another war in the Middle East, or they*

don't want to have further troops and resources dedicated to another war. Trump also came to power to end wars in the Middle East and to reduce troops there. He is just escalating his rhetoric's to bring Iranians back to the negotiations table, because he is the master of deal making. He wants to show the people like: "Hey that was my election claim". So, he claimed it was a bad deal. He withdrew and now the third step is to force Iranians to come to table and renegotiate that deal." (012 Shivan Fazil).

Anyway, according to the answers, it is unlikely that there would be an open conflict between the US and Iran. However, it is possible that the current dispute will continue, and it will be very difficult to find a common solution to this long-standing conflict.

9.2.3. The relations between KRI and Russia

"The Russians are back to the Middle East. Especially at the time when the UK and the US are preoccupied with internal political dynamics. In the UK with Brexit and in the US with speculations of Russia meddling to the Trump campaign." (012 Shivan Fazil).

As written in the theoretical part, Russia's engagement in the KRI is mainly built up on economic interests, focused on the energy gas sector. Russia's efforts of its involvement in the KRI were promoted by KRG's economic crisis caused by its long-term disputes between Erbil and Baghdad. After signing several agreements between Erbil and Russian energy company Rosneft, Moscow gained a significant leverage in this area and thus secured another predominant share in one of its energy routes to Europe and consolidated its political influence there in the future. *"Rosneft has majority ownership of KRG's pipeline, which is leading to Turkey, So Russia is taking money from KRG for KRG sending its oil through this pipeline."* (001 A). *"So, Russia has increased their leverage and presence in Iraq and in KRI as well. For example, Rosneft, one of the biggest oil and gas companies, that's close to the Russian government, has ties in KRI. They bought the pipeline infrastructure that exports oil and gas from Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan - author's note) to Turkey. So that's a big deal. And we also have ExxonMobil and Chevron in Kurdistan. It's a very diverse field. It's not that only US companies are here. There are US companies, Turkish companies, Iranian and Russian ones."* (012 Shivan Fazil). *"When KRG starts to export LNG, it will be much cheaper. So Rosneft wants to control it here."* (003 dr. Aziz Barzani).

Some of the respondents also mentioned another Russian energy company, Gazprom Neft and its connections to KRG. *“KRG has some contracts for drilling and production of oil and gas with Gazprom Neft. With Russia there are more economical relations.”* (009 A).

In a more geopolitical view, a lot of answers were directed at Russia as an opposite global player to the US. The perception of both actors by the respondents was very contrasting and the answers often resonated the co-existence of these two main global actors in KRI. *“Russia is very active in the oil and gas sector in Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan - author’s note), which is also something that the US doesn’t like, because of its area of their influence and leverage. But KRG needs to balance their relations. Especially in the absence of a clear US policy towards the Kurds, the Kurdish leadership started to think about alternatives, to think of balance and approach. So, the world of balance and approach is very critical for Kurds and foreign relations. For many reasons it (KRG - author’s note) cannot take sides. It has to stay balanced in this relationship with foreign countries including these global powers.”* (018 Kamaran Palani). *“Maybe they (the Russians - author’s note) did some good things here. I don’t know. I see the presence of the US more here. I believe that the US has a better role here. Even better than surrounding states.”* (002 A). *“Because of the presence of the US army until 2011, Russia wasn’t interested in KRI. Then Obama decided to withdraw, and Russia prepared to have a strong relationship with KRG. In late 2011 Russia decided to pay more attention to KRI.”* (dr. Aziz Barzani). *“Russia got into dynamics in the KRI after the KRG expressed disagreements to the US position about the Kurdish referendum of independence.”* (006 A). *“The US has a very positive influence here in many factors. We feel safe with the US. We don’t feel safe with Russia and Iran.”* (009 A).

Relations between KDP and PUK and Russia are only marginally mentioned in some of the answers. The KDP follows the historical ties, when Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani spent 12 years in exile in the former USSR during the 1950’s. *“With Russia we have a long-standing relationship, when even general Barzani was in the former Soviet Union. But they (the Russians - author’s note) were also among the first countries to open a consulate general here.”* (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir). *“During the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s a lot of Kurdish intellectuals and politicians lived and studied in the Soviet Union. So, there is still intellectual influence over the Kurdish elites now.”* (018 Kamaran Palani). The PUK’s position towards Russia is not covered in depth in the answers, but from a more general point of view it can be read that mutual relations are good.

Some voices say that Russians were more open to the idea of the Kurdish referendum of independence in 2017, but in the end the position was identical to the statement of the US

administration. *“A lot of people say that the Russians are good because they are more open to supporting Kurdish independence, which is not true at all from my point of view. They just used softer language, maybe with a hint of some promises. Russia would never support this. It stems from the tradition of Russian and Soviet foreign policy. If they once began to support the creation of some of the new states, then why could they not use it as an argument, for example in the Caucasus. I can’t imagine what would have to be left for this predicate to change.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

9.2.4. The relations between KRI and China

“China is new to this situation, because China started its relations after 2003. We have an active consulate general here. They want to engage with the Kurdistan region, and we are happy with all the relations.” (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir).

In comparison to the other global actors, China does not play a significant role in the geopolitics of the KRI. Historically, China has had a good relationship with Iraqi government which was buying cheap weapons from Beijing during the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980’s. The current Chinese foreign policy is based on expanding economic influence, which also affects KRI and Iraq. Almost half of the respondents admitted that they are unfamiliar with Chinese interests in the KRI. The rest of them commented that the Chinese influence is built up on economic ties, investing into business and trade, not involving into political issues both in KRI and in the rest of the Middle East. Some of the answers also mentioned an import of cheap Chinese products, which are low-quality in comparison to other imported goods. *“Chinese products are cheap, but poor quality. I have traced that people from KRI are telling that Chinese people are making goods with no good quality.”* (004 A). *“There is no exact sort of Chinese influence like from Russia or America. At least China does not do it through hard power, it does not use military force. China’s main interest is making money, basically.”* (014 A).

In the geopolitical perspective, China, as mentioned earlier, has good ties with Baghdad and therefore is not so politically involved in Erbil. *“They have much greater economic interests in Baghdad. Many Chinese oil companies operate in Iraq, and my opinion is that it was simply not worth threatening these great economic interests there. For some time, the volume of Chinese orders or the Chinese footprint in the oil industry needed to be greater than the US after 2003 in those southern areas. In my opinion, this will be the main reason. They did not want to break up with Baghdad.”* (016 Tomáš Kaválek).

The relations on the political level between the two main Kurdish political parties (KDP and PUK) and the Chinese government are not mentioned in the interviews. Despite this fact, one of the respondents is speaking about the earlier economic delegation of then prime minister Nechirvan Barzani in Taiwan who was not warmly received by the Chinese side. China was also against the Kurdish referendum of independence, which is detailed in the following chapter.

