



Iraq in the 2020's: Stable Union or Balkanized States?

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Iraq in the 2020s: Stable Union or Balkanized States?

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Abstract

Rife with sectarian division in a contentious region, and at the center of numerous global conflicts, the nation of Iraq is a geopolitical paradox in many ways. This paper examines modern-day Iraq on local, regional, and international levels while also exploring the question of whether the struggling country is destined to remain a single nation or would be more viable if split into two or even three separate states.

After thorough analysis of each possible outcome, I conclude that a two-state solution is the most stable option, in which Iraqi Kurdistan secedes from the rest of the country, and rival Sunni- and Shi'a-majority regions reunite under new government leadership.

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Glossary of Acronyms

Acronym	Description
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Political party of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan)
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq (predecessor to Daesh)
ARAMCO	Arab-American Corporation (huge oil-producing company in Saudi Arabia)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party (one-party government of the People's Republic of China)
EU	European Union
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (powerful wing of the Iranian military)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (one of two major political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, party of Prime Minister Masoud Barzani)
KDP-S	Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria
KGB	State Security Bureau (Intelligence apparatus of the former Soviet Union)
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (semi-autonomous government of Iraqi Kurdistan)
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OBOR	One Belt, One Road (network of international infrastructure projects overseen by the Chinese government)
PKK	Kurdistan Worker's Party (Communist Kurdish separatist faction in Turkey, considered a terrorist organization by Turkish and American governments, responsible for militant attacks in Turkey)
PLA	People's Liberation Army (China's national military)
PM	Prime Minister
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces (powerful network of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (one of two major political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish-backed and partially U.S.-backed rebel forces in Syria)
YPG	People's Protection Group (Kurdish Military Force)

Glossary of Special Terms

Term	Description
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue	Address in Washington, DC of the White House, the residence of the sitting president of the United States
Ayatollah	The Ayatollah, or Grand Ayatollah, is considered in Shi'a Islam to be the highest religious authority in a nation. Iran's Ayatollah is its most powerful political figure; Iraq's Ayatollah tries to focus his authority on religious matters and avoid inserting himself into political matters when possible.
Baath	Party of former IraqI dictator Saddam Hussein and current Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Characterized by heavy-handed rule, mostly secular. Many former Baathists in Iraq after Hussein's ouster tended to gravitate toward extremist organizations.
Daesh	Self-proclaimed Islamic State terrorist group. Daesh is an Arabic double-entendre, as it both spells out the Arabic acronym for the " <i>al-Dula al-Islamia fii Iraq wa al-Shaam</i> ", or "Islamic State of Iraq and the Shaam" (northern Levant region), and is a colloquial Arabic term for a backward or bigoted person stuck in unenlightened ways of thinking.
de-Baathification	US strategy in the initial stages of its military operations in Iraq, which aimed to purge future governments of any remaining elements of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. It had the unintended consequence of heavily disenfranchising large segments of Iraq's population.
<i>Fatwa</i>	Edict issued by an Islamic cleric that imparts religious authority and guidance on a current issue.
Islamism	Also called "political Islam," a theocratic political system or paradigm based on the premise of using Islamic text as a constitution to dictate state affairs.
Kremlin	The seat of government of the Russian Federation, located in Moscow, often used in the media to symbolize the government itself.
<i>Kulhum ya'ni kulhum</i>	Arabic for "All of them means all of them," a popular chant in the 2019-2020 anti-government protests in Lebanon, expressing the urge to purge all elements of perceived corruption from the government.

Term	Description
Nine-dash Line	Name for the demarcation of the South China Sea which the Chinese government uses to justify territorial claims in the region. The Chinese Government insists that territory within the nine-dash line is part of the sovereign Chinese territory.
<i>Nom du guerre</i>	French for “war name.” War names are often used by militant leaders in the Middle East to obfuscate their identities and family ties
One Belt One Road	Name for a series of infrastructure projects around the world through which the Chinese government seeks to develop commerce while gaining soft power and influence.
Shi’a Crescent	The idea of a crescent region of Iranian influence and expansionism that extends from Tehran across northern Iraq, through Lebanon and Syria, to the Mediterranean Sea, threatening regional stability. When this region is plotted on a map, it forms a crescent shape, a prominent symbol in Islam.
Street	Used in Middle Eastern media as a metaphor for popular grassroots sentiment in a region.
Stuxnet	2009 cyber attack that caused mechanical failures at the Natanz Uranium Enrichment Center in Iran, crippling Iran’s suspected nuclear weapon development program. No country officially claimed responsibility for the attack, but the US, Israel, and Netherlands are the alleged perpetrators.
<i>Sura</i>	A chapter of the Qur’an, Islam’s holiest text. Each <i>sura</i> covers a specific topic.
Treaty of Lausanne	Modified version of the Sèvres treaty which, due to Turkish pressure, excluded any route to the formation of a Kurdish state.
Treaty of Sèvres	Original treaty by European powers following World War I to partition former Ottoman territory into independent states. Included a plan to establish an independent Kurdish state.

Glossary of Important People

Person	Description
Abadi, Haider	Former Prime Minister of Iraq (2014-2018)
Abdullah II	Current King of Jordan
Abdul-Mahdi, Adel	Former Prime Minister of Iraq (2018-2019) and Current Caretaker Prime Minister
Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud	Former President of Iran (2005-2013)
Allawi, Muhammad Tawfiq	Resigned as Iraqi Prime-Minister Designate in March 2020 after failing to form a unity government
Amiri, Hadi	Leader of Iraq's Badr Brigades, powerful political figure with ties to the Iranian Government
Assad, Bashar	Current President of Syria
Baghdadi, Abu Bakr	Founder of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (Daesh) and its leader until his death in a U.S. led raid in October 2019
Barzani, Mansour	Current Prime Minister of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan government
Barzani, Mullah Mustafa	Founder of the modern Kurdish independence movement, father of current Kurdish prime minister, Mansour Barzani
Biden, Joe	Former U.S. Senator from Delaware. Former U.S. Vice President under Barack Obama. Democratic Party candidate running for president in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.
Bin Hamad Al-Thani, Tamim	Current Emir of Qatar

Person	Description
Bin Laden, Osama	Former leader of Al-Qaeda, masterminded the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, killed in a raid by U.S. forces in 2011
Bin Salman, Muhammad	Current Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia
Bush, George W.	Former President of the United States (2001-2009)
Clinton, Hillary	Former U.S. First Lady and Former Secretary of State, Lost the 2016 Presidential Election to Donald Trump
Erdogan, Recep Tayyip	Current President of Turkey
Ghaani, Esmail	Current leader of the Iranian Quds Special Operations Forces
Graham, Lindsay	U.S. Senator from South Carolina, ally of President Trump who sharply criticized Trump's withdrawal of U.S. Forces for Syria in 2020
Gülen, Fetullah	Prominent Turkish cleric whose followers strongly oppose the current Turkish government, lives in exile in the United States
Hadi, Abdu Rabbouh Mansur	Current President-in-Exile of Yemen (2012-present), embattled against the Iranian-backed Houthi movement, who have taken over large swaths of Yemen and driven him to flee to Saudi Arabia
Haftar, (Field Marshal) Khalifa	Current Commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) who controls a large swath of eastern Libya and seeks to seize control of the country from the current Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli
Hamid, Ali Farhan	Current Governor of Iraq's Al-Anbar Province

Person	Description
Hussein, Saddam	Former dictator of Iraq deposed and then captured by U.S.-led military forces in 2003 and hanged by an Iraqi tribunal in 2006
Jabouri, Raed	Current Governor of Iraq's Saladin province
Khamenei, Ali Hassan	Current Ayatollah of Iran who maintains ultimate authority over the Islamic Republic
Maliki, Nouri	Former Prime Minister of Iraq (2006-2014)
Mareed, Mansour	Current Governor of Iraq's Ninewah Province
Morsi, Muhammad	Former Muslim Brotherhood-aligned President of Egypt (2012-2013) elected in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and deposed in a popular uprising a year later
Mossadegh, Mohammad	Former Prime Minister of Iran (1951-1953), ousted in a coup d'état covertly orchestrated by the United States' and the United Kingdom's intelligence agencies, and replaced by secular Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi
Muhandis, Abu Mahdi	<i>Nom-du-guerre</i> of Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi, former leader of the Iranian-backed Khata'ib Hezbollah militia and by extension the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, killed in a U.S. Airstrike in January 2020
Nahyan, Khalifa Bin Zayed	Current Grand Emir of the United Arab Emirates (UAE)
Nasrallah, Hassan	Current Leader of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah party in Lebanon
Obama, Barrack	Former President of the United States (2009-2017)

Person	Description
Pahlavi, Shah Mohammad Reza	Secular former Shah of Iran (1953-1979) who was installed by a covertly orchestrated coup d'état by the United States and the United Kingdom, and overthrown by disenfranchised Iranians in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which set Iran under the strict Islamic rule and harshly anti-Western ideology of Shi'a clerics
Pompeo, Mike	Current U.S. Secretary of State
Putin, Vladimir	Current and longtime President of Russia, former Soviet State Security Bureau (KGB) officer
Qorashi, Abu Ibrahim Al-Hassimi	Current leader of Daesh who took over after the death of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in October 2019
Rouhani, Hassan	Current President of Iran (2013-present)
Rubio, Marco	U.S. Senator from Florida, staunch ally of President Trump who sharply criticized Trump's withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Syria in 2019
Sadr, Muqtada	Popular Shi'a Muslim cleric in Iraq with a large and often militant following who began to oppose the current Iraqi government in 2019 during anti-corruption protests in Basra
Saleh, Ali Abdullah	Former and first President of united Yemen (1990-2012), ousted in 2012 following the Arab Spring protests, and replaced by current President-in-Exile, Abdu Rabbouh Mansur Al-Hadi
Salman I	Current King of Saudi Arabia
Sarraj, Fayez	Current Prime Minister of the internationally-recognized Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli

Person	Description
Sisi, Abdul Fatah	Current President of Egypt (2014-present), who was elected after deposing Muhammad Morsi in 2013
Sistani, Ali	Current Ayatollah of Shi'a Muslims in Iraq, who exercises considerable political influence in Baghdad, but not final authority like his counterpart in Iran
Soleimani, Qassem	Former leader of the Iranian Quds Special Operations Forces, killed in a U.S. airstrike in January 2020
Trump, Donald	Current President of the United States (2017-present)
Xi Jinping	Current self-declared President for Life of China (2013-present)
Yahya, Ahmet S.	Former Turkish police chief who allegedly witnessed the Turkish government providing materiel support to Daesh
Zarqawi, Abu Musb	Former deputy of Osama bin Laden who oversaw Al-Qaeda in Iraq until he was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006
Zawahiri, Ayman Muhammad	Current leader of Al-Qaeda
Zurfi, Adnan	Current Prime Minister Designate of Iraq, appointed March 2020

Glossary of Geographic Locations

Place Name	Description
Aden	Second-largest city in Yemen, port city on the Gulf of Aden, center of Yemeni support for the internationally-recognized government-in-exile of Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi movement
Al-Bukamar	Syrian city on the Iraqi border, last stronghold of Daesh caliphate, site of the U.S. raid in 2019 that killed Daesh leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi
Al-Anbar	Largest province in Iraq by area, located in western desert region of Iraq, Sunni majority population
Aleppo	Second-largest city in Syria, site of large-scale clashes in 2018 between pro- and anti-government forces in the Syrian Civil War
Amman	Capital and largest city of Jordan, used to symbolize the Jordanian government
Ankara	Capital of Turkey, used to symbolize the Turkish government
Baghdad	Capital and largest city in Iraq, used to symbolize the current Iraqi government
Baku	Capital and largest city of Azerbaijan, used to symbolize the Azerbaijani government
Basra	Second-largest city in Iraq, Arabian/Persian Gulf port, only coastal port in Iraq, initial site of 2019 anti-government protests in Iraq
Beijing	Capital of the People’s Republic of China, used to symbolize the Chinese government (Chinese Communist Party, CCP)
Beirut	Capital and largest city of Lebanon, used to symbolize the Lebanese government
Brussels	Capital and largest city of Belgium, seat of the European Union (EU), used to symbolize the European Union government

Place Name	Description
Cairo	Capital and largest city of the Arab Republic of Egypt, used to symbolize the Egyptian government
Chechnya	Caspian region in southeastern Russia, which, along with the neighboring Republic of Dagestan, is home to radical Islamic separatist movements within Russia
Dagestan	Caspian region in southeastern Russia, which, along with the neighboring Republic of Chechnya, is home to radical Islamic separatist movements within Russia
Dahuk	Capital of Dahuk province on Iraq's northern border, part of Iraqi Kurdistan
Doha	Capital and largest city of the Emirate of Qatar, used to symbolize the Qatari government
Erbil	Capital of Erbil Province in Iraq and Capital of the Kurdish semi-autonomous government, used to symbolize the Kurdistan government and the government of a possible future Kurdistan State
Euphrates River	One of the two major rivers in Iraq that, along with the Tigris, forms the "Fertile Crescent", originates in central Turkey and flows through Syria and Iraq, serves as a natural barrier between pro-government forces and Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) in Syria
Euphrates Valley	Drainage basin of the Euphrates River that, along with the Anbar Desert, encompasses most of the Sunni-majority portion of Iraq. Used here to reference this region of Iraq
Gaziantep	City in Southern Turkey near the Syrian border, site of alleged clandestine Turkish operations in support of Syrian extremists in 2015
Grozny	Capital of the Republic of Chechnya region of Russia, which is home to radical Islamic separatist movements within Russia
Halabja	Province in northeastern Iraq that broke away from Sulaymaniyah province in 2014, part of Iraqi Kurdistan

Place Name	Description
Halabja	Kurdish city in northern Iraq, site of mass chemical weapon attacks on civilians by the Saddam Hussein regime in 1988
Hama	City in western Syria, site of 1982 massacre of Syrian citizens by the government of Hafez Assad, predecessor and father of current Syrian president Bashar Assad
Helebce	Capital of Halabja province in northeastern Iraq, part of Iraqi Kurdistan
Hong Kong	Semi-autonomous region of China, former British territory, site of major 2019 protests against perceived Chinese government overreach in the region
Idlib	City in northwestern Syria, site of clashes between Turkish and Russian-backed Syrian military forces in 2019 and 2020
Istanbul	Largest city in Turkey, lies on the Bosphorus straight, a navigational chokepoint between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea
Jeddah	Second-largest city in Saudi Arabia, port of entry for pilgrims to Mecca and Medina
Jerusalem	Capital of Israel, used to symbolize the Israeli government, considered a holy site in Judaism, Christianity, and Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Control of the city contested between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization; straddles the border between Israel and the Palestinian West Bank territory
Karbala	Capital of Karbala province in southern Iraq, considered a holy city in Shi'a Islam
Kirkuk	Capital of Kirkuk province in northeastern Iraq, hotly contested between the Iraqi and Kurdish governments; site of fighting between the two in 2017
Kobani	Syrian city on the Syrian border east of the Euphrates River, invaded by Turkish forces in 2019 to fight Kurdish presence in the region following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the area

Place Name	Description
Kurdistan	Semi-autonomous region and potential future state in northern Iraq, consisting of Erbil, Dahuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja provinces
Latakia	Syrian port city on the Mediterranean Sea, site of a large Russian naval base representing Syria's strategic importance to Russia
Lhasa	Capital of the Chinese province of Tibet, used to symbolize Tibetan interests in opposition to the Chinese government
London	Capital and largest city of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, used to symbolize the British government
Luhansk	Capital of Luhansk Oblast in Ukraine, site of continued fighting between the Ukrainian government forces and Russian-backed separatist forces
Macau	Semi-autonomous region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China, former Portuguese territory
Makhachkala	Capital of the Republic of Dagestan region of Russia, which is home to radical Islamic separatist movements within Russia
Manama	Capital and largest city of the Emirate of Bahrain, used to symbolize the Bahraini government
Mashhad	Second-largest city in Iran, located in the northeast of the country near the borders with Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, birthplace of Ayatollah Ali Hussein Khamenei
Moscow	Capital and largest city of the Russian Federation, used to symbolize the Russian government headquartered at the Kremlin in its central Red Square
Mosul	Third-largest city in Iraq, capital of Ninewah province in northwestern Iraq and likely capital of any future Ninewah state, invaded by Daesh in 2014 and liberated in 2016, used to symbolize the government of a possible future Ninewah State
Muscat	Capital of the Sultanate of Oman, used to symbolize the Omani government

