



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 11

## **The Consequences of the Kurdistan Independence Referendum: Relations between KRG – Iran/ the GCC**

Workshop Directors:

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### **Abstract**

This workshop examines the potential implications of an independent Kurdistan as well as the regional powers' policies, namely the Gulf States and Iran, to such an occurrence. The study will focus on the role of the KRG in regional policies –all of which have substantial Kurdish populations – in response to the Kurdish independence. While some analysts have hailed the referendum of September 2017 as a bold step, others have criticised it for heightening tensions or anticipated tensions in the region, citing some of the demonstrations that took place against it. Iraq, Turkey responded negatively while Iran aggressively whereas the US and the UK both expressed strong disapproval, while Russia tacitly signalled acceptance of the notion of Kurdish independence. The GCC remained focused on the traditional one Iraq policy and the state's unity relating it directly to the process of Referendum.

### **Description and Rationale**

## **Objectives and scope:**

The KRG initiated the non-binding referendum, in which more than 90 percent voted 'Yes' to secession, on September 25 last year. Kurds are one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world, primarily distributed across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, with a semiautonomous region established at the intersection following the Gulf War in 1991. The region has been federated since 2005 following the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and leaders in the region, Iraqi and Kurdish alike, have worked diligently to strengthen control over affairs in the North. Tensions between the KRG and Baghdad, primarily stemming from the distribution of resources and oil control over disputed territories, have engendered further desire for distancing between KRG and Iraqi central government. Consequently, the question of sovereignty – today in contestation – concerns Iraq vis-à-vis the KR's potential independence and the impact on regional dynamics of any new form of governance that might stem constitute this workshop's main foci.

Negotiations over prospective independence have intensified in the past years. In May 2017, the KRG formally articulated its intention to hold a referendum to the UN Security Council. However, the process had effectively began a year earlier when the president of the KR, Masoud Barzani, back then in February 2016 affirmed that a referendum would be held in the KRI among on the issue of independence. The ostensible goal of the referendum was not to immediately declare the independence of the people of Kurdistan, but to negotiate with Baghdad. Earlier, in 2005, an informal referendum had been held in which 99 per cent of the participating electorate voted in favour of independence.

## **Iran and Turkey**

During talks in Tehran in the lead-up to the vote, the presidents of Iran and Turkey vowed to closely collaborate to prevent the perceived disintegration of Iraq and Syria, and to oppose the drive by Iraqi Kurds for independence. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani stated: "We want security and stability in the Middle East. The independence referendum in Iraq's Kurdistan is a sectarian plot by foreign countries and is rejected by Tehran and Ankara", adding: "We will not accept a change of borders under any circumstances." Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meanwhile, stated: "We have already said we don't recognize the referendum in northern Iraq. We have taken some measures already with Iran and the Iraqi central government, but stronger steps will be taken soon." In essence, while both Turkey and Iran oppose Kurdish independence in principle, their approach to the issue has been markedly different. On the one hand, Turkey has very good security-related and economic relations with Erbil. But on the other, Iran has far more influence within Iraq. The main reasons Iran opposes Iraqi Kurdish independence are that, firstly, the KRG shares a border with Syria, which poses an obstacle to the realisation of Iran's long-term agenda (establishing a Shiite Crescent). Secondly, Iran is concerned that its own Kurdish population may rise up to claim similar rights in the future. Thirdly Iran is wary of Saudi Arabia's attitude to proposed Iraqi Kurdish independence.

## **The Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) states and the KRG**

The relations between GCC member countries and the KRG are limited, as the Gulf states have had to maintain a balance between building relations with the Kurds and maintaining those with, and their interests in, the broader Iraqi state. The UAE has the most extensive relations and political ties with the Kurdish capital of Erbil, and placed a consulate general in post there as early as 2012. This move was subsequently carried out by Kuwait in 2015, then Saudi Arabia in 2016, a tangible upgrade in relations that was conducted despite Iran's objections. KRG president Masoud Barzani visited a number of Gulf countries in 2015, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the KRG granted Emirati, Qatari, and Kuwaiti citizens the right of non-visa entry in 2014. At the same time, however, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar do not have high-level representation with the KRG.

With regards to the responses of the GCC states in the run-up to the referendum, strong support for the vote was voiced in Saudi and Emirati traditional and social media, but both governments formally expressed concerns about Iraq's territorial integrity and the need for stability. Bahrain also advised Kurdish leaders not to rush into a move that might destabilize Iraq. Kuwait was even more forthright, emphasising that its primary interests lay in the continued national unity and independence of Iraq. Oman did not take a public position. Qatar took the strongest Gulf Arab position in opposition to the Kurdish vote, expressing "deep concern" that the referendum could "pose a threat to the unity of Iraq and the security and stability of the region."