9.3. Reactions of individual actors on the Kurdish referendum of independence in 2017

“The referendum highlighted two things. Firstly, the weakness of the KRG institutions, like a unified army, unified government. Secondly, it highlighted that KRI cannot survive without international support.” (018 Kamaran Palani).

Declaration of the Kurdish referendum of independence in September 2017 was a very controversial theme among all the mentioned actors⁷⁸. Most of the respondents answered the questions “What do you think of the 2017 referendum? Was it timed well?” in a rather negative direction that the referendum did not have a good timing. The decision of the KRG to organize it came despite clear attitudes against the declaration of the referendum from Baghdad, regional actors (with the strongest voices of Turkey and Iran) and global actors, led by the USA. *“It was a bad time for it. Every country said to the KRG that’s not a good time. KRG wasn’t well prepared for the referendum. And that’s why it had a terrible impact on people in KRI.”* (020 A). *“It was not a great step. Political and economic situation wasn’t normalized. Kurds didn’t have a good international recognition. Why did the KDP and Kurdish leadership do the referendum? Because in that time, KRI had gained a good recognition. The thoughts weren’t based on real calculations. It was just estimating.”* (006 A). *“It was good. But time was not good. Because every Kurdish person wants to have one country. But when you are not ready, economically or politically, it is hard. It’s like you have no money, no job and you want to marry a girl.”* (008 A).

On the other hand, some of the arguments from individual respondents opposed the explanation of the bad timing of the referendum as the primary reason for its failure. Additionally, due to some respondents, there would always be a reason for “bad time” as an excuse for arguing against the referendum. *“You know, we have been asking for this for years*

⁷⁸ With the exception of the Israel’s perspective, which was supporting the Kurdish independence, as it is mentioned in the lines below.

and every time they tell us this is not the right time. We came to the conclusion that there would never be the right time, because no matter when we have asked, we have given the same answer, that this is not the right time. But why did the Kurds go to the referendum? That's the question. The Kurds felt that they had no future in Iraq, they felt, and they saw that the constitution was not implemented. There is no genuine partnership, article 140 regarding Kirkuk and other disputed areas was not implemented deliberately. The budget is not shared, the status of peshmerga is not finalized, no hydrocarbons law, no revenue sharing law and so on. Gradually, our power was diminishing in Baghdad and we were treated as guests, and not as partners in Baghdad. And we told them: if we are not able to be genuine partners in the same country, let's become good neighbors to each other.” (019 Falah Mustafa Bakir).

Nevertheless, the timing of the referendum was very resonant in individual interviews. By some it was planned by the KRG to hold the referendum at the time when Baghdad was weak to strike the KRI and stop it. *“I think it was timed well, but the preparations for the referendum were not in place and were not done nicely to put it that way. It was timed well because Iraq was weak. If Iraq was stronger it would not let us do this referendum. It would fly F16 and bomb Erbil and bomb whatever they like to. So, it was timed well. We did it when Iraq was done.” (014 A).*

As is the case with the previous questions, there are some exceptions. Some of the Kurds view the announcement of the referendum quite positively and celebrate it despite its failure. *“I think it was really good. It was a success for me, because it will go in history, no matter in what light. Masoud Barzani did a great job. Even when we don't have benefits now, I am optimistic that it will help us to form our own state in future.” (007 A).* *“Majority wants to be independent of Baghdad. The time was wrong, but it is now the most important document in Kurdish history. If there will be a problem, we can show this document to the world that we want to be independent.” (009 A).*

The reaction of the individual actors that were strongly against the declaration was surprisingly negative, more or less strong and restrictive to the KRI. Baghdad closed the airspace and banned flights to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Further, prime minister Haider al-Abadi sent an Iraqi army to the disputed territories (with the oil-rich Kirkuk) and regained them on October 16, 2017. *“Baghdad rejected it. They started to introduce a new step. They shut down the airports, they closed the borders, they cut the budget and they took disputed areas by military as well.” (006 A).* *“The Baghdad reaction was very smart because they took the contested areas, the Kirkuk mainly, because of the oil. That's very important.” (015 A).* *“Iraq's reaction was very bad, they used military force to take Kirkuk away.” (014 A).* As it is

mentioned in the chapter “8.1.1. Position of the KRI in Iraq”, the after-referendum relations between Erbil and Baghdad were “normalizing”, especially supported by an effort of the KRG to regain and rebuild its trust in Baghdad again.

In terms of regional actors, the most frequent responses were from Turkey and Iran, countries with a significant Kurdish minority. *“Turkey and Iran were frustrated. They blocked a trade with the region. Iran blocked the border for months; Turkey and Iraq banned the flights”* (001 A). *“Turkey was not happy about it. None of the surrounding states. They also have Kurds in their area. If the referendum would be successful, other Kurds would want to have their own state too.”* (007 A). *“Iran was a leader in making the referendum fail. They did that through Iraqi government in Baghdad.”* (010 A).

Syria’s position was not fully captured in the respondent’s answers. One of the respondents mentioned Syria in the context of Turkey’s and Iran’s approach against referendum while other two respondents noted that Syria was busy with its own conflict and it could not comment on what was happening in the KRI.

Israel, on the other hand, is portrayed in the answers as the only friend of the Kurds who was not against holding a referendum. However, this encouragement had also the other side of the coin. *“There is sympathy between KRI and Israel. Israel is the only country which supported independence of KRI. This sympathy also has a negative side. Iran uses it against the KRI and says: You’re building another Jewish state in the Middle East.”* (003 dr. Aziz Barzani). *“I know that during the referendum Israel supported the KDP and then the Kurds made the huge mistake being pro-Israelis. This is completely wrong in this part of the world. It will automatically make you the enemy of all your Arab neighbors.”* (013 A).

The attitudes of the global actors were presented in a similar way as the perspectives of the regional actors and Baghdad. The US and Russia have stated that they are in favor of maintaining the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. *“The US was against it. Russia also, but they have a little sympathy. However, in the end, it was the same as with the US.”* (009 A). *“I don’t think America’s and Russia’s reactions for example were violent. They didn’t say: “we are really against it and this must not happen and so on”. They said: “we don’t think this is good at this moment”. So, I think, they had a mild reaction. The immediate bad reaction came from our neighbors.”* (014 A).

After all, it is required to mention the posture of China toward the Kurdish referendum. As written in the theoretical part, Beijing does not approve of the idea of independence because of its internal geopolitical issues. This narrative was confirmed by one of the respondents, dr.

Aziz Barzani: “*China doesn’t want to support independence of KRI because of Taiwan. China doesn’t like the idea of independence.*” (003 Aziz Barzani).