Place Name	Description
Najaf	Capital of Najaf province in southern Iraq, considered a holy city in Shi'a Islam
Ninewah	Second most populated province in Iraq; assumed name of a possible future breakaway state in the Sunni-majority regions of Iraq, which would include Ninewah, Al-Anbar, and Saladin provinces
Ramadi	Capital of Al-Anbar province in western Iraq
Raqqa	City in north-central Syria, former caliphate capital of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (Daesh)
Riyadh	Capital and largest city of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, used to symbolize the Saudi government
Saladin	Sunni-majority province in north-central Iraq, declared a state of semi-autonomous rule in 2011
Sana'a	Internationally-recognized capital and largest city of Yemen, although the internationally-recognized government is currently in exile in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; currently controlled by the Iranian-backed Houthi movement
Strait of Hormuz	Shipping chokepoint between the Arabian/Persian Gulf and its only outlet to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, flanked by Oman and Iran and critical for the passage of Gulf oil to the rest of the world
Suez Canal	Critical shipping route in Egypt between the mainland and Sinai peninsula, under the control of the Egyptian government, connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and by extension the Indian Ocean, providing a commercial shipping route between Europe and East Asia without having to travel around the whole of the African continent, critical component of the Chinese government's "One Belt One Road" initiative
Sulaymaniyah	Capital of Sulaymaniyah province in northeastern Iraq, part of Iraqi Kurdistan

Place Name	Description
Tehran	Capital and largest city of the Islamic Republic of Iran, used to symbolize the Iranian government
Tibet	Southwestern highland province in China, home to large separatist movements that enjoy a large amount of international support due in part to the influence of the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama
Tigris River	One of the two major rivers in Iraq that, along with the Euphrates, forms the “Fertile Crescent,” originates in eastern Turkey and flows through Iraq
Tikrit	Capital of Saladin province in north-central Iraq, hometown of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein
Tripoli (Lebanon)	Costal city in northern Lebanon, site of killing of several anti-government protestors in 2019
Urumqi	Capital of the Chinese Xinjiang province, used to symbolize Uyghur interests in opposition to the Chinese government
Washington	Capital (city) of the United States of America, used to symbolize the American government
Xinjiang	Province in northwestern China with a mostly Uyghur-Turkic ethnic population, scene of international condemnation of the Chinese government for its heavy-handed surveillance and mass-internment of Uyghur Muslims over concerns of radicalization
Yerevan	Capital and largest city of Armenia, used to symbolize the Armenian government

Chapter I

Introduction

Five major wars in four decades (Iran-Iraq in the 1980s, Desert Storm and the Kurdish civil war in the 1990s, Operation Iraqi Freedom in the 2000s, and the fight against Daesh in the 2010s) have rendered the nation of Iraq very unstable; yet it remains a strategically vital crossroads for several world powers. Compounding the problem is the fact that Iraq is a sectarian state whose borders were drawn by foreign powers and whose people are not necessarily unified as a nation. While many minority groups exist throughout the country, three major geopolitical affiliations continually vie for control and influence within Iraq: (1) the Shi'a Muslim-dominated bloc in central and southeastern Iraq, (2) the Sunni Muslim-dominated bloc in the west, and (3) the Kurds in the north.

Since the American invasion in 2003, scholars, journalists, and policymakers have posed the question of whether Iraq would be better off divided into two or even three separate nations. In fact, it was Joe Biden, then-U.S. Senator, now U.S. presidential candidate who co-wrote (in November 2003, with a *New York Times* reporter) a proposed partitioning strategy (Bernstam, 2011; Chmaytelli, 2016; Gelb, 2003; Halbert, 2006; Ramsden, 2016). But today, post-Saddam Hussein Iraq remains a single, if struggling, sovereign state.

However, the reality on the ground in Iraq today is much different than a decade and a half ago. Modern Iraq is a highly contested region involved in some form in several

regional conflicts with global security implications: the ongoing Sunni-Shi'a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in which both countries seek to shape the Middle East region through proxies and financial/military/diplomatic operations; and the Kurdish-Turkish rivalry in the north. Additionally, the United States has great interest in defending its hard-fought geopolitical gains against growing Iranian influence in Iraq. Israel, too, seeks to temper Iranian inroads into Iraq because the country represents a potential staging point for Iranian attacks against the Israelis. Meanwhile, a powerful country like Russia must balance its relationships with the Syrian regime and its cooperation with quasi-rivals of Iran like Turkey and some Kurdish factions. In turn, Syria depends on Iranian support from Iraqi militias.

Of course, all countries in the region and beyond are opposed (at least officially) to a resurgence of terrorist groups like self-proclaimed Islamic State (Daesh), which tend to thrive in the absence of a stable governing force. But countries like Turkey, as I will show in my analysis, are not averse to exploiting this threat in pursuit of other geopolitical interests. Russia, China, and the European Union are all especially sensitive to the threat such groups pose to their internal security and stability, but their interests are not necessarily aligned in Iraq, either. Growing unrest within Iraq in 2019, most visible in the wave of anti-government protests in cities across the country, betrays a weakening of the central government in Baghdad, especially after the October 2019 resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi.

For each of the above-mentioned external powers that have vested interests in Iraq and the surrounding region, Iraq's destabilization creates a sense of urgency for the other countries' leaders to make quick decisions in defending their interests in the face of a

rapidly shifting situation, even when the complicated and often contradictory web of alliances and rivalries obfuscates what exactly might happen as a result of those decisions.

With all of these factors in mind, it is clear that Iraq's future will have a significant impact on the future of much of the rest of the world. Following the rise of Daesh in 2014 and the Kurdish Independence referendum of 2017, it is worth revisiting the question: Would Iraq and the surrounding region best preserve stability by manifesting as one, two, or three Iraqi nation states?

Hypothesis

My hypothesis is that a three-state solution will prove to be the most stable and viable outcome as a result of the deep-seated rifts within Iraqi society that will be difficult to reconcile, and because of the complex and competing strategic needs of regional powers to contain others' expansion into Iraq. For this purpose, the maximum possible number of "buffer-zone" states seems conducive.

The corresponding opposite (null) hypothesis is that either the one-state or two-state outcome provides a more geopolitically stable situation. In order to effectively prove my hypothesis, or at least support it with an analytically sound logical model, I must sufficiently show why my hypothesis is reasonable and supported by the current reality on the ground; also, that the null hypotheses (i.e., the alternatives) are not logically congruent with the current situation as viewed in the context of the conglomeration of competing strategic interests of the regional and international powers at play in the

region. If I cannot determine any definitive “most stable” outcome, I will be unable to prove my hypothesis.

It is important to note that “stability,” in the context of this analysis, will not be defined as the avoidance of conflict or even warfare in the immediate term. Rather, I will seek to find optimal stability in the long term in terms of what happens after the dust settles. I will define the final stability of each outcome by the lowest aggregate of expected conflicts among players, both in terms of domestic disputes internal to Iraq and in terms of power struggles between foreign powers, which I would not expect to be resolved by coercion, short-term warfare, or diplomacy. I would expect it to result in long-term (>5-10 years) unrest. In other words, I will analyze and compile which set of conflicting actors’ interests are likely to be resolved, and which are likely to result in continued conflict. In turn, this will affect the survivability of the resultant Iraqi state or states in each scenario. Ultimately, however, my goal is not to answer yes or no to this hypothesis, but to answer whether scenario A, scenario B, or scenario C, provides the most stable outcome.

Chapter II

Research Methodology and Analysis Strategy

I will approach this problem from a bottom-up perspective, starting from player interests individually in order to determine how I would expect them to converge or clash with each other when viewed globally. After identifying the important players, I will run an individual analysis for each player to examine the domestic, regional, and international interests and priorities of the governing powers for that player, and specifically how these factors apply to Iraq and the surrounding area.

Based on this knowledge, I will analyze the extent to which that player benefits or loses in a scenario of Kurdistan independence, and then the extent to which that player benefits or loses in a scenario where the western Iraqi provinces of Saladin, Al-Anbar, and Ninewah secede from Iraq. This analysis will provide a reasonable basis to ascertain what will be the likely responses of each player to either scenario. This will be the most research-intensive portion of the analysis, because the steps that follow will rely on logical inferences made from these case studies and other background information.

In this construct, I will consider the initial division, or lack thereof, of modern-day Iraq as the independent variable with three potential values as defined above. The dependent variable is the resulting level of stability from each of these cases, in terms of stability as it is defined in my hypothesis. To link the two, I will analyze the reactions from local, regional, and global players with interest in the outcome of Iraqi geopolitics.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will consider nine principal players in the individual actor studies:

1. Iraq (the current parliamentary government in Baghdad, headed by its current caretaker prime minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi).
2. Kurdistan (the semi-autonomous regional government of Kurdistan, headed by its current prime minister Masrour Barzani).
3. Ninewah (currently, the provincial governments of Ninewah, Saladin, and Al-Anbar, headed by their governors, Mansour Al-Mareed, Raed Al-Jabouri, and Ali Farhan Hadeed, respectively. In the event of secession from Iraq, it is assumed that these three governates would form a unity government headquartered in Mosul.)
4. Iran (the theocratic government in Tehran whose affairs of state are headed by current president Hassan Rouhani, but whose governing policies are ultimately dictated by Shi'a Muslim cleric Ayatollah Ali Hussein Khamenei).
5. Saudi Arabia/United Arab Emirates/Jordan/Egypt (the monarchical government in Riyadh headed by current king Salman Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would likely act as the head of any Arab coalition in Iraq, acting in concert with the government of the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi, headed by Emir Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan; the government of Jordan in Amman under the rule of King Abdullah II; and the government of Egypt, headed by president Abdul-Fatah el-Sisi.)
6. Turkey/Qatar/Muslim Brotherhood (the government in Ankara, controlled in majority by current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and

Development (AKP) Party. The interests of the state of Qatar (the government based in Doha headed by Emir Tamid bin Hamad al-Thani), and the loosely defined but influential Muslim Brotherhood political movement across the Middle East, also tend to align with Turkey.)

7. The United States (the democratic-republican government in Washington, D.C., headed by current president, Donald Trump, but highly tempered by a bipartisan and bi-cameral Congress).
8. Russia (the federal government in Moscow whose policy is dominated by longstanding president, Vladimir Putin).
9. China (the Chinese Communist Party seated in Beijing, under the direction of self-proclaimed “president-for-life” Xi Jinping).

I chose the following players to represent the three over-arching dynamics at play in Iraq:

- Southern/Central Iraq, Ninewah, and Kurdistan—represent the three main competing populations in *Iraq*.
- Iran, the alliance of Saudi Arabia/United Arab Emirates/ Jordan/Egypt, and the alliance of Turkish/Qatari/Muslim-Brotherhood—represent the three main entities competing for power in the *Middle East region*.
- United States, China, and Russia—represent competing global superpowers that strive to displace each other on *the global stage*, including in Iraq.

While countries like Israel and Syria also provide unique dynamics in Iraq that do not necessarily align with these nine players, for the most part I lump Israel’s interests

together with those of the United States, and the Syrian government's interests with those of Russia.

The actions and interests of other important actors like the European Union, the United Nations, the British government, the French government, the Lebanese government, the Kuwaiti government, the Bahraini government, the Omani government, the Yemeni government-in-exile, the Libyan government, Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, Daesh, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Al-Nusra Front, the Free Syrian Army, supporters of exiled Turkish cleric Fetullah Gulen, and supporters of cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, will be viewed in the context of how they apply to these nine principal parties.

Once I have outlined these nine individual actor studies, I will look at each of the three scenarios for Iraq—remaining unified, Kurdistan separation, and both Kurdistan and Ninewah separation—before building an aggregate model of the geopolitical outcome for each based on the responses of all nine actors as a whole. I will examine some amount of background history for each player to the extent needed to establish context and discover the players' approaches to similar challenges and their likely responses to developments in Iraq.

I will conduct a second round of analysis based on how or if each player will react to this outcome in response to the actions of the other players. My goal is to determine an “end state” for each scenario, predicting which players will ultimately settle resulting conflicts therein or at least establish a new standoff position, and which players will likely pursue ongoing conflict that would destabilize the region.

Finally, I will compare all three scenarios to determine the most “stable” outcome for all players involved and for Iraq and the region as a whole. This level of stability will constitute the dependent variable, and the one that I am ultimately seeking to evaluate in comparison to the independent variable.

Chapter III

Literature Review

Many Sunni and Kurdish Iraqis feel disenfranchised from their government in Baghdad (Chmaytelli, 2016; Ramsden, 2016). Foreign interests in the region are largely known, as are the potential benefits and pitfalls of a divided Iraq for individual actors (Alterman, 2007; Ayman, 2014; Chaziza, 2017; Pletka, 2012), and the sectarian makeup and distribution of the Iraqi population (Middle East: Iraq, 2018).

Several well-circulated analyses of specific aspects of Iraq already exist in the literature, outlining geopolitical outlooks for Iraqi Kurds. For example, Jenna Krajeski (2016) paints a mixed picture for their future and suggests reliance on the United States for a successful future of both Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq (Al-Arabiya, 2019; BBC, 2017; Caspani, 2019; Chmaytelli, 2016; Chulov, 2014; Lake, 2017; Martin, 2017; Morris, 2017; Osborn, 2019; Ramsden, 2016).

Other literature, such as Walker's "The Revenge of the Shia" (2006), focuses on Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a populations and highlights the importance of containing Iranian attempts to influence Iraq's Shi'a adherents (Abdulrazaq, 2019; Barzegar, 2008; Carter, 2014; Ghosh, 2019; Rubaie, 2019; Salhy, 2014; Shafaaq News, 2019). Scholars such as Feisal Amin Rasoul al-Istrabadi (2007) examine the prospects of the Iraqi government, asserting that preserving the current Iraqi state is vital for maintaining some semblance of order in the region (Al-Arabiya, 2019; Collard, 2018; Dodge, 2013; Ghosh, 2019; Totten, 2015). Likewise, experts like Daniel L. Byman (2005) assert the importance of bolstering the government in Baghdad in order to keep terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in check

(Carter, 2014; Ghosh, 2019; Ibrahim, 2015; Investigative Journal (UK), 2019; Jabouri, 2010; Raphelson, 2019; Strassmann, 2007; Weaver, 2006).

Iran's interaction with Iraqis is central to arguments from analysts like Michael Bernstam (2011), who proposes that the United States and its Arab allies should support Kurdish independence as a mechanism to counter Iran's regional ambitions (Al-Arabiya English, 2020; Barzegar, 2008; Cockburn, 2019; McDowall, 2014; Pletka, 2012; Pregent, 2020; Wehrey, 2009). Analyst Mark Strassmann (2007), on the other hand, points to the United States' involvement in the region and the difficulties the U.S. has faced in trying to bring Iraq together to achieve Washington's strategic goals there. Mordechai Chaziza (2017) looks at Iraq's situation through the lens of the Great Powers Competition, particularly as it applies to China's rising power, which has a vested interest in keeping Iraq in one piece. However, what seems to be lacking is a comprehensive analysis that weighs competing interests against each other to determine what solutions may ultimately be feasible in providing a stable nation-state.

There is some existing literature that supports the need to maintain a unified Iraqi state. The main arguments there tend to focus either on cultural identity and the historical basis for an Iraqi nation, or they pose a slippery-slope paradigm in which dividing Iraq would only further destabilize regional relations and stoke sectarian tensions among minority groups hoping to further subdivide. In the case of the former, scholars like Nahar Muhammad Nuri (2018) rightly call into question the assertion that Iraq is a British construct that exists only as a byproduct of the Sykes-Picot negotiations in the aftermath of World War I, instead pointing to a deep Ottoman and pre-Ottoman history in the Iraqi region as a whole. Unfortunately, this argument offers limited insight into the

cultural motivations of some Iraqis, is largely academic in nature, and is hardly relevant in terms of current *realpolitik* considerations in the region at large.

The warning against further destabilization is usually presented from the American/Western perspective, which emphasizes the negative impact on U.S.-Turkey relations that would result from backing an independent Kurdistan (Istrabadi, 2007; McHugo, 2013; Terrill, 2005). This warning is valid, but the larger argument behind it is one that presumes any short-term bucking of the status quo will result in long-term instability, which is not necessarily true. Additionally, it is not necessarily the case that an Iraq divided into two or three states will continue to fragment unabatedly, because the external interests that foment larger breakaway movements are less likely to be present in the case of smaller ones (McHugo, 2013). The 2014 invasion and occupation of the Ninewah province by Daesh, and the subsequent evolution of the Iraqi political system in response to it, has largely changed the underlying realities of these arguments, most of which originate from the pre-2014 era.

However, it must be said that most of the existing literature on the topic seems to support Kurdistan separation with possibly a follow-on Sunni/Shi'a partitioning of the remainder of Iraq. This literature seems to have evolved over time with the Iraqi situation. Articles from the days leading up to and in the early stages of the 2003 Iraq war often cite policymakers' wishes to accommodate what they believed were irreconcilable differences within the Iraqi populace and balance each other's interests to maintain some semblance of order in the region (Gelb, 2003; Halbert, 2006). These arguments may have been valid but were often oversimplified or tempered with unrealistic expectations (Halbert, 2006). In more recent years, the discussion of Kurdistan separation has evolved

into one of containing and balancing regional aggressors. In the words of current Kurdistan Regional Government President, Masrour Barzani: “If we have three confederated states, we will have [three equal] capitals, so one is not above the other” (quoted in Chmaytelli, 2016).