### **The KRG and the great powers in the region**

The Kurdistan Regional Government has a good relationship with the UK and the US, especially since the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, when it declared the referendum, both Western countries strongly condemned it. By contrast, Russia and Israel had a very different response. The UK believed that it had proposed an alternative plan which would have seen negotiations take place between the government of Iraq and the KRG to address all areas of dispute. This would have provided the opportunity for the aspirations of the Kurdish people to be met. It is regrettable that certain segments of Kurdish leadership rejected the proposal. Commenting on the referendum, the UK's then-foreign secretary Boris Johnson said: "The UK does not support this referendum and continues to back the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. We believe that any referendum should be agreed with the Government of Iraq." Meanwhile, the KRG has enjoyed a close relationship with the US, building up a reservoir of goodwill across the government. But Washington suggested the Referendum was not timely for fear that would disrupt Iraqi unity and hamper the fight against Islamic State.

Another significant regional power in the region is Russia, which has sought to develop its economic relations with the KRG and since the referendum has attempted to maintain a balance between its relations with Baghdad and Erbil. An illuminating statement was published by Russia's foreign ministry on September 27, two days after the referendum. It made the following points: "We maintain our unwavering commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the friendly Iraq and other Middle Eastern states"; "Moscow respects the national aspirations of the Kurds"; "We believe that all disputes that may exist between the Iraqi federal government and the government of the Autonomous Kurdish Region can and should be solved through constructive and respectful dialogue, with a view to devising a mutually acceptable

formula of coexistence within a single Iraqi state”. Meanwhile in Israel, a month before the referendum the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated: “Israel supports the establishment of an independent Kurdish state”. Senior Israeli officials have said Netanyahu's comments reflect official Israeli policy on the matter in light of the referendum. A number of these officials, including the late president Shimon Peres and defence minister Avigdor Lieberman, have in the past expressed support for Kurdish independence. Earlier this month (September 2018), justice minister Ayelet Shaked said: "Israel and countries of the West have a major interest in the establishment of the state of Kurdistan. I think that the time has come for the US to support the process."

## **Anticipated Participants**

**The questions that this proposal will seek to answer include:**

- Iraqi Kurdistan’s independence a security challenge to Iran, Iraq and Turkey.
- What were the pressures on the KRG to hold the referendum for independence?
- How have the KRG’s neighbours, Iran, Iraq and Turkey responded to its efforts for autonomy and independence in the past, and how has this changed.
- Will Kurdistan use the result of referendum to negotiate with Baghdad in a process that will ensure a smooth and peaceful independence.
- What might the KRG’s previous policy towards the GCC states suggest about future of the Kurds in Iraq?
- What can we expect of the KRG’s foreign policies towards the GCC and Iran if the result of the referendum is successfully negotiated?
- How might the KRG work with the GCC states to find a way to stop destabilizing actions of Iran in the region?
- Will the Gulf states support the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan in the future?
- Why are some forces in the region desperate to ensure this goal is not achieved?
- Could the UK and US take a mediatory role in the crisis unfolding between the KRG and Iraqi central government?
- How will a post-referendum KRG compete with the US and Russia for regional influence?
- Did Israel support Kurdistan’s referendum? And if so, in what capacity?
- Did the US and the UK left behind the Kurds for the Kurdistan independence?
- Why Iran is wary of Saudi Arabia’s attitude to proposed Iraqi Kurdish independence.
- The future of Islamic State in Kurdistan Region and Iraq.

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Irfan Azeez Azeez** Al-Sabah doctoral Fellow at Durham University’s School of Government and International Affairs (SGIA). He is part of a research project titled “Transnational Language, Transient Identities and the Crisis of the Arab Region”. This

project directed by Professor Anoush Esteshami at the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham university. In his doctoral research, Irfan Azeez investigates how IS has shaped Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)-Turkey relations and KRI-Iran relations. More broadly, the research aims to deepen the understanding of the role of non-state actors in the Middle Eastern region. Azeez completed a Master of Law at Kingston University in Arbitration Law and Alternative Dispute Resolution.

Irfan Azeez is the former Secretary General of the Kurdistan Students' Union. He is also political analyst. Azeez grew up in the Iranian and Iraqi parts of Kurdistan region during the period when the Kurds were being persecuted by the Iraqi regime.