To sum up, the declaration of independence announced by the Kurdish political officials caused nuances between the KRG and other (both Baghdad, regional and global) actors and provoked harsh reactions, especially from neighboring countries and actors. The Iraqi Kurds had to face closed borders on the part of Turkey and Iran, the inability to fly and have lost the significant part of disputed territories. However, to survive, KRG had to find and open a new way towards Baghdad and other actors and negotiate for diplomatic settlement of this dispute.

10. Interpretation of the results

This chapter summarizes the examined problematics and answers to the main research questions mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. It interprets the obtained data and represents the most important summary of the issue. Each question summed up to consolidate the answers into a comprehensible wording. This chapter then draws more general conclusions.

The role of the geographical location of the KRI determines its geopolitical position in the region; the KRI is located between the two regional big powers represented by Turkey and Iran. The geographical closeness of Syria is projected in the relations between Iraqi, Syrian and also Turkish Kurds and often brings instability of this entity, mostly represented by refugees. Additionally, the strategic position of the KRI is seen and used by global powers. Firstly, the United States recognize the Kurds as a possible ally in Shia dominated Iraq and as an “island” of relative stability which can be used as a base for American economic and military purposes to control activities of Iran. On the other hand, Russia detects the KRI as a big reservoir of unexcavated gas and a “beginning” of one alternative gas route to Europe which can be under its control.

The Kurdistan region of Iraq is a very specific entity which has been formed by several historical events, often caused by other actors, the most significant of them being Saddam Hussein repression in the 1990’s that led to the creation of no-fly zone safe haven, which was the first step towards the Kurdish autonomy in the northern Iraq. Secondly, the US-led invasion in Iraq in 2003, which overthrew Saddam’s autocracy, brought the Kurds to the negotiation table together with Sunni and Shia part of Iraq and secured them the key position not only in the higher political positions according to dawlat al-mukawana system but also at the regional level with the postures of mayors.

After that, the KRI was further formed by withdrawal of US troops in 2011 during the Obama administration when some of the security gaps were filled by the Sunni or Shia extremists’ groups. These areas thus became a breeding ground for terrorist organizations, the most prominent of which was the Islamic State. The war against ISIS between 2014 and 2017 helped to expand the territory under de facto control of the KRG which it managed to maintain until October 2017. According to Kamaran Palani, the Kurds “...*have benefited from conflicts in the region, because conflicts are creating vacuums and gaps and building opportunities for Kurdish political parties to survive.*” (018 Kamaran Palani). The fight against ISIS also brought more international attention to the Iraqi Kurds and their efforts to create their own independent state in northern Iraq.

The project of the Kurdish referendum of independence one month earlier, in September 2017, brought strong negative reactions from the central government in Baghdad and also from two neighboring countries with numerous Kurdish minorities - Turkey and Iran. The most significant change in distribution of forces came after the Iraqi security forces, backed by the Popular mobilization forces, retook a considerable part of the disputed territories with Kirkuk as the center of this dispute.

The main added value of this thesis is complex analysis of the geopolitical position of the Kurdistan region of Iraq as a specific entity (KRI), officially represented by Kurdistan regional government (KRG), which as a body enters into regional and international relations. As written in the chapter “6. Using the Case Study” to truly describe the case study of KRG, in terms of internal structure, position in Iraq and relations with selected actors, it is needed to generate data via triangulation. The questions are answered through a wide search of expert literature, field research based on interviews with twenty respondents in KRI in June and July 2019 and supplemented by information from the media.

The historical, geographical, internal and geopolitical context described in this thesis is used for interpretation of the results. The main characteristics of the Kurdistan regional government (KRG) are determined by the two dominant Iraqi Kurdish political parties KDP and PUK.

The first part of this research is directed to the internal structure of this representative institution. The domestic political field is divided between KDP and PUK and it is affected by long-standing disputes dating back to the 1970's when PUK split from KDP due to different ideology preference and view of Kurdish leadership in KDP. The internal division between those parties even deepened by several historical events which are detailed in the chapters describing these parties.

PUK left-orientated policy, which is quite different from conservative and tribal principles of KDP, is projected to the relations with other Kurdish political parties in the region. This is also one of the reasons why PUK has a better relationship with PKK and its affiliations of PYD and PJAK⁷⁹. The spatial proximity of Iran determines PUK closeness to Tehran and appears not only in economic but also political ties. These circumstances only deepened the internal division of Iraqi Kurdish political scene, which passed the KRG to the weaker position

⁷⁹ As it is written earlier, all of these parties are members of Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), which follows the ideology and goals of the PKK.

in Baghdad⁸⁰. It also reduced the credibility of these political institutions by the Kurdish population.

The first part also aimed at the KRG position in Iraq and examined the main subjects of discussion between the KRG and central government in Baghdad. There are long-term considerable obstacles like exporting of oil, budget, disputed areas with the Kirkuk as the center or status of peshmerga forces, deepening the gap between both actors, causing problems and delaying a strong, prosperous and common future in one state. From the KRG point of view, it is very important who will be in the position of the Iraqi prime minister. Historically, some of the prime ministers were strongly against the Kurdish issue (for example Nouri al Maliki or Haider al-Abadi), while some of them proclaimed a softer policy towards the Iraqi Kurds (for example Adil Abdul-Mahdi). After the Kurds lost a significant part of disputed territories, which was the reaction of the central government on declaration of Kurdish referendum, the KRG reversed its position and sought to find peace and mutual dialogue that had improved relations. This policy was approved and supported by then prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

The next research question was focused on the KRI in the regional geographical context, trying to find an answer on how the KRI fits into regional spatial relations. According to this research, the KRG is mostly controlled by KDP with a leading position and direction of its internal and foreign policy. The result is, for example, a strong focus on Turkey, where the relationship is built up on personal ties between⁸¹ high officials, a wide-scale trade and the common rival of PKK and PYD. Turkey is by KRG seen as an energy hub for its oil and gas and the only way for Kurdish “hydrocarbons reserves” to the world. However, this orientation is making the KRG highly dependent on Turkey. The similar approach towards PKK (and affiliated PYD and PJAK) stems from different facts. For Turkey PKK represents a long-term violator of the territorial unity of the state, for KDP is PKK contender in the competition of the dominant party in the Kurdish world.

Official relations between the KRG and Syrian central government is not clear from the expert literature and the attention is often directed to the Syrian Kurds. Nevertheless, according to the interviews, at this time, Syria does not represent a trustful ally for KRG, drowned in its internal problems and issues and thus it is not a priority for the KRG to orientate this way. The approach of the KRG towards Syrian Kurds in the form of PYD are described in the previous lines. Also, it is important to add that KDP leverage in northern Syria is spread through ENKS

⁸⁰ Further, both sides have their internal problems, which does not help the situation of unity.

⁸¹ On the other hand, the public opinion is mostly against Turkey and its presence in northern Iraq due to the PKK.

and KNC which are opposite to the PYD administration and policy in this territory. There were also some attempts of joint cooperation through KSC between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish parties, but the signed agreements have never been implemented.