With the decisive mandate of Kurdistan’s 2017 independence referendum in mind (BBC, 2018), many scholars have espoused Kurdish independence not only as an inevitable and necessary pressure release for Arabs and Kurds within Iraq, but also as a strategic stabilizing force in the region and a mechanism to balance regional powers. Literature has emerged in recent years describing Kurdistan as a check against Iranian expansion and Arab concerns of a “Shi’a Crescent” between Iran and the Mediterranean Sea (Barzegar, 2008), as well as a potential stumbling block for China as it fights to suppress its own potential separatist movements (Bernstam, 2011; Chmaytelli, 2016; Ramsden, 2016; Chaziza, 2017).

Chapter IV

Analysis of Potential State Actors

The view of a three-state outcome as both an inevitable product of modern Iraqi sectarianism and a mechanism to balance power in the region represents the logic behind my hypothesis that a three-state outcome is the most viable and stable end-state for Iraq. However, my goal is to incorporate all the arguments described here into a construct in which I can weigh them against each other and objectively determine the most locally, regionally, and globally stable path forward for Iraq. To begin, I will analyze the state and potential state actors outlined above.

Iraqi Kurdistan

Kurdistan's hopes for statehood began a century ago in the aftermath of World War I. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Allied powers were left with the task of drawing the borders of newly established Middle Eastern states. Initially, the Kurdish population of the Middle East was promised a state of its own, as per the Treaty of Sèvres, but the newly established secular state of Turkey successfully pressured the Allies to retract this promise.

In 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne split the Kurdish region between Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Seven years later, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, a revered figure among the Kurds to this day, led what became the first rebellion movement against Iraqi rule, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP dominated the political scene in Kurdistan until 1975, when a rival party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) emerged. The

resulting tensions led to the start of the Kurdish Civil War the same year, in which the PUK seized control of the Kurdish capital of Erbil (BBC, 2018; Gunter, 1996; Krajeski, 2016; Morris, 2017).

Over time, the KDP began to form alliances with Turkey, its former Turkish enemy, while the PUK gravitated toward Tehran. The Kurdish civil war became a regional conflict that drew in the armed forces of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which by then were growing increasingly hostile to the Kurds in the north. In 1988, Iraqi planes targeting Kurdish and Iranian militants infamously dropped chemical munitions on the town of Halabja, killing more than 5,000 Kurdish civilians. For this reason, many Kurds still deny that the current Kurdish prime minister, Masoud Barzani (son of the esteemed Mullah Mustafa Barzani and cousin of the current president), ever made the controversial decision to ally with Hussein in order to retake Erbil from the PUK in 1995. Despite the controversy, the KDP remains Kurdistan's dominant political force, especially when the 2009 establishment of the Gorran (Kurdish for "change") Party formed from a breakaway faction of the PUK and splintered its support base. Still, while his KDP party is no longer at war, Prime Minister Barzani still partially bases his political calculus around how to maintain his edge over the PUK (Al Arabiya, 2019; BBC, 2017; Gunter, 1996; Johns, 2011; Krajeski, 2016; McKernan, 2017; Morris, 2017).

Despite its horrors, the rise of Daesh in 2014 breathed new life into Kurdish aspirations for independence. The inclusion of Kurds in the Iraqi government following the 2003 U.S. invasion may have temporarily placated these ambitions, but by 2014 it quickly became clear to the world that the Kurds, now mostly united in the face of the Daesh specter, were by far the most effective regional force in countering Daesh fighters.

The Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq and People's Protection Group (YPG) in Syria proved a constant thorn in the side of Daesh leader, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi. In light of their successes, the KDP even went so far as to establish a Syrian arm of itself, the KDP-S (Gunter, 1996; Kati, 2019; Krajeski, 2016; Mitzcavitch, 2014; Morris, 2017; Stansfield, 2014). For its part, the Iraqi and Syrian government forces were largely ineffective; for example, in 2014 Iraqi forces were known to have retreated in the face of Daesh forces that in fact they outnumbered almost 40 to 1 (Carter, 2014; Chulov, 2014; Salhy, 2014).

The newfound gains of the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds garnered the attention of an old adversary—Turkey. Since the Syrian Kurds in the northwest near the Turkish border were able to defend the areas in which they were concentrated against Daesh, and in the absence of Syrian government forces, Ankara saw them as a threat. In Ankara's eyes, there is little distinction between YPG forces and the much more extreme Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which both Turkey and the United States consider a terrorist group. In late 2014, Turkish forces invaded the Kurdish-controlled border town of Kobani, proving that Erbil, despite fighting the existential threat of Daesh, would now need to temper its response to stave off the other existential threat of Turkey. Instead, having seen the ineffectiveness of the Iraqi government in holding territory against Daesh, the KDP seized the opportunity to annex the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, which had not previously been a part of Kurdistan, but where many ethnic Kurds live (BBC, 2018; Kati, 2019; Kaválek, 2016; Krajeski, 2016; Stansfield, 2014).

In late 2017, in an attempt to consolidate this newfound power and encourage Kurdish national unity, Barzani held a Kurdish independence referendum. Barzani was

aware that the majority of Kurdish people now supported greater regional independence from Baghdad: 92.7% voted in favor of independence, with 72.6% voter turnout (BBC, 2017; McKernan, 2017). Barzani himself likely had no intention of immediately seceding from Iraq but rather wanted to use the election results as a mechanism to increase his bargaining power in Baghdad—despite advice to the contrary from some of the Kurds’ closest allies, including the United States. Unfortunately for Barzani, Baghdad bristled following the results of the election and responded a month later by invading and retaking Kirkuk from the Kurds (Chmaytelli, 2017; Lake, 2017; Martin, 2017; Morris, 2017).

While Barzani’s gamble may have failed in the short term, it demonstrated the disenfranchisement felt by the Kurdish population toward Baghdad. This sentiment is felt in many Iraqi regions, but is perhaps best demonstrated in Erbil, where oil wealth has enabled rapid development of infrastructure and public institutions following the removal of Saddam Hussein, who had inhibited such projects in the past. However, under the current legal and constitutional system, Iraqi Kurdistan still forfeits a significant portion of its oil—205,000 barrels per day—to Baghdad. In return, Erbil has seen an ever-decreasing commitment from Baghdad to support Kurdish institutions (Al-Arabiya, 2019; Krajeski, 2016; Sanjary, 2013; Stansfield, 2014).

While Iraqi Kurdistan remains part of Iraq today, there distrust is growing between Erbil and Baghdad. As a result, in 2019 many Kurdish members of parliament sought to renegotiate oil revenue agreements, which led to an impasse that prevented the passage of a national budget for Iraq in 2020 (Al-Arabiya, 2019). This, in combination with Iraq’s weakening central government in the face of growing popular protests in 2018

and 2019, makes the prospect of independence all the more attractive to the Kurds (Al-Ahram, 2019; Cockburn, 2019; Ghosh, 2019; Tawfeeq, 2019).

At the same time in 2019 U.S. President Donald Trump decided to remove U.S. forces from northeast Syria and allow Turkish forces to overrun Kurdish YPG fighting forces there. This gave Erbil reason to question whether or not it would receive the necessary outside support for independence, even from some of its closest allies like the United States (Al Arabiya, 2019; Caspani, 2019; Osborn, 2019; Regan, 2019). Baghdad's response to these current challenges could provide fertile ground for Kurdish secession in the 2020s, but whether or not this secession materializes will depend largely on the actions and responses of outside actors.

Ninewah

What Kurdistan gained in the aftermath of Daesh, western Iraq lost. Specifically, the Iraqi provinces of al-Anbar, Ninewah, and Saladin (also known as Salah al-Din), which all have predominantly Sunni Muslim populations, have been in an awkward geopolitical situation since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. After successfully removing dictator Saddam Hussein from power, U.S. forces faced the task of building a governing body from the remnants of a nation now rife with sectarian division and score-settling.

A native of Tikrit in Saladin province, Hussein and his Baath party were Sunni, at least in name, and facing considerable enmity from Iraq's Shi'a majority (CNN Library, 2017). After his ouster, local leaders in western Iraq underestimated the extent to which the perceived association with the former regime would exclude them from the new Iraq. Washington called their strategy de-Baathification, and it ran directly counter to the

western tribal leaders' expectations. As far as the tribal leaders were concerned, the United States shared a mutual enemy with them in Iran and a mutual ally in the Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia on Iraq's southern border. They believed their former ties with the old regime would prove more of a strength than a hindrance because their familiarity with the administration of public institutions in Iraq would ensure continuity of day-to-day life and provide relative stability in the fledgling government (Beauchamp, 2014; Jabouri, 2010).

However, Washington pivoted strongly toward the Shi'a regions and groups in the country (and to a lesser extent, the Kurds) out of concern that anything more than nominal influence in the new caretaker government would lead to a resurgence—or at the least a perceived resurgence among the Iraqi Shi'a and their neighbors—of Hussein's Baathists (Jabouri, 2010). In the years to follow, with nowhere else to turn, western Sunni tribes began to develop relationships with extremist groups in the region, in particular Al-Qaeda. In previous years under the heavy hand of the Hussein regime, such groups had been unable to take root, so while most residents of Ninewah and Anbar practiced Sunni Islam, they had little experience with its radical Islamist incarnation.

Given this dynamic, Al-Qaeda factions were able to establish Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which implemented its strict rule across the region with little resistance. AQI became so powerful that Jordanian radical Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had become the symbolic figurehead of AQI, also became the symbolic second-in-command of Al-Qaeda under Osama bin Laden. While other clerics held equal or greater power on the ground, Zarqawi developed by far the largest cult of personality in western Iraq (Weaver, 2006). As far as the U.S. was concerned, this region, often referred to as the "Sunni Triangle" or

“Triangle of Death,” had become one of the most violent places on Earth under the influence of Zarqawi’s hyper-zealous followers (Strassmann, 2007).

By 2006, however, the locals in the region were beginning to realize how problematic this new presence was for their internal stability and security, as well as how much their quality of life had diminished. Analyst Najim Abed Jabouri retrospectively noted that in some villages under AQI control, lifestyle restrictions were so extreme that produce markets were forbidden to sell and locals were forbidden to carry cucumbers and tomatoes together because local clerics were concerned that the sight of these two crops next to each other was too reminiscent of male and female genitalia coming into contact and thus might incite debauchery (Jabouri, 2010).

U.S. forces responded in 2006 with a grassroots campaign dubbed the “Sunni Awakening,” seeking to re-engage with tribal leaders in the Triangle and cooperate with them to drive out AQI as well as guard the porous border with Syria to prevent the infiltration of additional foreign extremists into the area (Jabouri, 2010). The operation was generally successful in suppressing AQI in the region, and in June 2006, U.S. forces tracked down and killed Zarqawi near Baghdad (Burns, 2006). On the surface, U.S. policymakers and local Sunni leaders were now united against common enemies in AQI and the regime in Tehran. At the same time, however, local leaders no longer felt Washington could be considered a trustworthy ally to Iraqi Sunnis (Jabouri, 2010).

For the next five years, Sunni disenfranchisement simmered as the now-official Iraqi government under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki grew increasingly one-sided in its policies that favored eastern Shi’ites. In 2011, protests against the government became public in Saladin and Ninewah provinces, both of which had prominent political

movements calling for increased autonomy from Baghdad. Foremost among protestors' complaints was the fact that, as it did in Kurdistan, Baghdad was claiming revenue from the oil-rich Sunni regions while neglecting its commitment to support infrastructure and local institutions (Al-Arabiya, 2019; Beauchamp, 2014; Carlstrom, 2011; Salhy, 2014; Sanjary, 2013). In 2012, these protests reached Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad, infuriating Maliki, who continued to gravitate toward Iran (Mitzcavitch, 2014). In his view, any prominent voices of dissent from the Sunni regions meant the potential danger of AQI and/or Baathist resurgence in Iraq, thus making it necessary to further isolate Mosul (Beauchamp, 2014; Mitzcavitch, 2014; Shafaaq News, 2019; Stansfield, 2014). In turn, this growing sectarian division caused fragmentation within the ranks of the Iraqi military.

The combination of disillusionment and divided loyalties proved fertile ground for the terrorist group Daesh in 2014. In June that year, Daesh successfully invaded Mosul and quickly established its strict caliphate system of governance there. Shockingly, reports from locals after the initial invasion revealed that a force of only some 800 Daesh fighters was able to overpower 30,000 Iraqi soldiers because most of them simply dropped their weapons and retreated once fighting started (Carter, 2014; Chulov, 2014; Mitzcavitch, 2014; Salhy, 2014). To many observers, including Maliki, this was evidence of collusion between Daesh, then based in Raqqa, Syria, and the western Sunni locals, and it provided even more justification for Baghdad to isolate and neglect this region, even after Daesh was eventually driven out. Maliki even alleged Saudi support for Sunni-aligned terrorist groups in the region (Ireland, 2014).

With such a desolate backdrop, it comes as no surprise that Sunni Iraqis remained conspicuously absent from the popular protests that arose in Shi'a regions of Iraq in 2018 and 2019. While Maliki was forced to step down following the 2014 Mosul invasion (CNN Library, 2019), the sentiment he stoked against western Sunnis remains. As a result, residents of the Ninewah area, despite holding many of the same frustrations as their Shi'a counterparts in Basra and Baghdad, are cautious not to join movements that might associate them with terrorist groups. Further, the Iranian-backed militias and covert operations that have targeted protestors across Iraq have been especially severe in the west (Abdulrazaq, 2019; Cockburn, 2019; Davison, 2019; Deutsche Welle, 2019; Ghosh, 2019; Rubaie, 2019; Shafaaq News, 2019).

In an odd turn of events, it is now the Shi'a population of Iraq that poses the most vocal opposition to encroachment from the Shi'a state of Iran than from the Sunnis. The strongest advocate for the Sunnis might be Iraq's top ranking Shi'a cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who rallied support from all Iraqis to resist Daesh. In an increasingly polarized Iraq, where hard-line politicians stand the best chance of replacing ousted prime minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, Sistani is one of the few voices of moderation, encouraging tolerance between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a sects, and with minorities. While he prefers to avoid mixing his religious prominence with political influence (unlike his counterpart in Tehran), Sistani's esteemed guidance on important day-to-day issues in his country make him one of its most influential voices. However, as he approaches his 90th birthday in 2020, Sistani's age is a liability to Iraqi stability, as there are currently no prospects for a successor who shares the moderate cleric's temperament (CNN Library, 2019; Ghosh, 2019; Grady, 2019).

Consequently, the outlook for Iraqi Sunnis is not one of unification and acceptance by Baghdad or their Shi'a counterparts, even if they share a common adversary in Tehran. Not being welcome in their own country, with a government that seems to be unraveling, is a good motivation for the western provinces to declare independence from it. However, the harsh resistance to any such moves by Iranian proxies, combined with fear of being associated with Daesh, and uncertainty whether any other countries would support the new nation, make it unlikely that Ninewah will secede from Iraq in its current state. However, a successful Kurdish secession might create the precedent necessary to push Ninewah over the edge to secession as well.

Iraq (Baghdad)

Since the establishment in 2006 of a permanent post-Saddam Hussein government in Iraq, authorities in Baghdad have had to play a delicate balancing act between maintaining a sovereign Iraq accountable to the Iraqi people and placating the policy demands of foreign benefactors like America and Iran, upon which the fledgling government depends in order to maintain power. However, the preference given to predominantly Shi'a establishments by the United States when establishing the new government gave Iran the opportunity to gradually but surely extend its influence across Iraq—an opportunity that would have been unthinkable to Tehran only a few decades earlier.

Iraq's first long-term prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, was instrumental in establishing this dynamic. Originally friendly with the United States, Maliki rose to power in 2006, but quickly became disillusioned with American policies toward Iraq, and

instead welcomed growing Iranian encroachment into his country. In Maliki's paradigm, post-Saddam Iraq was a zero-sum game along sectarian lines. His Shi'a-heavy government naturally gravitated toward the only official Shi'a state in the world, and in the process disenfranchised Iraq's Sunni population (Al-Arabiya, 2019; Beauchamp, 2014; Cockburn, 2019; CNN Library, 2019; Davison, 2019; Dodge, 2013; Kenner, 2015; McDowall, 2014; Mitzcavitch, 2014; Shafaaq News, 2019).