Irfan Azeez is the former Editor-in-Chief of Kongra newspaper, Xabat magazine, Xema magazine, Rwanin newspaper, and Nvar magazine. Moreover, he is the former director of the Xema Centre for the researcher centre's business and political relations. He is the author of the books "Strategic Relations Between Kurdistan and Turkey" and "Future Outlooks for Iraq's Political Situation".

**Dr. Marianna Charountaki** is a Lecturer in Kurdish Politics and International Relations at the School of History, Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester. She is also the Director of Kurdistan International Studies Unit (2016-2018) and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research interests range from international relations and foreign policy analysis to the international relations of the broader Middle East. She is the author of the books *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, (Routledge, 2010) and *Iran and Turkey: International and Regional Engagement in the Middle East*, (I. B. Tauris, 2018) as well as articles in *Harvard International Review*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Journal of American Foreign Policy Interests*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* and *Journal of Arabian Studies*.

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**2019 Gulf Research Meeting**

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**The Consequences of the  
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Relations between KRG – Iran/ the GCC**

**Paper Presenter Abstracts:**

**The KRI Alliance Making in a Fragmented Regional Order**

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Abstract:

This research is on the Kurdish perspective of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-UAE relations. Using Kant liberal theory, it argues that KRG views its relations with UAE not from a security perspective, but as an opportunity to achieve a network of interlinked political and economic aims. It concludes that the UAE is an economic partner to achieve recognition, eliminate regional threats, preserve its de facto rule of post 1991, and achieve self-sufficiency from the federal government of Iraq.

**Iran's relation with Kurds in Iraq: An analysis of Iran's position  
on the 2017 Kurdish Referendum**

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Abstract:

In the last few years two developments in the Middle East have dominated the region: the emergence of Iran as a regional power and Iraqi Kurdistan's secessionist efforts. The two are multifaceted and complex and related in many ways. This paper examines the significance and the implications of the Kurdish independence in Iraq for Iran's hegemonic ambitions. It also investigates the root causes of the collision of the Kurdish independence plans with the Iranian hegemonic posture in the Middle East. I argue that the KRG independence plans are contrary to Iran's hegemonic ambitions. To test this argument, I evaluate Iranian current security concerns and its push to rebalance regional and international pressures. The security concerns were the main drivers behind the Kurdish independence attempt, as well. However, security was not the only overlapping area. As the paper shows, timing was equally significant; as the two sides saw that the current circumstances in the Middle East and beyond offered a historic moment to push for their agenda. Our findings show that while there was very little support for the Kurdistan independence move, it was Iran through the use of military, close relations with Kurdish political parties, and the ISIS war that turned the Kurdish efforts from gain to loss.

## **Ideology, Sectarianism and Authority Vacuum: The Factors Keeping the Islamic State (IS) Alive in Iraq and Kurdistan Region**

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Abstract:

The Islamic State (IS), by relying on the theological and moral values and the social practices of the first three Muslim generations (the al-Salaf al-Salih, the most righteous and virtuous period) and by adhering to takfiri (excommunication) and militant manhaj (methodology) of Wahhabism, has become notorious worldwide, but especially in Iraq. Iraq's fragmented and fragile ethnic and religious structure and IS's ideological and organizational roots in the country raise serious concerns about the impact of IS in the country, and leads us to ask the following question: Does (and how) the IS pose a threat to Iraq and Kurdistan Region?

The IS, since its predecessor Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's takfiri Salafi jihadi practice (2003-2006) in Iraq, promotes itself as the protector of Sunni Arabs. In fact, in the post-Saddam Iraq, certain developments, such as transfer of the power to the Shi'a elites, implementation of the de-Baathification policy, and the chaotic atmosphere of clash of identities, have offered an opportunity, first to al-Zarqawi and then to the IS, to present themselves as the chief protector of the Sunni identity – or on a broader context, of the Sunni Islam (ahlu-al-Sunnah) – against the 'Shia sectarianism.' Doctrinal competitiveness of the Sunni and Shi'a identities, in this context, has provided the IS a theological space within the

former. Likewise, from political and military perspectives also, the IS presents itself as the only group that can protect the Sunni territories and the Sunnis political and economic interests within Iraq's ethno-sectarian conflictual and corrupted structure.

In sum, exclusion of from the political power, alienation from the central state, and the fear and concern about the future have created an ideological and authority vacuum amongst the Sunni Arabs, which al-Zarqawi and the IS have successfully filled in a different periods so far. Accordingly, failure to incorporate the Sunni Arabs into the power structure (i.e. power-sharing) in the future, that is, failure to guarantee their equal access to political and economic resources in a federal structure and to prevent sectarian identity clash in the society, carries the potential of generating a fertile ground for IS's existence and its likelihood of continuing to receive support from the Iraqi Sunnis – which overall, will further destabilize Iraq.