The KRG's east neighbor, Iran, enjoys deeper cooperation with PUK which is built on the personal ties between political officials (as it is in the case of KDP and Turkey). The PUK dominated area, the so-called Green zone, is supplied by goods and oil which are coming by trucks from the Iranian side. At the same time, however, the conclusions of the answers do not show that KDP has a bad relationship with Tehran. After the failure of Kurdish referendum of independence, the KRG (and especially KDP) realized the importance of this partner and began work on improving relations with it. PJAK then enters into mutual relations with Iran. While the KDP approach towards PJAK is formed by its stance to PKK, PUK is unwilling to tolerate this party near its sphere of influence.

The regional figure includes Saudi Arabia which is often taken as Iran's counterpart and which has good but not very deep relations with the KRG. These are based on mutual understanding and the soft factors of religion. It is also necessary to mention Israel when its form of relations with the KRG is not very well known and is rather built on a political level.

The third research question was aimed on the position of the Kurdistan regional government in the global geopolitical context. The selected actors were the United States of America, Russian federation and China. Both used sources, expert literature and own interviews, verified the significance of the US as an irreplaceable ally for the Iraqi Kurds and the KRG. Despite historical negative nuances (which also caused considerable mistrust in the eyes of some Kurds) in the relation between those two actors, the US represent a guarantor of security and stability and it is prepared to secure its own interests and issues in the region. The significant geostrategic position of the KRI also helps him to fulfill his own goals, including the ambition of "keeping Iran under control". Thus, the KRG has to balance between the US and Iran efforts to gain an advantage over each other. The US also plays a very important role as mediator not only between the Kurds themselves, as it was shown in 1998 during the Washington Peace Accord, but also between Erbil and Baghdad. An important act was the Obama decision to join the fight against ISIS in August 2014, which helped the Kurds gain a large part of territories claimed by both, Erbil and Baghdad. Despite all these circumstances, the United States stand for Iraq's territorial unity, which was reflected in Washington's response to the Kurdish referendum on independence.

Because of illegible rhetoric and foreign policy of the Trump administration, KRG tried to diversify its foreign policy to other global actors, specifically Russia and China. KDP built

its ties with Russia in the historical period around 1950's, when Mullah Mustafa Barzani used the "Soviet shelter" to hide from repression of Hashemite monarchy. Currently, the Russian foreign policy in the KRI is projected by two large Russian gas companies - Gazprom Neft and Rosneft. The latter gained a large stake in the KRG's pipeline and in several gas projects in the KRI and thus secured its leverage here. In addition, the sharp reaction of the USA to the referendum helped to expand the Russian influence and Moscow's willingness saved the KRG from bankruptcy due to its economic crisis.

The third chosen global actor, China, is gaining its leverage through investments, especially in the oil and gas sector. In comparison to the two already mentioned global actors, it is a relatively new in the region and the interest of Beijing in this area is not completely known yet.

As described in the chapter "9.3. Reactions of Individual Actors on the Kurdish Referendum of Independence in 2017", the Kurds were not supported by any mentioned actor (with the exception of Israel) with their idea of future independence of the KRI. There were several reasons. Baghdad saw this act as an attempt to disrupt the territorial unity of the state and strongly opposed it. This statement was supported by not only the regional actors (included Saudi Arabia), but mainly by the US and Russia. Moscow's milder rhetoric (albeit with the same mission) provided an opportunity for future economic cooperation with the KRG. The clear answer of the surrounding countries (Turkey, Iran and Syria) was against the referendum because of its populous minority of Kurds on their territory. Successful referendums would encourage them to fulfil similar ambitions in their countries.

The only country that supported the referendum was Israel which subsequently proved as counterproductive for the KRG relations with other mentioned actors.

The key to understanding the principle of the KRG domestic and foreign policy is to balance between actors in the region and at the global level. Firstly, KRG needs to balance between the interests of its people and the demands of Baghdad. Secondly, the KRG has to find the right way between securing energy and goods imports from Turkey and Iran and the pressure of the Turkish and Iranian Kurdish political parties with its armed wings - PKK and PJAK. Thirdly, the KRG has to find an adequate approach to the Syrian Kurds, which is proven to be an important comrade against ISIS. Plus, the KRG needs to balance between the growing leverage of Iran from one side, and Saudi Arabia from the other (however, it is not so strong yet). Last but not least, it must maneuver between the two global powers, the United States and Russia.

To sum up all of these circumstances, the KRG cannot afford to have an enemy, lacking heavy equipment and air force. At the same time, the surrounding countries can always use tactics of closing the borders like it was in the case of Turkey and Iran after the Kurdish referendum in 2017. Indeed, the KRI residents could have serious problems with food and goods supplies in the event of a prolonged closure. In order to maintain the status quo, the KRG must play on all sides and retain the benefits that flow from the KRI's autonomy.

11. Conclusion

This work aimed to perform a comprehensive analysis of the geopolitical position of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and its official political institution of Kurdistan regional government (KRG) on the basis of an in-depth search of data from the expert literature and field interviews when 20 respondents from Erbil and Sulaymaniyah were interviewed. Information gaps were then filled with news from the media⁸². The motivation of this work was the complexity and integration of the issue into one written work as there are many articles that, however, only deal with a section of this issue.

The case study was examined from three different points of view. Firstly, the research focused on the internal structure and position of the KRI in Iraq. Secondly, it directed into the regional context and KRI position between “local” actors. Thirdly, this thesis aimed on the global level with the dominance of the USA, Russia and China and characteristics of their interests and efforts in this area. There was also space given to a non-state actor - ISIS, which significantly influenced not only the KRG and KRI itself but also almost all the relations mentioned in this thesis.

The time frame of this thesis was delimited by two significant events for the Iraqi Kurds. On one side of the timeline, there is the ratification of the new Iraqi constitution in 2005, and on the other, the announcement of the Kurdish referendum on independence and the reaction of selected actors to this act in 2017. As mentioned in the introduction, several events resonated also during the field research and therefore it was meaningful to include them into the time frame. The end of the time frame was set for the beginning of July 2019.

This framing also opened future possible researches aimed on the historical characteristics of the Kurdistan region of Iraq before 1990 or in the current situation, working with the period after the referendum and involving large-scale protests against the Iraqi government, started on the 1st October 2019, whose messages and demands also have moved to the KRI.

The research also opened up topics and themes which would deserve more attention in the future. An example can be a specific form of relations between Turkish, Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish political parties and its impacts on the regional geopolitical context. The future research could also aim at the position of KRI between the US and Iran and their long-term disputes and tensions affecting the region. Additionally, the possible future researcher can

⁸² As it was in the case of Syrian attitude towards the KRG and the Kurdish referendum of independence.

choose and elaborate in detail every single bilateral relation between the KRI and preferred actor.