When protests started to grow in the Sunni areas of Iraq in 2011, eventually reaching the streets of Baghdad in 2012, the protestors' chief complaints had to do with economic and social issues, as many public institutions and infrastructure outside of Baghdad were falling into neglect, and Baghdad controlled the economic resources for these areas. Such control is crucial, because Iraq is largely dependent on oil revenues from non-Shi'a-majority areas.

Continued nationalization of these areas has caused increased tension in the Iraqi parliament between Shi'a and non-Shi'a members of parliament. Baghdad claims 205,000 barrels of crude oil per day from Kurdish wells per Iraqi law, which led to a deadlock in parliament in October 2010 as Kurdish lawmakers tried to renegotiate (Al-Arabiya, 2019). However, in 2011 and 2012 Maliki bristled at the protests; in his view any uprising from the western part of the country represented a possible resurgence of Baathism or Islamic extremism. When some of these protests grew into calls for semi-autonomy in provinces like Ninewah and Salah al-Din, Maliki dismissively declared that such movements "would not see the light of day" in the Iraqi parliament (Al-Arabiya, 2019; Beauchamp, 2014; Collard, 2018; Dodge, 2013; Mitzcavitch, 2014; Sanjary, 2013; Shafaaq News, 2019; Stansfield, 2014).

In 2014, and with the rise of Daesh in Iraq, Maliki was forced to resign and was replaced by his rival, Haider al-Abadi (Collard, 2018). Friendly toward the U.S., Abadi attempted in vain to balance relations with both the U.S. and Iran. However, in 2018 dissatisfaction with his policies ultimately led to his ouster amid protests centered in the Shi'a-majority city of Basra in southern Iraq (Al Jazeera, 2018; Collard, 2018).

After Abadi's ouster in 2018, Adel Abdul Mahdi became the new prime minister, but he failed to satisfy the grievances of the protest movements, which were now more concentrated in the Shi'a community than in Sunni areas and had turned decidedly against Iran. In September, protestors in Basra set fire to the city's Iranian consulate. After using threats of his own resignation as a bargaining tool in attempts to reach settlements within the highly divided parliament, Mahdi was forced to resign after slightly more than a year in power. He currently serves as caretaker PM until a successor can be appointed (Al Jazeera, 2018; Catherine, 2018; Collard, 2018; Gathright, 2019; Ghosh, 2019).

Popular protests suggest that even the Shi'a public in Iraq (post-Mahdi) have lost confidence in the government as a whole and want a comprehensive change. The primary motivations are complaints against a political elite seemingly indifferent to the Iraqi people, and calls for an end to Iranian efforts to dominate Iraq (Abdulrazaq, 2019; Gathright, 2019). This sentiment is reflected by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who, despite his preference to avoid political involvement, holds significant sway over the Shi'a population of Iraq and continues to call for peaceful protests against a government in which he has lost faith (CNN Library, 2019; Ghosh, 2019; Grady, 2019). Sistani's influence has acted as a force of quasi-stability against the more extreme tendencies of

both the Iraqi street and Iranian loyalists. As noted earlier, when he dies, it is likely a more polarizing figure will take his place as Iraq's Grand Ayatollah, which will almost certainly lead to a deterioration of the already tenuous political situation in Iraq.

At the center of the government's crackdown against the protests was the commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Front (PMF), Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi, better known by his *nom-du-guerre*, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Shaalán, 2020). In 2014, Muhandis (whose adopted name means "the engineer" in Arabic) organized Shi'a forces across the country under the banner of his Kata'ib Hezbollah brigades in response to a *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah al-Sistani calling for the Iraqi people to rise up against Daesh. However, Muhandis had strong ties to Iran's infamous Quds forces, essentially serving as one of Iran's top men on the ground in Iraq (Frantzman, 2020). As such, his PMF was responsible for the most intense responses to protests in 2018 and 2019. As such, he maintained close ties with Baghdad and conducted operations beneficial to the government but perhaps too unsavory for it to officially sanction. When the Iraqi government retook the province of Kirkuk from the Kurds in 2017, it was Muhandis himself who raised the Iraqi flag over the capital city, and in late 2019, he commanded increasingly violent attacks against protestors (Al-Ahram, 2020; Cockburn, 2019; Shafaaq News, 2019; Tawfeeq, 2019; Davison, 2019; Frantzman, 2020).

This dynamic was shaken to its core, however, in the early morning of January 3, 2020, when Muhandis received Iranian Quds commander Qassem Soleimani on the tarmac at Baghdad Airport for a series of meetings the purpose of which is disputed. In another sign of Muhandis' closeness with the government, he and Soleimani were allowed by airport security to leave directly from the tarmac and bypass Iraqi customs

(Soleimani had arrived from Damascus) (Al Arabiya, 2020). Shortly after leaving the airport, the armored convoy carrying both men was struck by a missile launched from an American unmanned aircraft, killing both of them and causing a major escalation in tensions between the United States and Iran (Al Arabiya, 2020; Klar, 2020). While both the Iraqi and Iranian governments responded with the requisite public outrage about the attack, both Baghdad and Tehran saw mixed reactions on the street. Especially in Iraq, Iran's influence is increasingly unpopular and feared. Soleimani, especially, was regarded as a master strategist, and his fearsome reputation was well established by his violence in Iraq and elsewhere. As a result, much of Iran's foreign policy was dependent on him. His replacement, Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, will likely have a more difficult time establishing the same type of iron fist in Iraq in the current environment, as will PMF figures who step up to fill the void left by Muhandis (Abo Rezeg, 2020; Klar, 2020; Pregent, 2020).

Behind the scenes, it seems that the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis have given Baghdad pause, causing it to reevaluate its relationship with Iran and the United States. This shakeup affected Tehran's relationship with the Iraqi people themselves. Iranian proxies had been Baghdad's greatest defense against a possibly existential threat from the Iraqi street, but with the legs now cut out from under these entities and a suddenly more aggressive American presence, Mahdi and his cabinet are left to wonder how they will calibrate themselves. In the week prior to the killings, flare-ups between American forces and the PMF led Mahdi to publicly laud his government's efforts to prevent the U.S. from targeting PMF interests and warn that Iraq could reconsider its relations with the U.S (Al-Jazeera Arabic, 2019). In the days following the killings, reports suggest that

even after the Iraqi parliament called for expulsion of U.S. troops from the country, Mahdi reached out privately to the United States to temper those calls out of concern for what would happen if there were a rapid departure of the American presence in Iraq (Dozier, 2020). A few days later, when Iran launched an attack against two major military bases in Iraq, multiple government figures in Baghdad condemned the attacks as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty (Al-Arabiya English, 2020).

In light of this new dynamic, the Iraqi government's response to possible Kurdish or Ninewite secession moves will largely depend on Iraq's new prime minister. Most recently, this mantle almost passed to Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, who replaced Mahdi as prime minister designate in early 2020 (Esfandiari, 2020). The two front runners at the time of Mahdi's resignation were Hadi al-Amiri, of Iraq's Iran-linked and PMF-linked Badr organization, and nationalist Muqtada al-Sadr, who commands a powerful militia (the Mahdi Army) and attracts a large following with his passionate positions. However, while Sadr espouses Iraqi independence and nationalist sentiment, his willingness to play politics with Iran in recent years has made the Iraqi streets wary of his commitment, as well as Amiri's commitment (Abdulrazaq, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2010; Frantzman, 2020; Ghosh, 2019; Grady, 2019). Because of this lack of trust, and other issues dividing the Iraqi parliament and the Iraqi street, Allawi was agreed upon as a compromise of sorts, having experience in the government as former minister of communications under Maliki before resigning in 2012 due to disagreements with Maliki. Despite a past life of activism on behalf of Shi'a political movements, Allawi is generally seen as a moderate and as one of the few politicians left in Iraq with no known ties to Tehran. Even so, he was viewed on the street as one of the political elites and therefore finds himself in the paradoxical

situation of being supported by Sadr and rejected by the protestors, both of which claim to represent the will of the Iraqi people, and both of which are also now in violent conflict with each other (Esfandiari, 2020; Moubayed, 2020). As a result, Allawi, too, was forced to resign the post in March 2020. That left only bad options (Adnan, 2019; Laessing, 2020; Shafaaq News, 2020), including previously ousted prime ministers (Shafaaq News, 2020), a former head of intelligence so controversial that Hezbollah in Lebanon threatened to wage all-out war against him if he were to be appointed (Al-Arabiya, 2020; Shafaaq News, 2019; The National (UAE), 2019), and a figure previously named by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as one of the masterminds of a 2019 attack against the U.S. embassy in Baghdad (Pompeo, 2019; Shafaaq News, 2020). Three weeks later, Iraq took a gamble by appointing opposition leader Adnan al-Zurfi as the new PM-designate (Alaadin, 2020). It seems that Zurfi's legitimacy will be somewhat contingent on his ability to hold territory under the grip of Baghdad and primarily contingent on his ability to make massive reforms to appease growing distrust of the current governing bodies.¹

In the event of a secession movement, Iraq's ability to defend its sovereignty in both Kurdistan and Ninewah is now greatly reduced with the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis. Baghdad would likely make a military response against any seceding territories, as it did against the Kurds in Kirkuk and Daesh in Mosul in 2017. Especially in Ninewah, the legacy of anti-Sunnism left by Maliki would almost certainly cause a hostile response. In both Kirkuk and Mosul examples, however, Baghdad's military response was not taken immediately after either city was seized. Instead, Baghdad opted to wait until it had a geopolitical advantage, knowing that it would have great difficulty

¹ Update: Adnan al-Zurfi was replaced by Mustafa al-Kadhimi in May 2020, who remains in office as of October 2020.

succeeding in either of these campaigns without the right conditions. If there were a future internal conflict, and in the absence of an unchallenged, Iran-backed force like PMF which was Iraq's secret weapon in 2017, it is possible that a similar advantage may never come, especially in a place as historically contentious for Baghdad as Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan Section). While the PMF is still active throughout Iraq, it is no longer necessarily the obstacle to independence it once was for Kurdistan or Ninewah.

Iran

Iran is without doubt the most aggressive of the outside actors vis-à-vis Iraq's current situation. To understand what drives this aggression, it is important to understand the basis of Iranian doctrine—or at least the doctrine that usually prevails among the sometimes-conflicting mindsets of Tehran's elite.

Modern-day Iran, formally the Islamic Republic of Iran, was founded following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a secular leader installed into office 26 years earlier in a *coup d'état* covertly orchestrated by the U.S. and the U.K. against his predecessor, Mohammad Mossadegh. Following the revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Al-Khomeini emerged as the leader of the new Islamic Republic. In contrast to Pahlavi's secular rule, Khomeini instituted a system of governance that was strictly theocratic in its adherence to a dogmatic understanding of Shi'a Islam, and virulently anti-Western in response to perceived Western colonial treacheries against Iran and the Muslim world as a whole, epitomized by the coup against Mossadegh in 1953 (Aarabi, 2019; Katzman, 2019). After Khomeini's death in 1989, he was succeeded by Grand Ayatollah Ali Hassan Al-Khamenei, who took this distrust of

the West to a paranoid extreme, especially with regard to the so-called “Great Satan” of the United States, and to Israel which Tehran largely believes is the hidden puppet master driving American policy in the Middle East (Aarabi, 2019; Katzman, 2019; Kaye, 2011). Popularly elected Iranian heads of state come and go with varying geopolitical stances. Most observers see current President Hassan Rouhani as somewhat moderate; his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, held much more hard-line views. However, as stipulated by Iran’s constitution, it is the Grand Ayatollah, not the president, who holds the final authority over the geopolitical affairs of Iran, including the powers of war and peace (Aarabi, 2019; Katzman, 2019; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009).

With this brief history in mind, it is easier to understand the logic of Iran’s territorial aggression. With a violent, nearly 1,400-year-old rift in the Muslim world between the Shi’a and Sunni sects of Islam, which resulted from disagreement over the rightful political successor to Islam’s most revered prophet Mohammed, Iran now finds itself the primary torchbearer of Islam’s Shi’a sect. In contrast, most of the Arab world is dominated by Sunni Islam, which Iranian hardliners view as apostasy to Islam, especially as most Arab countries maintain some level of alliance with the United States. Such an embattled view of the world can be coupled with the third Sura of the Qur’an, *Ali ‘Imran*, which glorifies the initial establishment of Islam as an institution in contrast to a world stubbornly at enmity with it.² As the 110th verse of this *Sura* in the Quran states:

You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah. If only the People of the Scripture had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient.

² Whether or not such an interpretation of Islamic scripture can be considered valid is irrelevant to this analysis.

From this context, it is then incumbent on Iran's elite clerics to export its revolution throughout the Muslim-majority Arab world and beyond, and in so doing further the cause of "true" Islam.

Recent history has proven that Tehran is actively committed to this end. Tehran plays an active role in Lebanon through its control of the influential and longstanding Hezbollah party, which along with Iran's infamous Quds forces, provides substantial backing to Iran's ally in Syria, Bashar al-Assad, in violently suppressing opposition movements in Syria's eight-year civil war. Tehran also operates in tandem with several PMF units throughout Iraq, whose government has become increasingly Shi'a-dominated and increasingly connected and congruent with its Iranian counterpart (Ayman, 2014) (Barzegar, 2008; Cockburn, 2019; Katzman, 2019; Kaye, 2011; Times of Israel, 2014).

Furthermore, although not explicitly acknowledged until very recently (Esfandiari, 2020), Iran aggressively backs the Houthi rebellion movement in Yemen—which has been at war for half a decade against the internationally recognized, now exiled Yemeni government—as a proxy to counter Tehran's regional nemesis, Saudi Arabia (Saul, 2017). In recent years, Iran has built increased ties with the Palestinian Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip and even maintains a minor influence in Egypt (Katzman, 2019; Kaye, 2011; Pletka, 2012). When these areas of Iranian influence are viewed on a map, it becomes clear why Iran's rivals, particularly Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are concerned about the formation of what Jordan's King Abdullah II refers to as a "Shi'a Crescent" encircling the Sunni-majority Arab states in the Gulf and posing an existential threat to those Arab states (Barzegar, 2008; Walker, 2006).

However, Iran's position in the region is tumultuous. In late 2019, Iran's network of influence across the region began to degrade significantly. First, in October 2019 anti-government protests in Lebanon emerged against rising taxes and government corruption. However, the demonstrations soon turned against the Iranian proxy and para-government organization Hezbollah, which protestors associate with the larger political establishment. The protestors' mantra, "*Kulhum ya'ni kulhum*" ("All of them means all of them") (Bulos, 2019) crossed the sectarian lines that had divided the Lebanese people since the 1982 civil war and challenged the influence that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah had previously taken for granted (Bulos, 2019; Homsy, 2019; Times of Israel, 2019). The next month, anti-government protests also coalesced in Tehran following government cuts to fuel subsidies.

Earlier, in 2017 and 2018, increased U.S. sanctions against the Iranian regime caused similar protests, but the 2019 protests spread across the country with a more virulent tone. Protestors decried the languishing quality of life in Iran, and they blamed the government for perpetuating this situation by continuing to spend national funds on foreign meddling operations (Berger, 2019). About a month after the demonstrations began, Amnesty International reported that 200 protestors had been killed by government forces, while the U.S. government put the number at up to 1,000 (Times of India, 2019; Williams, 2019). Unlike in past demonstrations, and despite futile government attempts to deflect blame for the protests on clandestine foreign interference (BBC, 2019a), protestors openly directed their anger toward Supreme Leader Khamenei himself, even calling for his death, which had been unheard-of in past uprisings (Berger, 2019).

At the same time, the region witnessed a significant increase in Iranian aggression against Saudi Arabia, including a September 2019 attack on a major ARAMCO oil facility (Al-Arabiya, 2019; Turak, 2019), and another against U.S. bases and facilities in Iraq in December (Frantzman, 2020; Leary, 2020; Klar, 2020). Hostilities came to a head when the U.S. military conducted a drone strike on January 3, 2020, that killed Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi counterpart Abu-Mahdi al-Muhandis, commander of the Iraqi PMF, dealing a severe blow to Iran's ability to conduct proxy operations, especially in Iraq (Abo Rezeg, 2020; Al Arabiya, 2020; Klar, 2020; Pregent, 2020). Both the Quds Forces and the PMF appointed new leaders almost immediately, but geopolitical analysts quickly pointed out that their replacements lacked the considerable experience and reputation that Soleimani and Muhandis wielded (Abo Rezeg, 2020) (Fazeli, 2020; Frantzman, 2020; Pletka, 2020; Pregent, 2020; Shaalan, 2020). In retaliation, Iran struck back at the United States by launching ballistic missiles at U.S. bases in Iraq. In the confusion of that attack, a civilian Ukraine International Airlines flight was shot down, killing all 176 on board, including many Iranians. After initial denials, President Rouhani announced that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps had in fact mistakenly shot down the airliner. This announcement breathed new fury into the anti-government protests inside Iran, with protestors now refusing to demonstrate against the United States and Israel, claiming the greater enemy is within Iran (Azimi, 2020).