This study also did not pay much attention to the Iraqi political, administrative and economic internal structure with emphasis on geographical distribution of power. Last but not least, the other actors mentioned in this thesis, for example Iraqi security forces and the Popular mobilization forces should be examined in more detail. Especially then the latter actor as it is an important element in understanding the current internal political and military situation in Iraq.

As for the credibility and transferability of the results, some voices could argue that the research is one-sided, including only the answers from the Kurdish side. However, the involvement of other sides would be extremely costly and time consuming, regardless of the security situation in some selected countries. Locally, however, the answers may legitimately be perceived as one-sided, as the majority of respondents were from Erbil and the sample from Sulaymaniyah, or from the political voices of the PUK (or the Gorran Movement) was not fully represented. It should be added, however, that there have been several attempts for contact, especially with the political scene. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful.

In conclusion, Iraqi Kurds enjoy greater autonomy than their counterparts in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Syria or Iran. This position was gained after the long-term repression from former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and even after his fall in 2003, threatened by sectarian fighting between Sunni and Shia factions or growing Sunni extremism, which resulted in a war with ISIS. As written in the previous chapter, the KRG will have to face a lot of challenges in the future, such as internal division between KDP and PUK, legitimacy of the political system in the KRI, or long-term dispute with Baghdad which causes economic problems and crisis with the greatest impact on the Kurdish citizens. Iraqi Kurds also need to maintain the balance between much stronger actors than the KRG itself, securing and guarding its specific position in the Middle East.

12. Bibliography

ABDULLAH, F., H. (2018): The Political System in Iraqi Kurdistan: Party Rivalries and Future Perspectives. *Asian Affairs*, 49, 4, 606-624.

AHMED, A. H. (2015): The Influence of the Kurdistan Regional Government-Turkey Relations on the Kurdish Question in Turkey. Master's Thesis, Middle Eastern Studies, Center of Middle Eastern Studies, LUND University, Sweden.

ALI, O. (2017): Iran and Barzani: Worsening Relations and the Risk of an Inevitable Clash? *ORSAM Review of Regional Affairs*, 58.

ALI MADIH, M. (2007): The Kurds of Khorasan, Iran & the Caucasus. 11, 1, 11-31.

AL MAKAHLEH, S. (2018): The Arab View of Russia's Role in the MENA: Changing Arab Perceptions of Russia, and the Implications for US Policy. In: Karasik, Blank: Russia in the Middle East, 61-86.

ALMAQBALI, M. (2018): Russia's relations with Gulf states and their effect on regional balance in the Middle East. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, 20, 4, 536-547.

AMALYAN, H. (2018): Implications of the 2017 Independence Referendum of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq on the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Master's Thesis. ARMENIAN ARMED FORCES M.S., Yerevan State University, Yerevan.

ANDERSON, G. V. (2019): US-Kurdish Relations: The 2nd Iraqi-Kurdish War and the Al-Anfal Campaigns. Master's Thesis, Comparative International Relations, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. Venezia.

BARKEY, H. J. (2015): On the KRG, the Turkish- Kurdish Peace Process, and the Future of the Kurds. Working Paper 12, Global Turkey in Europe, Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington.

BARTON, N. (2018): To Arm or Not to Arm the Kurds: A Look as U.S. National Security Interests in Kurdistan. *Pepperdine Policy Review*, 10, 6.

BENGIO, O. (2014): Surprising Ties between Israel and the Kurds. *Middle East Quarterly*, 21, 3, 1-12.

BLANK, S. (2018): The Foundations of Russian Policy in the Middle East. In: Karasik, Blank: Russia in the Middle East, 28-60.

CAETANO, CH (2019): United States interests in the debate on self-determination of Iraqi Kurds. The Fletcher School, Tufts University. Medford. US.

ČERNÝ, K. (2020): Nad propastí: ke kořenům blízkovýchodní nestability. *Geografické rozhledy*, 29, 3, 8-11.

DANĚK, P. (2013): Geografické myšlení: úvod do teoretických přístupů. Masarykova Univerzita, Brno.

DANNREUTHER, R. (2012): Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64, 3, 543-560.

DELANOË, I. (2015): The Kurds: A Channel of Russian Influence in the Middle East. Franco-Turkish Paper No. 14, IFRI Contemporary Turkey Programme in cooperation with Russia/NIS Center, Paris.

DRULÁK, P. (2008): Jak zkoumat politiku: kvalitativní metodologie v politologii a mezinárodních vztazích, Portál, Prague.

EPPEL, M. (2018): A Future for Kurdish Independence? *Middle East Quarterly*, 25, 2, 1-9.

FLORENSA, S. (2014): Transitions and Regional Geopolitics in the Arab World. *Mediterranean Yearbook*, 31-41.

GERRING, J. (2004): What is a Case Study and What is it Good For? *American Political Science Review*, 98, 2, 341-354.

GHAHRIYAN, M. (2018): The Kurdish Factor in Iraq-Gulf Arab States Relations. *CONTEMPORARY EURASIA*, 100-113.

GRIGORIADIS, I., N. (2016): The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the 2015 elections. *Turkish Studies*, 17, 1, 39-46.

GUNES, C., LOWE, R. (2015): The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East. *Middle East and North Africa Programme*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London.

GUNTER, M. (2003): Kurdish Future in a Post-Saddam Iraq. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 23, 1, 9-23.

GUNTER, M. (2011): Arab-Kurdish Relations and the Future of Iraq. *Third World Quarterly*, 32, 9, 1623-1635.

GUNTER, M. (2015): Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the US and Turkey. *Middle East Policy*, 22, 1, 102-111.

HALHALLI, B. (2018): Kurdish Political Parties in Syria: Past Struggles and Future Expectations. *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East: Actors, Ideas, and Interests*, This Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, Switzerland, 27-53.

HAMA, H. H., ALI, O: (2020): De-politicization of the partisan forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *National Identities*, 22, 2, 111-131.

HANDY, N. (2018): Turkey's Evolving Relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq Since the Arab Spring. In: İşıksal, H., Goksel, O.: *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring*, Springer Nature, Switzerland, 181-195.

HARMES, A. (2016): Political Marketing in Post-Conflict Elections: The Case of Iraq. *Journal of Political Marketing*.

HELFONT, S. (2017): Getting Peshmerga Reform Right: Helping the Iraqi Kurds to Help Themselves in Post-ISIS Iraq. Foreign Policy Research Institute, American University of Iraq Sulaimani, IRIS.

HENDL, J. (2005): Kvalitativní výzkum: základní metody a aplikace. Portál, Prague.

HEVIAN, R. (2013): The Main Kurdish Political Parties in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey: A Research Guide. Middle East Review of International Affairs, 17, 2, 94-98.

CHAROUNTAKI, M. (2016): The GCC in Kurdish Politics. Journal of Arabian Studies, 6, 2, 201-215.

CHITTENDEN, M. (2016): Turkey and the Kurds: Conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party and Implications for Turkey-United States Relations. Global Security Studies, 7, 3, 31-40.

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (2015): Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict. Middle East Report N°158.

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (2019): Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria. Middle East Report N°207.

JAMAL, R. (2018): United States and Iraqi Kurdistan: An analysis on the legacy of the US support to the Iraqi Kurds after 1991. Master's Thesis, Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Milan.

JONES, T. C. (2012): America, Oil, and War in the Middle East. The Journal of American History. 99, 1, 208-218.

JUNGBLUTH, S. (2015): The future of Iraqi Kurdistan: The „Islamic State“ as a catalyst for independence? Working papers from the Åland Islands Peace Institute, Åland.

KANE, S. (2011): Iraq's disputed territories: A view of the political horizon and implications for U. S. policy. Peaceworks no. 69, United States Institute of Peace. Washington.

KARASIK, T., BLANK. S. (2018): Russia in the Middle East. The Jamestown Foundation, Washington D. C.

KATZ, M. (2018): What Do They See in Him? How the Middle East Views Putin and Russia. RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST, 219, 2-4.

KAVÁLEK, T., ŠMÍD, T. (2018): Kurdská otázka v Turecku v letech 2009 až 2011: Konflikt (ne)zralý pro řešení? Mezinárodní vztahy, Czech Journal of International Relations, 53, 1, 7-21.

KAVÁLEK, T., MAREŠ, M. (2018): PKK's Friends and Foes in the Middle East Since 1999. Central European Journal of International and Security Studies, 12, 2, 100-129.

KAVÁLEK, T. SOMMER, F. (2019): Russia's Imprint in Iraqi Kurdistan: Rosneft's Ascendancy. Middle East Policy, 26, 4, 91-101.

- KAYA, Z., LOWE, R. (2017): The Curious Question of the PYD-PKK Relationship. In: Stansfield, G., Shareef, M., (ed.) *The Kurdish Question Revisited*. Hurst, London, UK, 275-600.
- KOLÁŘOVÁ, T. (2006): *Kurdský nacionalismus v Turecku: Boj za lidská práva či mezinárodní terorismus?* Diplomová práce. Katedra mezinárodních vztahů a evropských studií, Fakulta sociálních studií, Masarykova Univerzita v Brně.
- KRIEG, A. (2016): Externalizing the burden of war: the Obama Doctrine and US foreign policy in the Middle East. *International Affairs*, London, 92, 1, 97-113.
- LEVERETT, F., BADER, J. (2006): *Managing China-U. S. Energy Competition in the Middle East*. The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *The Washington Quarterly*, 29, 1, 187-201.
- LIGA, A. (2016): *Israel and Iraqi Kurds in a Transforming Middle East*. Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI WORKING PAPERS, 16, 34, 1-20.
- LIGA, A. (2017): The “Israel Factor” and the Iraqi-Kurdish Quest for Independence. Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI COMMENTARIES, 17, 20, 1-5.
- LIJPHART, A. (1971): Comparative politics and the comparative method. *American Political Science Review*, 65, 3, 682-693.
- LIN, CH. (2014): *Al Qaeda and ISIS Have Declared War on China - Will Beijing Now Arm the Kurds?* ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security, 299.
- LIN, CH. (2016): *Will China support an independent Kurdistan?* ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security, 424, 5.
- LINDENSTRAUSS, G., M., CLUZET, A. (2017): *An Independent Iraqi Kurdistan? On the Prospects and Viability of a Future State 2017*. Strategic Assessment, 20, 1, 35-45.
- MAMMADOV, R., KARASIK, T. (2018): *Arab Persian Gulf States’ Investment in Russia*. IndraStra Global, 1-4.
- MANSOUR, R. (2016): *The Sunni Predicament in Iraq*. Carnegie Middle East Center, Washington D. C.
- MCDOWALL, D. (2004): *A modern history of the Kurds*. I.B. Tauris, London and New York.
- MINASIAN, S. (2007): *The Israeli-Kurdish Relations*. 21 - st CENTURY, 1, 15-32.
- MIRTORABI, S. (2016): *Kurdistan Regional Government: Petro-politics in the Post-2003 Era*. *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 2, 4, 2773 - 2778.
- MOJAB, S., GORMAN, R. (2007): *DISPERSED NATIONALISM: War, Diaspora and Kurdish Women’s Organizing*. *Journal of Middle East Women’s studies*, 3, 1, 59-85.
- PAASCHE, T., MANSURBEG, H. (2014): *Kurdistan Regional Government-Turkish energy relations: a complex partnership*. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55, 2, 111-132.

- PALANI, K., KHIDIR, J., DECHESENE, M., BAKKER, E. (2019a): Strategies to Gain International Recognition: Iraqi Kurdistan's September 2017 Referendum for Independence. *Ethnopolitics*, 1-22.
- PALANI, K., KHDIR, J., DECHESENE, M., BAKKER, E. (2019b): The development of Kurdistan's de facto statehood: Kurdistan's September 2017 referendum for independence. *Third World Quarterly*, 1-19.
- PUSANE, O. K. (2016): Turkey's Changing Relations with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 20, 2, 20-28.
- RAFAAT, A. (2007): U.S.-Kurdish Relations in Post-Invasion Iraq. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 11, 4, 79-89.
- ROBERTS, J., M. (2018): Turkey and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Strained Energy Relations. *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 17, 3, 99-109.
- ROBSON, B. (1996): Iraqi Kurds. Their History and Culture. CAL Refugee Fact Sheet Series, Center for Applied Linguistics, Refugee Service Center, Washington D. C., 13.
- ROMANO, D. (2010): Iraqi Kurdistan: challenges of autonomy in the wake of US withdrawal. *International Affairs*, 86, 6, 1345-1359.
- ROMANO, D. (2015): Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey: Temporary Marriage. *Middle East Policy*, 22, 1, 89-101.
- RUSSEL, M. (2018): Russia in the Middle East: From sidelines to centre stage. EPRS - European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament EU.
- SALIM, B. H., MURTUZALIEVA, S. (2019): Kurdistan Regional Governments' (KRG) Economic Relations with Russia in Context of Developing Mutual Hydrocarbons Industry. In: EuroMed Press: 12th Annual Conference of the EuroMed Academy of Business, Business Management Theories and Practices in a Dynamic Competitive Environment, Thessaloniki 1093-1111.
- SAOULI, A. (2019): Sectarianism and Political Order in Iraq and Lebanon. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 19, 1, 67-87.
- SARIKAYA, A. (2018): Turkey-Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government Relations within the Frame of Syrian Civil War. In: Security & sovereignty in the 21st century, Institute for Cultural Relations Policy (ICRP), Budapest, 80-89.
- SINKAYA, B. (2018): The Kurdish question in Iran and its effects on Iran-Turkey relations. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45, 5, 840-859.
- SMITH, C. (2018): Independent Without Independence: The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga in International Law. *Harvard International Law Journal*, 59, 1, 245-277.
- SOMER, M. (2005): Failures of the Discourse of Ethnicity: Turkey, Kurds and the emerging Iraq. *Security Dialogue*, 36, 1, 109-128.