These losses have substantially weakened Iran's influence in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Ninewah. In recent years, Tehran has wielded influence in Ninewah through its almost total control of the PMF (Frantzman, 2020), through which it has violently

suppressed any perceived Sunni movements (Cockburn, 2019; Davison, 2019; Shafaaq News, 2019). Meanwhile, its primary inroads into Kurdistan have been through the opposition PUK party (BBC, 2017; Gunter, 1996; Khalil, 2018; Krajewski, 2016; McKernan, 2017; Morris, 2017). Despite these influences, Iran has sought to keep both regions under the thumb of Baghdad. When the Iraqi Army retook the city of Kirkuk from the Kurds in 2017, the PMF played a heavy role on the Iraqi side (Cockburn, 2019; Shafaaq News, 2019; Tawfeeq, 2019), while reports, although difficult to verify, suggest that Iranian-engineered political disputes led to the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the area (Bernstam, 2011; Khalil, 2018). From this, it is apparent that Iran wants to empower the Kurds but only to a limited extent, nor does it want Kurdish independence. For one, the creation of an independent Kurdish state could embolden the Kurdish minority in Iran, which comprises roughly 7% of its population, against the already embattled government (Bernstam, 2011). Furthermore, increased autonomy for the leading KDP party in Kurdistan, which generally opposed the PUK and Iran, would create additional difficulties for Tehran in maintaining its overland ties to Syria and Lebanon.

In the event a state is established in Iraqi Kurdistan, it can be assumed that Iran will not directly attack the new state but will utilize its network within the PUK and in the Iraqi government to exert both political and military pressure against Erbil. However, the PUK's influence is unlikely to counter the strong sentiment in Kurdistan for independence (McKernan, 2017), and in the absence of Iran's top two influencers in the region (Soleimani and Muhandis), Tehran's meddling may no longer pose the existential barrier to that independence that it did in the past.

In the case of Ninewah, Iran would oppose statehood much more than in Kurdistan because it would cause almost any Baghdad-based Shi'a proxies of Iran to become foreign powers, thus much less effective in wielding control in a Sunni-dominated and independent nation. As a result, with an independent Kurdistan and Ninewah, Iran would lose all of its remaining overland ties to Syria and Lebanon. Tehran would likely employ all available proxy resources to oppose a Ninewah state, but Iran's request to Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in the weeks following Soleimani's death, to work to unite Iranian proxies in Iraq (Salhy, 2020), suggests that Iran's power through these proxies is severely limited, as Nasrallah is himself struggling to maintain Hezbollah's grip in Lebanon (Cohen, 2020; Ghaddar, 2020). Iran's strong preference for indirect confrontation and asymmetric warfare (as discussed earlier) suggests that it would be reluctant to take explicit military action even if its interests are directly threatened.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt

For Saudi Arabia and its allies (United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Egypt), the most important consideration is countering Iranian expansion in the region, followed by containing extremist groups like Daesh—especially important for Jordan because of the existential threat these groups pose to the country's demographic and ideological stability (Arens, 2012; E., 2014; Emam, 2015; Malik, 2014; Whitman, 2013).

To these ends, in 2015 Riyadh began in earnest to reinvigorate its relationships in Iraq, both in terms of diplomacy and grassroots campaigns, against the backdrop of its coalition operations against Daesh. For more than a decade, both the Saudi and Jordanian Kingdoms have worried about what Jordan's King Abdullah II calls a "Shi'a Crescent"

across the Middle East (see Literature Review). The concerns about this crescent are based on geography: (1) Iran's established power in Lebanon vis-à-vis Hezbollah, (2) Iran's growing influence in Iraq through governmental and militia infiltration, and (3) Iranian exploitation of conflict in Syria to gain proximity control, particularly in light of the civil war that engulfed the country in 2011. When plotted on a map, these established and emerging Iranian proxies form a sort of crescent across the northern part of the Arab world, while looking out over Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula, and giving Iran a direct logistical link to the Mediterranean Sea (Aboudouh, 2019b; Barzegar, 2008; Congressional Research Service, 2019).

Prior to 2014, Saudi Arabia's inroads in Iraq were primarily limited to Sunni opposition groups in the country's western regions (Aboudouh, 2019b; Habibi, 2019). However, the meteoric rise of Daesh in the region in 2014 made this already failing strategy untenable for the Saudis, forcing them to reevaluate their approach. More recently, Riyadh has focused on undercutting the Iranians' economic grip on Iraq, primarily through the energy sector. Ironically, while Iraq is known worldwide for its vast oil exports, most of the country is unable to convert this resource to meet its own energy needs and is consequently dependent on Iranian companies to supply electricity. Even with Iranian supplementation, Iraq still faces power shortages in the summer months when demand is highest, which presents Riyadh with an opportunity to undercut Iran by providing alternative energy resources for the Iraqis to meet this deficit and potentially to replace the Iranian companies. Once anti-government protests began in Basra in 2018 (and are still ongoing), one of the demonstrators' grievances toward the pro-Iran government in Baghdad was the fact that it could not ensure sufficient delivery

of electricity, suggesting that this strategy is yielding real results for the Saudis (Habibi, 2019).

If Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran form a “Shi’a crescent,” then Yemen is the star in that crescent. Yemen has long been a flashpoint between rival Sunni and Shi’a segments of the population. It was only united as a single country in 1990 after years as a proxy battlefield in the Cold War, with Shi’a-majority North Yemen enjoying support from the West and the Sunni-majority South Yemen backed by the Soviet Union. Two decades later under the umbrella of the “Arab Spring,” Yemen’s embattled president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, stepped down amid protests in the capital of Sana’a and handed power to his deputy, Abdu Rabbouh Mansour Hadi. However, the recently formed and Iranian-backed Shi’a Houthi movement was not satisfied with Hadi and demanded the return of the more Iran-friendly Saleh. By 2015, Houthis had taken over most of northern Yemen including Sana’a and forced Hadi’s administration to flee to Yemen’s second city of Aden in the south. Ironically, the tables had flipped at this point, as the West and its Gulf allies now supported forces in former-South Yemen against an Iran-dominated North Yemen at Saudi Arabia’s front door, driving Saudi and Emirati forces to push back militarily against the Houthis (BBC, 2019b).

However, what should have been an easy military victory for the Saudis and Emiratis soon became a quagmire that drew criticism both at home and abroad, becoming a black eye for both governments. American military observers noted that the UAE, whose national and hired mercenary forces have done the majority of the fighting in Yemen, have shown remarkable combat prowess, even dubbing the small nation “Little Sparta,” but the loosely organized Houthi forces have proven to be surprisingly resilient

and difficult to remove. While the UAE still holds on to the key port city of Hodeida on the Red Sea, Houthi forces have come to control most of the populated territory of Yemen, while internationally recognized President Hadi now lives in exile in Riyadh, as there is a high likelihood he would be killed were he to return to Aden (BBC, 2019b; Baron, 2019; Bulos, 2019; Griffing, 2018).

Riyadh and its allies may now be in a position to benefit from an independent Kurdistan that would further isolate Iran. While both Egypt's President Sisi and representatives of Saudi Arabia's King Salman have in the past discouraged efforts toward Kurdistan independence (Arab News, 2017; Hares, 2014), both countries may now be willing to shift this stance.

As for Egypt, Sisi's comments that Kurdish independence would be "catastrophic" came in 2014, closely following the rise of Daesh in the region (Hares, 2014). Drawing from his previous experience as commander of Egypt's armed forces, Sisi was already familiar with the Syrian insurgency that became Daesh, and likely recognized what he perceived as ties they maintained to Muslim Brotherhood splinter groups, and ultimately to Turkey. Some reports that emerged later hinted at Turkish involvement and even support for Daesh (Investigative Journal, 2019; Kenner, 2019). Whether or not these reports are true, in Sisi's Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, from which Sisi seized control in 2013, is public enemy number one. So it is natural that the government was cautious of anything that might deflect military effort against Daesh as a possible extension of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hares, 2014).

For Riyadh, the desire to discourage Kurdish independence came in 2017 in the lead-up to Barzani's referendum, as Saudi Arabia's strategic approach in Iraq was

shifting from grassroots efforts to cooperation with the Baghdad government. For Riyadh, the benefits of an independent Kurdistan were likely too abstract and unpredictable to outweigh the complications this new country would present to Saudi-Iraqi government relations (Aboudouh, 2019a; Arab News, 2017; Habibi, 2019).

However, two recent factors may have changed or may soon change the calculus. First, the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis greatly weakened Iran's influence in Iraq, as popular opposition protests continue to chip away at the stability of Baghdad's government, which is greatly dependent on Iran. This weakens Saudi Arabia's need to preserve ties to Baghdad and presents an opportunity to further isolate Iran's access to the Shi'a Crescent, while Saudi Arabia and its allies still have the advantage against Tehran.

The second factor is the growing conflict between Saudi Arabia and its allies and Turkey. Under current president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey has focused on growing its regional influence through soft power across the Middle East region, at the behest of the Saudis. The years 2019 and 2020 saw this standoff evolve into conflicts in Sudan, Libya, and Syria (Goodman, 2019). Opposing Turkey by supporting Iraqi Kurds has suddenly become an attractive option for Riyadh and its allies, especially Egypt. In the event of Kurdish secession, it would not be surprising to see Riyadh and Abu Dhabi going so far as to send military support to bolster the new nation against its regional rivals.

This would likely not be the case in the event of a Ninewah secession, however. The reluctance of Arab allies to advance Barzani's desire for an independent Kurdistan betrays a risk-averse, decision-making process that prevents these governments from supporting would-be allies when there are too many unknowns like in western Iraq.

Especially in light of Saudi Arabia's failed grassroots efforts to gain support in this region, it is unlikely that Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, or Cairo would intervene on behalf of an independent Ninewah or against it. Their only goal in this scenario, at least initially, would be to preserve their own energy interests there and prevent Iran or extremist groups from gaining a foothold there.

Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood

Currently and for the foreseeable future, Turkey's interests are defined by the vision of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). Established as a successor to the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, modern Turkey is by definition a secular state. However, its leadership has grown increasingly Islamist over the past decade and is thus willing to align with like-minded Islamist political groups, specifically the Muslim Brotherhood (Aly, 2020; Heinrich, 2019). Under Erdogan, Turkey has been described by some as neo-Ottoman, suggesting a return to the imperial and theocratic ambitions of the past (Bakshian, 2013; Taşpinar, 2011). However, while the AKP's foreign-policy focus is on building alliances with its Arab and predominantly Muslim neighbors, it understands the strategic need to maintain a balance between these ties and its shaky alliance with the West.

It is perhaps this Ottoman-esque ambition that lends genuine popularity to Erdogan's administration, at least among a slim majority of the Turkish population. Even so, Turkish citizens as a whole are reluctant to see Turkey become too ensnared in external conflicts (Kenyon, 2017; Francisc, 2019; Karmon, 2018; Taşpinar, 2011). Outside observers, wary of Turkey's ambition to spread political Islam, have noted that

Turkey's intervention in the civil war in Libya—in support of the Islamist-leaning government in Tripoli against secularist Saudi-oriented opposition leader Khalifa Haftar—could be a sign of Ankara's strong commitment to spread political Islam beyond its borders, even when it is financially and politically costly (Aly, 2020; Goodman, 2019; U.S. Embassy in Libya, 2020).

At the same time, there is a large segment of the domestic population that strongly opposes the AKP, and Ankara is well aware of its precarious grasp on domestic control. Twenty percent of Turkey's population is Kurdish, and there is a deep-seated enmity between Kurdish political movements like the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and People's Protection Units (YPG). Many of these groups, concentrated in Turkey's southeast, call for secession of Kurdish areas from the Turkish nation and the AKP (Ayman, 2014). In 2016, a failed coup attempt gave Erdogan the justification he needed to launch a massive political purge throughout the country of any opposition to the AKP within the Turkish government (Kenyon, 2017). However, the election of an opposition candidate as the mayor of Istanbul in 2019 showed that the AKP is still contending with formidable opposition (Sariyuce, 2019). In the eyes of the AKP, much of this opposition comes from external forces, and Ankara views any political instability or opposition on its borders as an existential threat (Bakshian, 2013; Larrabee, 2010).

For Qatar, a rapid rise to global prominence put Doha in a position of wanting to secure geopolitical gains. That, combined with a mutual opposition of neighboring Saudi Arabia, drove an alliance of convenience with the Muslim Brotherhood, a rival movement to Saudi Wahhabism, preferring the spread of Islamism through politics and social institutions instead of through militant force (Chesnot, 2019; Khatib, 2013). By

extension, Qatar became a key partner and financial backer of the Erdogan administration in Ankara, with both states advancing Brotherhood interests throughout the region.

According to former Turkish police chief, Ahmet S. Yahya (who has since defected to the United States), Ankara miscalculated in 2014 that Syria's Assad regime was in its final days, and a Syrian power vacuum would give Turkey an opportunity to gain regional strength (Investigative Journal (UK), 2019). Yahya and others allege that Turkey, in cooperation with Qatar and in opposition to local security forces in the border city of Gaziantep, secretly funneled massive financial and material resources to Al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria, including Daesh, through operations orchestrated by Ankara's intelligence service. In return, Turkey may have received and laundered oil from areas under Daesh control, then distributed it around the world. At the same time, Turkey sought to focus domestic attention on the increasingly lawless situation on its southern border as justification for increasing operations against Kurdish groups in the east on both sides of the border (Investigative Journal (UK), 2019; Kenner, 2019).

As seen in late 2019, Ankara's response to this danger has been to double down on its opposition to Kurdish groups on its borders, possibly as a counterbalance to other opposition groups within its borders. After the sudden and heavily criticized announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump that he would withdraw U.S. forces from Kurdish areas in Syria in October 2019, Turkey seized the opportunity to steamroll Kurdish strongholds in the border region, now that it was no longer under the protection of the United States (Francisc, 2019).

Erdogan's overt military invasion of Syrian border towns east of the Euphrates has drawn international criticism, but with the Americans gone and the Russians and

Iranians mostly west of the Euphrates (Gibbons, 2018), Ankara is unlikely to face any repercussions serious enough to dissuade its campaign in that area. Oddly enough, Turkey's aggression has forged an alliance between the Assad regime and local Kurds, but Ankara-Damascus relations were already chilly (Francisc, 2019).

Resources aside, Turkey's principal adversary in the region is the Kurds. Following Turkey's actions in Syria, the next step for Ankara is probably action in Iraq. However, in Iraq's current state, this action is likely to be somewhat limited, especially given Iran's competing interests. From the AKP's previous actions, however, it can be reasonably assumed that a Kurdish secession would supercharge Ankara's fears of PKK influence and heighten the severity of Turkish incursion, likely resulting in a full-blown military conflict, even if it sours relations with Turkey's Arab and Iranian semi-allies (Ayman, 2014; Kaválek, 2016; Larrabee, 2010). Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood, although supporting Turkey, also have an interest in countering Iran in the name of promoting Sunnism over Shi'ism.

If a Kurdish secession is then followed by a Ninewah secession, Ankara will likely follow the same strategy of subversion it did in Syria in 2014, viewing the unestablished government as an opportunity to gain regional influence at a relatively low political cost, at least domestically (Kaválek, 2016; Larrabee, 2010). It remains to be seen whether the Arabs and the West will view Turkish presence around Mosul as a counter to Iranian hegemony or as an Islamist threat, particularly if it is accompanied by a resurgence of Daesh.

Russia

Russia's interest in Iraq is complicated. On one hand, Moscow has a growing interest in Kurdistan's oil, as Russia's economic ties with Baghdad have waned significantly since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Petkova, 2019; Oskarsson, 2013). However, unlike other countries, Russia has pursued its economic partnership directly with Erbil, without including Baghdad in the negotiations, because Moscow leadership has stated bluntly that it intends to approach Iraq as a fractured agglomeration of state-like entities, dealing with each independently (Hamilton, 2017). This suggests a shaky alliance between Moscow and Erbil, despite the fact that the Kremlin publicly called for the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from neighboring Syria following Turkish military operations there in October 2018 (Osborn, 2019; Suchkov, 2018).

Moscow realizes that its economy is in dire straits, in large part due to two decades of oligarchic economic policy under Vladimir Putin (a decorated KGB operative), so leadership is keen to keep domestic economic conditions good enough to maintain public favor at home (Alston, 2019; Rubin, 2019). To that end, Russia's domestic supply of oil, coupled with partnerships in oil-producing regions like Kurdistan, give Moscow increased financial sway on the world stage, helping to keep its vulnerable economy afloat. But in order to do this, Moscow must avoid actions that will provoke severe levels of sanctions from the West (Gurganus, 2019). Moscow's influence over oil is all the more important because of its growing rivalry with the Saudi oil market, which came to a head in March 2020 when disagreements in price controls and oil production between the two countries drove Riyadh to flood the market and cause prices to nosedive (Amlôt, 2020; Bremmer, 2020).