- STAKE, R., E. (1995): *The Art of Case Study Research*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, London.
- STANSFIELD, G. (2013): The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East. *International Affairs*, 89, 2, 259-282.
- STONI, M. A. A., BIN YATIBAN, A. (2019): The relationship between the U.S. and Kurdistan region-Iraq post referendum. 23, 4, 308-321.
- ÜNVER NOI, A. (2012): The Arab Spring, its Effects on the Kurds, and the Approaches of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq on the Kurdish Issue. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 16, 2, 15-29.
- VAN VEEN, E., GRINSTEAD, N., EL KAMOUNI-JANSSEN, F. (2017): A house divided Political relations and coalition-building between Iraq's Shi'a. *Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'*.
- VAN WILGENBURG, W., FUMERTON, M. (2015): Kurdistan's Political Armies: The Challenge of Unifying the Peshmerga Forces. *Civil Military Relations in Arab States*, Carnegie Middle East Center.
- WASSER, B. (2019): *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*. RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy.
- YANG, Z. (2018): *Securing China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Special Report 436. United States Institute of Peace, Washington D. C.
- YILDIZ, K. (2004): *The Kurds in Iraq. The Past, Present and Future*. Pluto Press, London.
- YILMAZ, R. (2017): Turkey-KRG Energy Relations: Internal and External Dynamics, *CESRAN International, Journal of Global Analysis*, 7, 2, 130-154.
- YOSHIOKA, A. (2015): The shifting balance of power in Iraqi Kurdistan: The struggle for democracy with uninstitutionalized governance. *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 9, 1, 21-35.
- ZAMBELIS, CH., GENTRY, B. (2008): China through Arab Eyes: American Influence in the Middle East. *Parameters*, 60-72.
- ŽENKA, J., KOFROŇ, J. (2012): *Metodologie výzkumu v sociální geografii - případové studie*. Ostravská univerzita, Ostrava, 90.

13. Electronic resources

Al Monitor (2017): Baghdad increases pressure on KRG with budget cut, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/kurdistan-iraq-budget-baghdad.html> (21. 11. 2020).

Al Monitor (2019): Iraq struggles with corruption as massive protests rage, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/12/iraq-protests-corruption.html> (21. 11. 2020).

Atlantic Council (2020): Renewed calls for demonstrations on October 25 in Iraq come with hurdles, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/renewed-calls-for-demonstrations-on-october-25-in-iraq-come-with-hurdles/> (22. 11. 2020).

BBC (2014): Iraq takes disputed areas as Kurds 'withdraw to 2014 lines', <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41663350> (21. 11. 2020).

BBC (2019): Iraq unrest: PM Abdul Mahdi to resign after bloodiest day in protests, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50600495> (28. 11. 2020).

Britannica (2020): Kemal Atatürk: president of Turkey <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kemal-Ataturk> (22. 11. 2020).

CONSTITUTE (2020): Constituteproject.org: Iraq's Constitution of 2005, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en (28. 10. 2020).

Ekurd Daily (2017): 'No for Now' Movement for Kurdistan referendum announced, <https://ekurd.net/no-for-now-movement-2017-08-08> (29. 8. 2020).

Geopolitical Monitor (2019): Operation Peace Spring: A Timeline, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/operation-peace-spring-a-timeline/> (21. 11. 2020).

Global-e (2018): An Independent Kurdistan: Will China Overhaul its Non-intervention Policy? <https://www.21global.ucsb.edu/global-e/february-2018/independent-kurdistan-will-china-overhaul-its-non-intervention-policy> (31. 10. 2020).

GOV.KRD (2020): Deputy Prime Minister: Qubad Talabani, <https://gov.krd/english/government/deputy-prime-minister/> (31. 10. 2020).

HARRISON, H., BIRKS, M., FRANKLIN, R., MILLS, J. (2017): Case Study Research: Foundations and Methodological Orientations, FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG, 18, 1, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2655/4079>.

Kurdistan 24 (2018a): PUK officially nominates Barham Salih for Iraqi Presidency, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/80bf9cac-cc26-413f-8b1f-462cabb5251> (31. 8. 2020).

Kurdistan 24 (2018b): KRG appoints new governor for Halabja governorate, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/903db17b-b66b-4137-8188-9c27ef69d54f> (21. 11. 2020).

Kurdistan Region Statistics Office (2015): Map of area of Kurdistan Region & its Governorates, <http://www.krso.net/Default.aspx?page=article&id=1142&l=1> (21. 11. 2020).

MERI: Middle East Research Institute (2016): State-building in a Fragmented Kurdistan Region of Iraq, <http://www.meri-k.org/publication/state-building-in-a-fragmented-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/> (4. 8. 2020).

MERI: Middle East Research Institute (2018): Iraqi Kurdistan - Russia Relations Do Not Come at the Expense of Baghdad, <http://www.meri-k.org/iraqi-kurdistan-russia-relations-do-not-come-at-the-expense-of-baghdad/> (2. 11. 2020).

Middle East Institute (2018): Challenges Facing Iraq's New Generation Movement, <https://www.mei.edu/events/challenges-facing-iraqs-new-generation-movement> (29. 8. 2020).

NATURAL EARTH (2019), Cultural Vectors, Countries, <https://www.naturalearthdata.com/downloads/50m-cultural-vectors/> (28. 10. 2019).

Niqash (2017): Promising Alliance: Kurdish Political Heavyweight Announces Plan To Shake Up Local Voters, <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5750/Kurdish-Political-Heavyweight-Announces-Plan-To-Shake-Up-Local-Voters.htm> (31. 8. 2020).

North Press agency (2020): Coming Syrian Democratic Council conference to discuss participatory and governance, SDC official, <https://npasyria.com/en/50217/> (22. 11. 2020).

Reuters (2017a): Damascus rejects Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-syria-idUSKCN1C00SV> (26. 10. 2020).

Reuters (2017b): Iraqi Kurdish leader says 'yes' vote won independence referendum, <https://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-idINKCN1C112C> (22. 8. 2020).

Reuters (2017c): Kurdistan rejects Iraq's demand to hand over airports, Baghdad readies air ban, <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurs-referendum-airpor/kurdistan-rejects-iraqs-demand-to-hand-over-airports-baghdad-readies-air-ban-idUSKCN1C20U7> (23. 8. 2020).

Rudaw (2018): Update: Salih announces CDJ will not participate in KRG election, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/020920181> (31. 8. 2020).

Rudaw (2020a): Hashd al-Shaabi: A house divided, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/08052020> (31. 10. 2020).

Rudaw (2020b): Rojava official: We've 'started the process' of removing Syrian nationals from al-Hol camp, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/14102020> (22. 11. 2020).

SHAKARIAN, P. A. (2017): Top Ten Origins: Russia's Relations with the Kurds, ORIGINS Current Events in Historical Perspective, Published by the History Departments at The Ohio State University and Miami University, <https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/top-ten-origins-russia-s-relations-kurds> (1. 11. 2020).

The Arab Weekly (2018): Upstart Kurdish party has Iraq-wide ambitions, <https://the arabweekly.com/upstart-kurdish-party-has-iraq-wide-ambitions> (29. 8. 2020).

The Diplomat (2017): China in the Middle East: The Iraqi Kurdish Question, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/china-in-the-middle-east-the-iraqi-kurdish-question/> (31. 10. 2020).

The Guardian (2017): More than 92% of voters in Iraqi Kurdistan back independence, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/27/over-92-of-iraqs-kurds-vote-for-independence> (22. 8. 2020).

The New York Times (2013): China Is Reaping Biggest Benefits of Iraq Oil Boom, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/03/world/middleeast/china-reaps-biggest-benefits-of-iraq-oil-boom.html> (3. 11. 2020).

The New York Times (2020): Iraq Chooses New Prime Minister, an Ex-Intelligence Chief Backed by U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/world/middleeast/iraq-prime-minister-mustafa-khadimi.html> (28. 11. 2020).

The Tahrir institute for Middle East Policy (2018): Kurds' Influence Diminished in Iraqi Elections, <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/kurds-influence-diminished-in-iraqi-elections/> (31. 8. 2020).

The Washington Institute (2018): In Search of a New Patron, the KRG Turns Back to Moscow, Policy Analysis, Policy Watch 2982, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-search-of-a-new-patron-the-krg-turns-back-to-moscow> (21. 11. 2020).

The Washington Post (2017): How the Kurdish independence referendum backfired spectacularly, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-the-kurdish-independence-referendum-backfired-/2017/10/20/3010c820-b371-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html (22. 8. 2020).

USIP (2020): The Iran Primer: Iran's Troubled Provinces: Kurdistan, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/sep/08/iran's-troubled-provinces-kurdistan> (22. 11. 2020).

14. Appendix

Appendix No. 1: Basic information about respondents.

Appendix No. 2: Semi-structured interview.

Appendix No. 3: Map of the Greater Kurdistan.

Appendix No. 4: Map of the Kurdistan region of Iraq with the disputed territories.

Appendix No. 1: Basic information about respondents (Source: author).

| Respondents | initials | interview No. | Age |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------|
| Journalists | RO | 017 | 55 |
| | | | |
| Academic | AK | 001 | 30 |
| | AB | 003 | 45 |
| | NS | 004 | 23 |
| | HJ | 005 | 31 |
| | FJ | 007 | 32 |
| | DM | 009 | 50 |
| | BM | 010 | 43 |
| | KW | 006 | 31 |
| | SF | 012 | 32 |
| | HA | 014 | 38 |
| | KM | 018 | 33 |
| | RB | 002 | 26 |
| | | | |
| Politics KDP | FMB | 019 | 55 |
| | | | |
| Politics PUK | / | | / |
| | | | |
| Politics Gorran | BOA | 020 | 35 |
| | | | |
| Others | RIT | 008 | 36 |
| | AS | 011 | 20 |
| | | | |
| Citizens | PG | 013 | 31 |
| | ADC | 015 | 31 |
| | TK | 016 | 29 |

Appendix No. 2: Semi - structured interview (Source: author).

Geopolitical analysis of the Kurdistan region of Iraq - Master's Thesis

Length: 20-30 minutes

1. **Basic Information (please fulfil empty spaces)**

Name: *Can be anonymous*

Age:

Profession:

2. **Regional actors in the region.**

Please sort these regional actors (their governments) into a point scale according to KRG/KDP/Gorran/PUK relationship with them. You can have only one country name at one number.

Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel

1 - the best relationship

10 - worst relationship

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

(F1) For extreme values (these, which are most close to numbers 1, 2, 9, 10), describe why:

- *Political reasons?*
- *Economy reasons?*
- *Safety and security reasons?*
- *Other reasons (water resources, human rights...)*

(Q1) How do you assess Turkey's role in the region?

3. **Global actors in the region.**

Please sort these global actors (their governments) into a point scale according to KRG/KDP/Gorran/PUK relationship with them. You can have only one country name at one number.

United States of America, Russian Federation, China

1 - the best relationship

5 - worst relationship

1 2 3 4 5

(F2) For extreme values (these, which are most close to numbers 1, 5), describe why:

- Political reasons?
- Economy reasons?
- Safety and security reasons?
- Other reasons (water resources, human rights...)

(Q2) Do you see significant influences of the US or Russia that could influence the formation of the region?

(Q3) Is it good or bad for KDP/Gorran/PUK and why?

(Q4) How do you assess the current situation regarding US-Iranian relations and how do you think it can affect your region?

4. “Regional” political parties.

Please sort these regional Kurdish political actors into a point scale according to KRG/KDP/Gorran/PUK relationship with them. You can have only one country name at one number.

PKK, PYD, PJAK, HDP, KNS, PDKI (KDPI), KDP, PUK

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

(F3) For extreme values (these, which are most close to numbers 1, 2, 7, 8), describe why:

- Political reasons?
- Economy reasons?
- Safety and security reasons?
- Other reasons (water resources, human rights...)

(Q5) What do you think about the presence of PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan?

5. Referendum of independence

(Q6) What do you think of the 2017 referendum? Was it timed well?

How do you evaluate the reactions of?

1.) Regional actors

2.) Global actors

3.) Internal situation (Baghdad reaction):

(Q7) How would you characterize your current relationship (your party relationship) to the relatively newly elected Iraqi government?

(Q8) What do you think is the most important „theme,, to deal with this government?

(Q9) What should be talked about?

(Q10) What are the main topics between Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad?

6. **Conclusion**

Something you want to tell me.

Summary of my thesis:

My name is Filip Sommer and I am from Czech Republic, Prague. I am in the first year of my master's and I am writing a master's thesis about Iraqi Kurdistan. I would like to ask you some questions about Iraqi Kurdistan and Geopolitics-that means questions about a political orientation of the KRI to other states (their governments). I would like to use it in my master's thesis about Iraqi Kurdistan and geopolitical relations with surrounding states and global actors like the USA, Russia and China.

Appendix No. 3: Map of the Greater Kurdistan (Source: Purchased in a bookstore in Erbil).



Appendix No. 4: Map of the Kurdistan region of Iraq with the disputed territories (Source: Purchased in a bookstore in Erbil).