Even more important to the Kremlin than economic benefits is sought-after restoration of Russia's regional prominence. This aspiration of a return to greatness is an idea that seems to stick in the minds of Russian leadership, as many senior officials are former officers of the old Soviet system, and even official strategy publications from the Russian government state this desire (Englund, 2019; Oskarsson, 2013; Kremlin, 2018; Russian Federation Ministry of Defence, n.d.). It is born of equal parts nationalism and nostalgia, as even President Putin has said: "Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart; whoever wants it back has no brain" (quoted in Weiss, 2012). Many scholars agree that it is not necessarily Moscow's aim to replace the U.S. as a superpower, but rather to establish itself as a regional hegemony and global powerbroker, creating a multi-polar world order. However, in the short term, such aims create the same empire-like tendencies when it comes to issues of foreign policy, and this mindset seems to be the central pillar of Russian foreign relations (Akin, 2017; Bershidsky, 2019; Englund, 2019; Oskarsson, 2013). Examples of how such a balance works were seen in 2008 in Georgia, for the last several years in Ukraine, and most recently in northeastern Syria.

True to KGB form, Putin is a master of working in the margins and gaining influence by creating power vacuums through subversion and then moving into these spaces by assuming the role of a peacemaker (Bershidsky, 2019; Connable, 2016; Kirasirova, 2017; Ratner, 2018). Moscow subtly conducts operations worldwide that align with this goal, even against the United States, according to the U.S. House Intelligence Committee (U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Intelligence, 2018).

In October 2018, when Washington withdrew U.S. forces from largely Kurdish-occupied regions of Syria, the Kremlin immediately took advantage of the opportunity. After Turkey's subsequent invasion of the region, Russia framed itself as a mediator between the Kurdish-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which it claimed had been "abandoned" by the United States, and Turkey (Al Arabiya, 2019; Bershidsky, 2019; Osborn, 2019). While Russia's "turf" in Syria had previously included everything east of the Euphrates River, as per unofficial agreement with the United States (Congressional Research Service, 2019; Gibbons, 2018), this development allowed overt deployment of Russian forces to the border town of Kobani. At the same time, Moscow saw its ally, the Syrian government, invited into an area to which it had previously been denied, out of a desperate attempt by the SDF to form a new alliance with Damascus (Al Arabiya, 2019).

With this context in mind, it is reasonable to anticipate how Moscow would seek to play both sides of any conflict arising from the fragmentation of neighboring Iraq. In the case of Kurdistan's independence, the Kremlin would likely reinforce Erbil. During the reign of Daesh in the region, the YPG proved itself to be one of the most effective combat forces when fighting Islamic radicalism (Caspani, 2019; Raphelson, 2019), which is a key concern for the Kremlin because of the threat it poses not only to Russia's regional interest but also its internal security, due to the existence of similar ideologies existing in the Caspian regions like Chechnya and Dagestan (Kirasirova, 2017). In the event such a force can establish itself as a nation-state, Moscow would be wise to support it from the onset, gaining not only a political foothold, but additional economic sway in the form of Kurdistan's rich oil deposits, particularly in light of Russia's waning relationship with a Baghdad whose future is highly uncertain (Al-Ahram, 2019; Tawfeeq,

2019). While the Kremlin may not be willing to risk direct military confrontation with Ankara or Baghdad in support of Erbil, it will almost certainly provide materiel and covert support to the government there.

Ninewah is an entirely different case. The regional governments in Al-Anbar province and Mosul are still shaken from the aftermath of Daesh's presence, and mutual distrust among rival sects in the region remains high (Gabriel, 2019). While an independent Ninewah state would once again provide Russia with a chaotic space in which to insert itself as mediator, this would also cut off the influence of Iran-backed militias such as the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) currently operating in the region and providing a logistical bridge between Tehran and Damascus (Barzegar, 2008). While the Kremlin's interests have not always perfectly aligned with those of its ally in the Islamic Republic, Tehran is still a key materiel, intelligence, and financial supporter of the Bashar Assad regime, which Moscow is determined to keep in power.

Due especially to the fragile balance of power between the remaining players in the region, Moscow is likely to focus world attention on the potential for the resurgence of radical groups in the area (perhaps correctly so, although there is also a risk of unrest in maintaining the status quo, given growing dissatisfaction with the government in Baghdad) (Al-Ahram, 2019; Tawfeeq, 2019). In the absence of significant engagement from the United States (at least during the Trump presidential administration), the Kremlin would likely provide military support to Iraqi forces that would undoubtedly attempt to recapture the region.

China

At the center of China's interest in the region is economic development. The People's Republic of China has seen huge economic growth in the last few decades, and while the financial prosperity has not reached all of China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) realizes that continuous growth is critical to its continued hold on power. Upon assuming power, President Xi Jinping outlined what he called the "China Dream," which is essentially a two-pronged approach to maintaining the support of the Chinese population. It relies on appealing to Chinese ambition for success by bringing money into China in a way that is visible, at least to the urban citizen in good standing with the Party, and through appealing to Chinese pride by vowing to restore China's prominence on the world stage, which the CCP alleges was stolen by foreign enemies. According to *The Atlantic* reporter Graham Allison, Xi is keenly aware that his hold on power is not guaranteed. As he expressed to his cabinet: "Winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CCP's survival or extinction. . . . Corruption could kill the party. Quoting Confucius, he vowed to 'govern with virtue and keep order through punishment'" (quoted in Allison, 2017).

In terms of foreign policy, these two goals often converge. China understands the long-term need to secure financial and economic resources from beyond its borders (Aaltola, 2016; Groot, 2016). Much of the CCP's foreign engagement is included in an initiative to this end called "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR for short; a/k/a Belt and Road), which aims to both secure global trade and flow of resources under Chinese control, and to reinforce Chinese soft power by presenting China as a benevolent global superpower that is actively working to develop the infrastructure and share its economic success with its neighbors. The "Road" of the Belt and Road consists of sea routes from the east coast

of China, through the South China Sea to ports in southeast Asia and Oceania, across the Indian Ocean to ports in the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and eastern Africa, and finally through the Suez Canal to Europe. China has been keen to protect the road through aggressive claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea (as well as complete ownership of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau), building of ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Djibouti, and the United Arab Emirates, and heavy investment in Egypt's development of the Suez Canal (Haddad-Fonda, 2014; Shepard, 2017).

The "Belt" consists of ambitious rail and highway networks to reinvigorate trade along the historic Silk Road across central Asia. Some projects seek to take advantage of the existing Trans-Siberian Railroad in Russia as a link to Europe, although many European countries are wary of joining OBOR. The main belt, though, crosses western China and connects central Asian cities as well as Pakistan. These networks then continue across Iran and the Caspian countries to Turkey, opening another potential portal to Europe as well as a southern branch into the Middle East (Sterzel, 2018). China's primary concern in the belt part of the network is with radical Islam—even moderate Islam—as it relates to the empowerment and identity of China's own Uyghur minority population (apart from the rest of China) in the Xinjiang autonomous region of western China (Al-Jazeera, 2019; Haddad-Fonda, 2014).

When comparing the Belt part of the project to the Road part, it can be seen that the overland portion is much more exposed to potential security and political risks. As a matter of national pride, China will ardently defend the inclusion of the "nine-dash line" on its maps, indicating complete territorial control of the South China Sea, despite overlapping claims by Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines, and Malaysia. However,

complete control over the South China Sea, while beneficial, is not critical for maintaining shipping routes. China's omission of the South China Sea territory from its "core national interests" in 2016 confirms that, if forced to choose between defending the nine-dash claims or defending against Uyghur separatism, China will focus on the Uyghurs (Nie, 2016).

For this reason, China is particularly interested in what happens in Iraq. Any land route to the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula, which supplies a significant portion of China's oil, must pass through either Iraq or Syria, although Iraq is the more direct of the two. Iraq supplies about 2.5% of China's total oil needs, much of it coming from Kurdish-majority and Sunni-majority areas. In particular, China keeps a close eye on Kurdistan. Following the rise of Daesh in 2014, Kurdish military forces have proved to be one of the most effective counters in the region to Islamic extremist groups (Al-Ahram, 2019; Tawfeeq, 2019).

The potential for an alliance with Iraqi Kurds also offers China a valuable bargaining chip against Turkey, which openly supports Uyghur separatist movements in Xinjiang. Just as the Uyghurs are a thorn in China's side, Kurdish groups on the border are a thorn in Turkey's side. However, China's inroads into Kurdistan so far have been necessarily under the umbrella of its engagement with Baghdad (Al-Arabiya, 2019), and China is not interested in burning that bridge.

Beijing has nothing to gain locally if Iraq fragments into two or three separate nations. Especially in light of China's growing economic ties to Iran, China is also interested in preserving Iranian territorial interests, and that requires a unified Iraq. Paradoxically, China must support Iran because the more aggressively Iran acts in the

region, the more it will face sanctions from the West, creating an oversupply of resources like oil from which China can then benefit (Aabashnas, 2019). Foremost, however, China is concerned with the social ripple effects of any successful separatist movement so close to Xinjiang (Chaziza, 2017).

Taking all these factors into consideration, it is safe to say that Chinese interests would be damaged by a Kurdish separation and further damaged by any additional fragmentation of Iraq. However, it is not clear that China would take any overt action to counter a Kurdish separation if it happened. As the world witnessed in Syria, China has no problem supplying belligerent allies like Bashar Assad in order to keep Islamists' attention away from Xinjiang. In time, China may be able to buy enough financial interest to choose political winners and losers from behind the scenes, as it was able to do in Zimbabwe in 2017 (Holland, 2018). However, China must refrain from direct engagement, as it would risk alienating too many of its Belt and Road partners, and potentially even its own populace, who have been told that all the problems facing China are a result of Western military imperialism. Iraq, specifically Kurdistan, naturally means much more to China than Syria, but not enough to necessitate any overt action by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) (Connable, 2016; Haddad-Fonda, 2014; Hemenway, 2018). China knows it could better salvage the challenges faced by an independent Kurdistan and even an independent Ninewah by maintaining existing ties with the remainder of Iraq while trying to establish relations with the new countries as well.

China's largest vulnerability in this case would be in Xinjiang. Because the CCP is so concerned about the potential for a Uyghur insurgency in Urumqi, Beijing would almost certainly clamp down even more than it already has on its own Uyghur citizens

while providing quiet military support to any Iraqi (or Iranian) forces trying to retake any separatist regions. China has for the most part managed to hide its heavy-handed treatment of the Uyghurs from the global public eye, but as Beijing's relations with the West have gone sour, more attention is starting to fall on Urumqi (Al-Arabiya, 2019). China will likely view Urumqi as a vital security concern, but its response could risk alienating OBOR partners, particularly in Muslim-majority countries, who so far seem to have looked the other way regarding the Uyghurs. If China crosses a line at some point, it could lose vital trade partners.

The United States

Since its invasion of Iraq in 2003 to topple dictator Saddam Hussein, the United States has had some difficulty deciding what it wants for the fragmented nation. After ousting Hussein's Baathist Party, U.S. strategists almost immediately embarked on the task of building a new and effective governing authority to replace it, but after the emergence of ethnic and sectarian conflict in Iraqi society, which had been repressed under Saddam's heavy-handed rule, this mission proved quite difficult.

A native of Tikrit in Sunni-dominated Saladin province, Hussein drew his Baath Party almost entirely from Iraqi's Sunni population, creating the perception that Baathists and Iraqi Sunnis were one and the same, and the Iraqi Shi'ites were the opposition. Unfortunately for Iraqi Sunnis, this perception is what caused Washington to exclude them in large part from the new government in Baghdad, as U.S. leaders did not want to risk a Baathist resurgence from within the Sunni bloc. Tribal authorities in the western provinces mistakenly assumed that the United States would want to take advantage of their governing experience and avoid giving their mutual enemy in Tehran too much of a

foothold in Iraq. When this did not happen, the populace in this region became disillusioned and fearful about their lack of representation in the national government, and as a result, western Iraq, particularly Anbar Province, became fertile grounds for Al-Qaeda recruitment and establishment (CNN Library, 2017; Jabouri, 2010; Johns, 2011; Stansfield, 2014).

After recognizing the growing problem of the newly established Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2006, the U.S. partially won back the region. Thereafter, a U.S. operation that killed AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the “Anbar Awakening” program gained back a moderate amount of support for U.S. forces by capitalizing on the harsh treatment AQI had imposed on the region and the fact that the U.S. was still working to counter Iran (Jabouri, 2010; Weaver, 2006).

At the same time, however, the U.S. was grooming Nouri al-Maliki to be the first non-interim prime minister of Iraq. When Maliki took power in 2006, he appeared as a beneficial figure supporting U.S. interests, but over the course of his eight years in office, he became increasingly distant from Washington, instead developing close ties with Tehran. Maliki was also infamous for his marginalization of western Iraq, which he viewed as a constant threat from Baathist or Al-Qaeda resurgence. Maliki’s zero-sum sectarian approach to the western Sunnis reversed any gains the U.S. had made among this population in 2006 and 2007, and, ironically, paved the way for the rise of Daesh in 2014—exactly what Maliki’s policies sought to prevent (Beauchamp, 2014; CNN Library, 2019; Jabouri, 2010; Kenner, 2015).

More recently, U.S. military bases in the Anbar/Ninewah region, particularly along the Syrian border, were the first to be handed over entirely to the Iraqi government

as part of Washington's strategic withdrawal from the country (Kohnavard, 2020), which brought some credibility to Washington from those Iraqis calling for the removal of foreign military forces, although potentially further isolating western Sunnis.

The United States' approach to Iraqi Kurdistan is an entirely different story. The U.S. military is familiar with the fighting acumen of the Kurdish militias and the Kurdish people as a whole, and it places a great deal of trust and respect in them. This admiration translates to a sense of kinship between the Kurds and at least a small segment of the U.S. population (Caspani, 2019). As a result, policymakers in Washington understand the value of keeping the Kurds as allies, and seek to legitimize the plight of the Kurdish people. But they continue to cling to the goal of a unified Iraq which, by definition, rules out Kurdistan independence and often makes American appeals ring hollow in Erbil. In 2017, the U.S. emphatically discouraged Kurdistan's independence referendum and stopped short of promising protection to Erbil from possible Turkish repercussions from it (Mylorie, 2017a; Mylorie, 2017b).

The American policy of supporting and working with the Kurds while simultaneously denying them independence dates back a half-century to U.S. President Richard Nixon's administration. At the time, the logic was that an independent Kurdistan would be unstable, landlocked, and surrounded by hostile neighbors, thus presenting more of a liability than an asset to the U.S. government's interests in the region (Calamur, 2017; Gibson, 2019). In 2020, there is the added factor that a divided Iraq represents a failure in U.S. policy after a 17-year effort to rebuild a unified Iraq. Despite some internal disagreements in Washington over what the U.S. position toward independence should be (Mylorie, 2017a), and despite a growing disconnect between the U.S. and the Iraqi

government in Baghdad (Knights, 2020), American policy remains focused on ensuring the Baghdad government's continuity and success. Even in the wake of government-sponsored militias conducting attacks on the U.S. embassy there (Knights, 2020), and growing protests that put the central government in an increasingly embattled position (Al-Ahram, 2019; Davison, 2019; Neshmi, 2020), the U.S. Department of State, in February 2020, held:

Current conditions in Iraq and the region require an independent and honest government committed to addressing the needs of the Iraqi people. The nomination of Muhammed Tawfiq Allawi [who stepped down the following month] as a new Prime Minister must be followed up with efforts to accomplish that objective. (Blanchard, 2020, p. 2)

Curiously, the “U.S.-Iraq Relations” page on the State Department’s official website does not even mention Kurdistan (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 2019).

Iraqi Kurds are well aware of this apparent disconnect, and while Erbil is displeased with Washington’s position, Kurdistan’s leadership seems to understand and accept it as reality, at least for the time being. Erbil’s official representative to the United States, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, noted that the American government tends to be risk-averse when dealing with potential separatist movements, even those from which it might benefit. In Rahman’s words: “[As for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Croatia] those countries would still be part of the [Soviet bloc] if American policies of the day had carried through” (quote and summary in Calamur, 2017). According to some experts, Erbil only expects to obtain neutrality from the United States, allowing it to freely negotiate with Iraqi authorities on the issue of independence without being undermined by Washington’s second-guessing (Mylorie, 2017b).

Of course, Washington's foreign policy, while not dictated by the current U.S. president, is heavily influenced by the person who occupies the White House, and weight of this factor could change depending on the outcome of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Unlike other countries in this study, election results in the United States usually carry a high degree of uncertainty, so that none of the candidates can take results for granted. In the last presidential election in 2016, current president Donald Trump surprised the world, as polls and political pundits had projected an easy win for Democratic contender Hillary Clinton just hours earlier (Hirschhorn, 2016). In 2020 as well, a sharply divided United States finds experts conflicted as to what could happen in the November presidential election (Elving, 2020; Gesiotto, 2020; Podhoretz, 2020; Real Clear Politics, 2020).

In terms of foreign policy, however, some similarities can be seen across the field. Current Republican Party candidate and incumbent Donald Trump has a mixed record in Iraq. On one hand, he dealt a devastating blow to U.S. adversary Iran—also an enemy to Iraq's Kurds, Sunnis, and even many of its Shi'ites—by approving the assassination of Iranian Quds Forces commander Soleimani and his Iraqi counterpart, PMF commander Muhandis, in January 2020. However, many Iraqis, particularly the northern Kurds, harbor serious reservations about Trump's trustworthiness as an ally, particularly in light of his apparent affinity for Turkey's strongman President Erdogan, whom Trump has described as a "good man . . . very highly respected throughout the world and in the United States" (quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2019), especially since the two men hold opposing ideological positions, particularly regarding support for Saudi Arabia, the Israel/Palestine conflict, Turkish military intervention in Libya, and the Turkish purchase of Russian S-

400 missiles (Gumrukcu, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2019; U.S. Embassy in Libya, 2020). Trump's leniency toward Erdogan was most apparent in the 2019 decision to pull U.S. troops from northwestern Syria, thereby allowing Turkish forces to move into the area and decimate U.S.-allied Kurdish forces in the region (Francisc, 2019; Gibson, 2019). This apparent betrayal led the Kurdish-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to form a desperate alliance with the Syrian government, an adversary of the United States (Al Arabiya, 2019). The action did not clearly benefit the United States' interests and brought heavy criticism to President Trump from some of his most prominent allies in Washington, including Republican Senators Lindsay Graham and Marco Rubio (Sullivan, 2018).

Among those most critical of Trump's withdrawal was Democratic nominee for president, former Vice President Joe Biden (Barrow, 2019; Weissert, 2020). Himself a veteran of U.S. foreign policy, it was Biden, then a senator from Delaware, who first seriously proposed the division of Iraq into three separate states in 2003 (Gelb, 2003). However, his approach contrasts significantly with that of Trump. Biden has mentioned on multiple occasions that he sees Trump's actions as a disastrous upending of U.S. foreign policy, and he seeks to replace this leadership style with something built on relationships previously established between the United States and classical allies such as those in NATO.

This sentiment hints at a return to the foreign policy of the Obama administration, in which Biden served as vice president. However, the Obama administration's approach to the Middle East, while presented as more temperate than Trump's, had its own problematic aspects with regard to Iraq. While President Trump has drawn criticism by

attempting to reverse agreements reached by the previous administration with the government in Iran, experts have also questioned Obama's approach to Iran, which seems to have emboldened the aggressive regime to make significant gains in Iraq that run counter to American interests (Loyola, 2020; Titus, 2018).

Biden also presents concerns to Iraqis over his history with Turkey. While not aggressively pro-Erdogan like his competitor, Biden delivered a less-than-convincing performance when he was sent to Turkey in 2016 as vice president to conduct damage control after Turkish leadership blamed the United States for secretly supporting a failed coup in Turkey that year. The vice president took the opportunity to present mild criticism of Ankara's harsh suppression of journalists in the country, but his primary objective was to assure Erdogan's cabinet that the U.S. still supported Turkey as an ally. It seemed that in the Obama White House, and perhaps therefore in a future Biden White House (or for that matter the current Trump White House), Turkey's strategic geographic location and status as a member of NATO takes priority over the dangers Ankara poses to U.S. allies and interests in the region (Lee, 2016).

Despite these differences, either Trump or Biden would probably present similar reactions to a Kurdish and/or Ninewite secession in Iraq. While many people in the United States hold Iraqi Kurds in high esteem, U.S. leadership would likely shy away from explicitly supporting an independent Kurdistan, especially militarily, against the conflict that would undoubtedly pit them against both Ankara and Baghdad, with whom the United States adamantly seeks to preserve relations. However, internal U.S. amity toward the Iraqi Kurds would likely lead to eventual support of and alliance with

Kurdistan, but only if Erbil can survive the initial conflict and establish itself as a legitimate and stable nation.

However, while unable to gain support from Washington, Iraqi Kurds would likely have the silver lining of being bolstered by American ally, Israel. While Tehran, Israel's primary adversary, views Israeli and American foreign policy as one and the same (Kaye, 2011), Israel does not have the same concerns as the United States in preserving ties with Turkey or Iraq, as Jerusalem is already an enemy with them. Further, increasing Iranian aggression toward Israel vis-à-vis proxies Hezbollah and Hamas has prompted Israel to respond in kind, building alliances with regional enemies of Iran. Israel is one of the few countries that maintains good relations with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite the enmity these countries maintain with each other (Melman, 2019; Stratfor Worldview, 2019). However, both Baku and Yerevan have diasporas in Iran that pose possible threats to the regime there. Israel is also infamous (although it has never explicitly claimed responsibility) for the 2010 Stuxnet cyber attack on Iran's Natanz nuclear-enrichment facility (Winer, 2019; Zetter, 2014). Tehran even accused Israel of going so far as supporting Kurdish groups against Iran, as well as internal anti-government groups in Iran (Kaye, 2011). This history, combined with a geopolitical situation that incentivizes Israel to act more impulsively than the United States, makes the regional military giant a prime contender to fight alongside the Kurds in the event of secession.

For both the United States and Israel, as well as for most of America's allies, independence for Ninewah is an entirely different story. While the U.S. has a history of building ties with local Sunni tribes (Jabouri, 2010), its insistence on maintaining a stable

and centralized government in Baghdad, combined with a loosely organized and generally disenfranchised population and the region's history with extremism and score-settling, all ensure that the United States would probably consider support for an independent Ninewah too risky to employ as a strategy. If anything, Washington might even ramp up its support of Baghdad against Ninewah, especially if doing so meant relieving some of Baghdad's pressure on what would then be the recently seceded Kurdistan.

Chapter V

First-Order Outcomes and Long-Term Outlooks

I have, up to this point, examined modern-day Iraq on local, regional, and international levels. I have also identified and analyzed the nine actors that have weight and influence on the status of Iraq going forward.

In this chapter, I will explore the question of whether Iraq should remain a single nation, or whether it would be more viable if split into two or even three separate states. I have identified three options: no secession, Kurdish secession only, and Kurdish/Ninewite secession. Each option is more fully analyzed in the sections below.

No Secession

Despite the numerous complications I have identified and analyzed so far, the status quo of a single-nation construct has survived in Iraq. If no secession occurs in Kurdistan or Ninewah in the coming years, Baghdad will likely continue its current course of rejecting, at least outwardly, the continued militarization of Iraq by both the United States and Iran, despite a history of appealing to both for backing and support. Iraq's demand for neutrality in the face of increasing hostilities between the U.S. and Iran on Iraqi soil is, at least in part, a concession to continuing anti-government protests in Baghdad and Basra. However, I believe that those in power will use their connections with the PMF militias to suppress these protest movements, perhaps violently at times.

However, the PMF's ability to wield power is substantially weaker now than it was before the deaths of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January

2020. The appointment of opposition figure Adnan al-Zurfi in March 2020 is a promising sign of reconciliation between the government and protestors, but the failure of his predecessor, Muhamad Tawfiq Allawi, to form a coalition betrays the deep rifts and entrenched positions that remain in Baghdad's government. Meanwhile, the Sunni majority in the country, while benefitting from decreased Iranian influence, will probably continue to be marginalized and distrusted by the rest of the country, despite attempts by Iraq's top Shi'a religious figure, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to promote tolerance across sectarian lines.

Iraqi Kurds will continue to exist as a semi-autonomous entity—stable, but forced to pay rent to Baghdad, thus hindering the Kurds' economic growth. Additionally, Erbil may face increased pressure in the form of military threats from Turkey, which will be emboldened by both the weakening of Iran in the region and by the reluctance of the United States to confront a NATO member, even against a valuable ally. As a result, Turkey will likely try to exploit the growing discord between western Iraq and Baghdad in order to spread its version of political Islam; it proved eager to do so in Ankara's 2019-2020 intervention in Libya.

For its part, Iran will almost certainly continue its attempts to infiltrate and manipulate Iraq. However, it will face much more difficulty than in the past, as it now lacks the reputation and abilities of men like Soleimani and Muhandis, while continuing to face a growing sentiment on the Iraqi street against foreign interference.

Saudi Arabia and its allies stand to gain from this weakening of Iran and will likely continue to improve their relations with the Iraq government to gain soft power through economic cooperation, particularly in the energy sector. At the same time,

Riyadh will have to contend with Turkey's expansion in western Iraq, which could potentially draw the two rivals into a proxy war in the region.

As for powers outside the region, the United States is likely to continue its strategic withdrawal from Iraq as its regional interests evolve and the American public grows increasingly weary of U.S. troops being deployed to the region. As Washington disengages, rivals like Moscow are sure to seize the opportunity to fill the void and gain hegemony in the region.

The Russian government benefits both politically and economically from spreading its sphere of influence into Iraq and the surrounding region. Additionally, the Kremlin is keen to squash Islamic extremist groups, especially if there is any possibility these groups will find their way into Chechnya or Dagestan. It also benefits from maintaining some level of conflict in the region and inserting itself as mediator into those conflicts. Moscow will have little to lose and much to gain in a unified Iraq.

Finally, China will continue to expand its Belt and Road initiative through the region, remaining neutral to most regional politics but hawkish in its efforts to suppress any major separatist movements, including Kurdistan—fearful of the message such a movement might send to the heavily oppressed Uyghur population in China's western Xinjiang region.

Overall, the outlook for Iraq in its current form is unclear, but there is potential for positive developments depending on the performance of the next prime minister. However, the issue of Kurdish statehood, or at the very least economic autonomy from Baghdad, has simmered for nearly a century and will not fade away without some kind of resolution. The deep rifts fomented by former rulers and outside actors between Iraq's

Sunni and Shi'a communities will be a key issue for future governments. Until these issues are solved, the combination of instability and rich oil resources means that Iraq will remain a tinderbox and a crossroads for global conflicts. This is not to say that it is impossible to effectively govern such a state while ensuring a decent standard of life and freedom for its citizens. However, it will be exceedingly difficult given the current political realities in the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys.

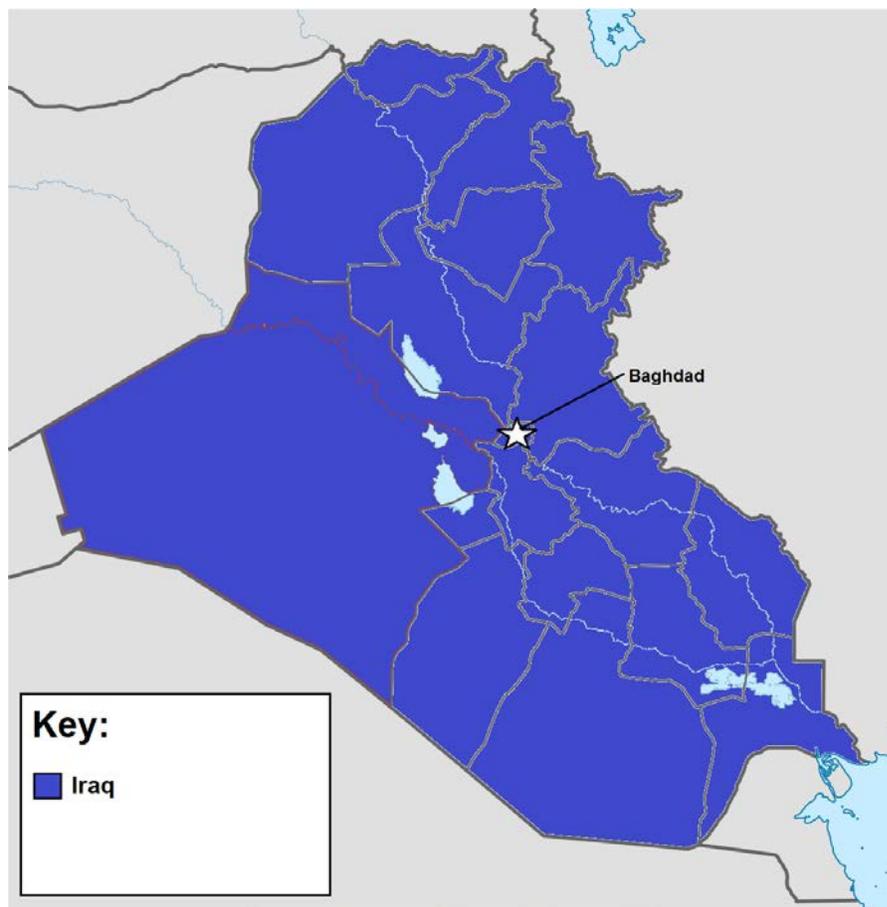


Figure 1. One-State Outcome.

Source: developed by thesis author.

Secession by Kurdistan Only

A looming possibility throughout Iraq's history, a Kurdish declaration of independence from Baghdad would almost certainly result in the deployment of Iraqi troops to maintain central government sovereignty—a scenario that occurred when tensions flared between Baghdad and Erbil over the Kirkuk region in 2017. However, the rise of anti-government protests across Iraq since 2017, as well as the devastating blow to the Iran-backed PMF by the death of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, significantly weakens Iraq's military's threat to Erbil.

In the same that way that Daesh so easily displaced Iraqi forces during its invasion of Mosul in 2014, with soldiers simply abandoning their posts, Iraqi military commanders who are tasked to defend Kurdistan may see little reason to fight for a territory that already operates so independently from the rest of Iraqi society that it likely holds little importance to the national identity of most Iraqis. This sentiment will be particularly true if the conflict between Iraqi protestors and the governments in Baghdad and Basra continue to escalate, making a fight against Kurdish forces seem like an unnecessary diversion of peacekeeping forces and resources.

Tehran, although not necessarily an enemy of the new Kurdistan, would undoubtedly become aggressive in order to maintain its influence in the region as a way to support its proxies in Syria and Lebanon. Kurdish independence would be disadvantageous to Iran, as its historical ties with Iraqi Kurds exists via Kurdistan's PUK party. But it is PUK's rival party, the AKP, that currently holds power in Kurdistan via Kurdish Prime Minister Masoud Barzani. And again, the loss of the two key leaders of the Iraqi PMF and Iran's Quds Forces decimated Iran's alliance-building and infiltration abilities in the region, including in Kurdistan. For this same reason, however, Iran's

proxy forces would likely be ineffective in deterring Kurdistan if it were to attempt secession, and Tehran would not likely risk the disastrous geopolitical fallout it would face from engaging in direct warfare with Erbil.

It is Turkey that would prove the greatest challenge for a new Kurdish state. Ankara's aggression in Syria in 2019, and its longstanding enmity with the Kurds, almost guarantee that Turkish forces would stage an invasion in response to Kurdish attempts to secede from Iraq, taking as justification the need to secure nearby Turkish territory. While Kurdish soldiers are notoriously tough fighters, Turkey's military might, resources, and access to NATO and Russian weaponry would prove an existential threat to Erbil, as suggested by the ease with which Turkish forces were able to steamroll over Kurdish-backed SDF fighters in northeastern Syria in 2019.

Russia itself may come to Kurdistan's aid to a small extent, given that Moscow and Ankara began in 2020 to challenge the other over conflicting operations in Syria's ongoing civil war. However, despite both countries pursuing conflicting military interests in the region, Russia and Turkey are both averse to going to war with one another, particularly as this could draw Russia into a war with Turkey's NATO allies. Therefore, Moscow is unlikely to provide significant forces to deter Turkish aggression. Likewise, Saudi Arabia, despite its desire to contain Turkish expansionism, would not have enough interests at stake to become embroiled in such a conflict. However, Turkey would likely receive significant military support, potentially even including limited troop deployments, from the Chinese government, as China strongly opposes independence movements in the region, fearing that such movements might inspire similar uprisings among China's Uyghur population in Xinjiang region. Despite Beijing's normal

reluctance to engage in external military conflicts, entering into a coalition with Turkey against Kurdistan would be relatively low-risk for China, as other world powers like Russia and the United States do not want to get drawn into a conflict in which they have allies on both sides.

The United States, under the presidential leadership of either Donald Trump or Joe Biden after the 2020 presidential election, would probably not go to war against Turkey to support Kurdistan; Washington considers the Kurds allies but opposes an independent Kurdish state. Further, the U.S. showed in 2019 in northeast Syria that it is willing to sacrifice its support of Kurdish forces (in this case, those attached to the Syrian SDF), in order to preserve its relations with Ankara. However, a U.S. ally in the region may be Kurdistan's saving grace against Turkey. Military giant Israel has both the political will and military capability (Global Firepower, 2020) to effectively come to Kurdistan's aid against Turkey: Israeli-Turkish relations are already sour, and Israel maintains a strong alliance with the Iraqi Kurds. Jerusalem has a sufficiently strong military to match Ankara, and with Israeli involvement in the conflict, Kurdistan would likely survive long enough for the U.S. to recognize it as a viable country worthy of defending.

Ultimately, the establishment of an independent Kurdistan would be messy, but the Iraqi Kurds seem up to the challenge. With numerous global powers intervening both for and against Kurdish independence, the resulting conflict would not have a guaranteed outcome, but I believe the competing interests are stacked slightly in Kurdistan's favor. Given Erbil's history of semi-autonomous governance and access to oil wealth, it would

likely become a stable state after an initial period of conflict, and within a decade of being established, it would likely form a strong alliance with the United States.

Kurdistan would also be a stabilizing force in the region, deterring some of the more aggressive destabilizing actors in the region, such as Turkey and Iran, while simultaneously diverting Turkish attention from the Sunni-majority regions of Iraq, where it might otherwise attempt to undermine existing authorities. For Baghdad as well, the significant loss of territory and resources has the potential to spur much-needed cooperation between the remaining political blocs in the Iraqi system that have so far kept Baghdad from governing effectively. Figure 2 illustrates what a two-state outcome would look like.

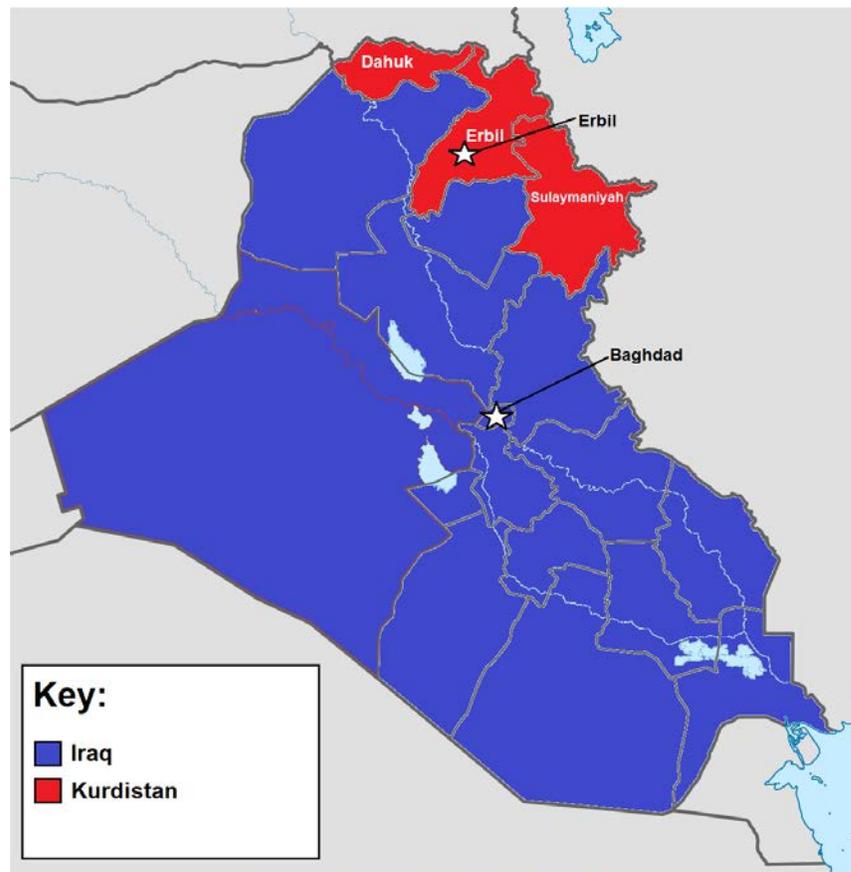


Figure 2. Two-State Outcome (most stable).

Source: developed by thesis author.

Secession by Kurdistan and Ninewah

Any declaration by Ninewah of total independence from Baghdad (following a similar declaration from Kurdistan) would likely elicit even more resistance from the Iraqi government than that faced by the Kurds alone. Were such a declaration to be made in Ninewah shortly after secession by Kurdistan, the newly independent Ninewah would have the advantage of seeing Iraqi military forces and paramilitary militias split between fighting to secure Kurdish territory and the region of the Anbar Desert/Euphrates Valley. Further, an independent Ninewah state would give a geographic perk to Kurdistan, because drawing new borders along current Iraqi province lines would geographically isolate Kirkuk province from the rest of Iraq (see Figure 3 below).

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) lost its influence over Kirkuk in 2017 to the central government in Baghdad after the Iraqi Army, with heavy PMF militia assistance, took the region by force. If Ninewah is able to survive as an independent nation, Kurdistan (which currently, and presumably upon secession from Iraq, does not include Kirkuk) could easily recapture the province from a weakened and geographically separated Iraqi government. That, in addition to increased economic ties between the two regions in recent years, could make the Kurds and Ninewites unlikely allies in a fight against Baghdad. However, mutual mistrust in the wake of Daesh's presence would limit any substantial military cooperation.

That said, Ninewah would face far larger and more difficult obstacles than its Kurdish counterparts in its efforts to become an independent nation. After a Kurdish secession, Iran inroads into Syria would be damaged but not blocked, since only a small sliver of the Iraqi-Syrian border itself is actually adjacent to Kurdish territory. Most of the border is with Anbar and Ninewah Provinces, as Figure 3 shows.

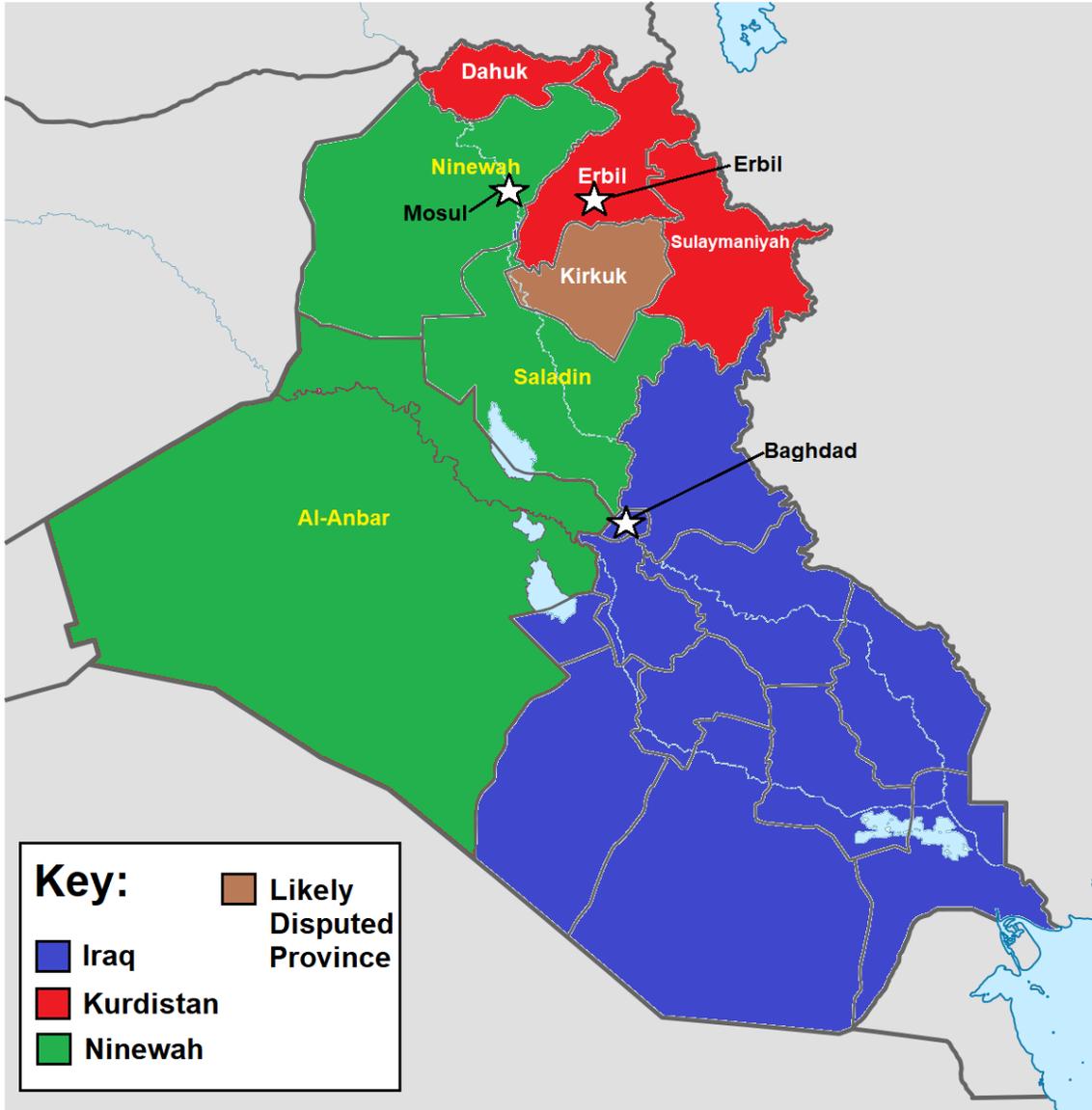


Figure 3. Three-State Outcome.

Source: developed by thesis author.

Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from military bases along the Iraqi-Syrian border in 2020, Iran will still be able to reroute logistical lines through Anbar Province to access Syria and, by extension, Lebanon. However, in the event of

Ninewah's independence, these routes would be completely severed. As a result, Iran's response to Ninewah would be more intense than to Kurdistan. Given recent geopolitical losses in Iraq and Lebanon, Tehran would likely feel backed into a corner, so it might deploy military forces overtly into the region rather than resorting to its usual strategy of subterfuge through the Iraqi PMF and Iranian Quds Forces.

The unrest resulting from potential Iran moves would likely draw in Turkey, whose AKP party would want to take advantage of the opportunity to influence a new government that represents a disenchanted Sunni population, seeking to gain ground for Ankara's brand of political Islam. As demonstrated in northern Syria and Libya, Turkish intervention would likely have limited success in making Mosul a proxy for Ankara's geopolitics, but it would almost certainly create even more chaos in the already unstable region.

As a rival of both Tehran and Ankara, Riyadh would naturally oppose intervention from both Iran and Turkey. However, given Riyadh's (and Abu Dhabi's) history of failed grassroots campaigns in the region, neither the Saudi nor the Emirati monarchies would want to see an independent Ninewah, given the potential for instability that could create a space for extremist movements on Saudi Arabia's northern border. Instead, Riyadh would likely continue its current strategy of rebuilding ties with Baghdad and providing electricity resources to outlying regions of Iraq in order to undermine Iran's soft power.

Like its Gulf allies, Washington would also try to discourage an independent Ninewah for the same reasons it is not keen on an independent Kurdistan. The U.S. still maintains camaraderie with Erbil but not in Mosul. Instead, like Saudi Arabia, the U.S.

has tried and failed to built grassroots support in the region. To make matters worse, American power was largely responsible for standing Nouri al-Maliki as Iraqi prime minister, who went on to treat the region's residents as second-class citizens before allowing them to fall into the hands of Daesh. As far as Washington and its allies are concerned, modern-day Ninewah is a lost cause; Ninewah as an independent nation would only be a liability to regional stability.

Beijing would strongly oppose a Ninewah state for the same reasons it would oppose Kurdistan. While the Chinese government is typically reluctant to deploy the People's Liberation Army abroad, it would face less risk doing that in support of Iraqi or Iranian forces in Ninewah than it would supporting Turkish forces in Kurdistan, because few (if any) countries would oppose China's presence.

Even Moscow, whose cloak-and-dagger political mechanisms typically thrive in spaces of controlled chaos, would most likely view a new capital in Mosul as carrying too much risk to jeopardize its current relations with regional powers. Further, the Kremlin's chronic trepidation over the threat of Sunni extremist groups that might export fighters to Chechnya or Dagestan would drive the Russian military to back Baghdad in retaking the region.

In the end, Ninewah would face too many major rivals and little if any support to make secession a reasonable option, even in the face of the chaotic situation unfolding in Baghdad. Despite legitimate grievances of its citizens and real aspirations for independence, Ninewah and Kurdistan would face disastrous outcomes if they attempt to secede from Iraq. Such a move would almost certainly be quashed by the Iraqi government—not because Baghdad is overwhelmingly strong but because international

interests would be stacked so heavily against Mosul. Even if a new nation were able to overcome these odds, it would face an ongoing battle with forces such as Turkey seeking to destabilize it from within.

In the aftermath of this conflict, strict anti-Ninewah paradigms carried into the present from Maliki's tenure would be given new breath in the halls of the Iraqi parliament, and the western Sunni populace would almost certainly be further disenfranchised in the name of preventing terrorism. This is not to say the idea of an independent Ninewah is entirely without merit to regional and global powers. Saladin province, in particular, has witnessed serious campaigns for increased economic autonomy from Baghdad rather than full independence.

For Iraqis in the Ninewah region, partial economic autonomy would be a much better option, as it would be more palatable to world powers and potentially more favorable to Baghdad than in the past. Iraq's next prime minister would need to strike a reconciliatory tone with the whole of the country in order to be successful in the position.

Chapter V

Analysis and Conclusion

Given the three potential outcomes developed in the last chapter, it becomes clear that Kurdistan and Ninewah are in completely different positions when it comes to possible secession from Iraq. There are deep divisions in Iraqi society that have existed since its founding, and they have been especially fomented throughout the last two decades. The weakening of Iranian destabilizing elements in Iraq, and the newfound semblance of national identity that has emerged in the recent street protests, both suggest that reconciliation and unity in Iraq might not be as far off as they once seemed. Secession of the Kurdish provinces in the north could actually pave the way for such a reconciliation, because then only two major population segments, rather than three, would have to negotiate with each other.

Furthermore, Kurdistan has arrived at a point where geopolitical factors have aligned for its secession. Independence for this region would still not come without intense fighting between regional powers, but on the other side of these conflicts, Kurdistan would in fact be a viable nation and a force to bring stability to the region in coming years. As far as the Kurdish people are concerned, an independent Kurdistan is a historic inevitability, and secession is more a matter of “if” than “when.”

As far as Kurdish politicians are concerned, though, the realistic pursuit of such an effort will take time. While few outside of extremist circles would mourn the fact that Daesh no longer holds any real physical territory, the weakening of this terrorist group

has stalled Kurdish ambitions, as world powers no longer view YPG fighters as an essential counterbalance to terrorism. However, Kurdish resolve is strong, and Kurdish politicians are playing the long game. Kurdish diplomats are actively building a support base in Europe through their mission in Brussels, and Kurdish soft power has won significant public support throughout the Western World. Likewise, a growing sense of Kurdish nationalism seems to be emerging in the Middle East, uniting Kurdish people in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. It is certainly not an immediate prospect for them, but it appears Erbil is still interested in actively pursuing independence, and the establishment of a Kurdish state in the 2020s is a real possibility.

Unfortunately, the stars have not aligned in the same way for Ninewah. While Daesh may be gone, the widespread mistrust left in its wake has made the establishment of a unified and autonomous government there difficult, and such a government would, unlike in Kurdistan, have to be built from scratch. To make matters worse, an independent Ninewah would face heavy political and military resistance from multiple countries, with no real support from any outside actors. In short, it would be nearly impossible for the Ninewites to establish a stable and independent government, and the aftermath of any attempt to secede would only deepen the rift between Sunnis and Shi'ites in Iraq and further disenfranchise the population of the Euphrates Valley.

In conclusion, my initial hypothesis—that a three-state solution would be the most stable outcome for Iraq—has been conclusively disproven. Both of the other alternatives I proposed—a single-state and a two-state outcome—proved more conducive to local, regional, and global stability than a three-way division of the country. The factor on which I based my hypothesis, namely, the deep sectarian divisions that exist in Iraqi

society, do not in fact favor the establishment of separate Sunni and Shi'a states—such a partition would actually further inflame existing tensions, mostly to the detriment of Iraq's Sunni population.

While keeping Iraq as a single state may be the path of least resistance in the short term, I believe long-term stability is best achieved by allowing an independent Kurdistan and unifying the rest of Iraq. It seems the best course of action, then, for the next prime minister of Iraq is to concede to Kurdish ambitions for independence and then focus on bringing disenfranchised Sunnis (and disenfranchised Shi'ites protesting in the streets) back into the fold. Only by becoming a truly representative government can Baghdad achieve stable governance.

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