When it comes to the Kurdistan region in Iraq, although the IS may not be receiving a collective support from the Kurds in an ideological sense, some other factors, such as the group's deep roots in some Kurdish areas through takfiri Salafi jihadi Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam), and also the political and economic corruption in the Kurdistan region, create a gray zone for the group which facilitates recruitment of new members and execution of sensational attacks. The attacks of IS in disputed territories, particularly in Kirkuk, in this respect, has a potential to generate ethnic and sectarian conflict and destabilize the Kurdistan region. The Kurdish independence referendum (September 25, 2017) and the Kurds' lose of Kirkuk and other disputed areas further provides IS a gray zone to threaten the Kurdistan region.

Within the context provided, this paper argues that the IS may not reach the military capacity of re-establishing an Islamic state in Iraq, but Iraq's sectarian and political structure offers a fertile ground for the group continue to destabilize the country. The paper, in this context, will address two sub-questions: (1) What does the IS ideologically offer to Sunni Arabs? (2) In what respect does the IS present itself as an alternative political and military power for the Sunnis in the context of their tension with the Shiites and the corrupt governments?

The study, to a great extent, relies on the primary sources. The research data were collected in a series of fieldworks that consisted of semi-structured deep interviews with political authorities, military members, tribal and religious leaders and experts in Iraq, Kurdistan Region and the United Kingdom during the period of 2016-2018.

## **Did the US and the UK left behind the Kurds for the Kurdistan independence? Assessing the importance of United States and United Kingdom approach towards the Kurdistan independence.**

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Abstract:

When dealing with the Kurds, the self interest of outside actors obscures the vision of a better future. With different stake holders in the region and the main figures in the international community the determination of achieving Kurdish independence has been a rollercoaster. Generally, short - term focuses are clear and concise. However, with this long-term interest the main focus shifts to the balance of power particularly with the United States. The question of statehood in Kurdistan appears a little nuisance to the United States and the United Kingdom. The last time Britain had a determined stand with the Kurds was in 1991, however, in opposing the referendum held in September 2017 Britain found it self close allies with Iran. Whether it was matter of ill timing or lack of support for the Kurdish independence and the statehood remains ambiguous. The Kurds have stood alone inline with the secular and democratic values in a religious fundamentalism and anti – western feeling in the Middle East region. The lack of support for an independent state from the international community and specifically the US and UK remains largely in doubt.

### **Saudi foreign policy towards KRG in the post-2003 era: Assessing Iran’s role: A neo-classical realist approach**

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Abstract:

This study investigates the evolving nature of the Saudi foreign policy toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which is the only regionally and internationally recognized Kurdish entity, in the post-2003 era with a particular focus on the role of Islamic Republic of Iran on their relationship. Placing a clear emphasis on its Iraq policy, this Gulf country has improved its relations with the KRG particularly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The invasion has shaken the balance in the region and laid the foundation for new understandings in Saudi foreign policy. On these grounds, it is worth examining the stance of the heavyweight of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) through different approaches of foreign policy. This study draws on the ‘neoclassical realist approach’ to explore the evolving nature of Saudi foreign policy strategy toward the KRG since the invasion to the present. When this paper examined the main determinants that could have had an impact on Saudi foreign policy strategy toward KRG, it found out that Riyadh’s growing attention to Arbil is mainly influenced by a variety of both internal and external factors related to the role of perception and threats by the Saudi leadership, regional patterns as well as the international context. The research problem of this paper would be read as to how Iran has played a role in Saudi approach toward the KRG and the independence desire of the Kurdish entity. Although it is still too soon to judge the outcomes,

this paper argues that closeness between Riyadh and Arbil signals a mutually beneficial scenario that can potentially limit Iranian influence in Iraq.

## **UAE and Qatar Position on Kurdistan's Independence**

**Ari Mamshae**

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Abstract:

The approach of the Arab Gulf countries towards an independent Kurdistan varies. This was very evident during the referendum for independence of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in September 2017, to which each the countries were divided into different positions. These positions were based primarily on larger regional and sectarian strategies that these countries pursue. The position of the United Arab Emirates on an independent Kurdistan is in harmony with those of the Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to which they view an independent Kurdish state in line with their regional Arab Sunni strategy for the Middle East, whereas Qatar is in opposition to any Kurdish statehood due to its close ties with both Turkey and Iran.

## **Kurdish Referendum and Great Power Politics: Regional Response and Global Concern**

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Abstract :

After the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Kurdish issue has remained by far the most contentious for geostrategic reasons involving Middle East and beyond. A nation divided into multiple geographies, the Kurds demand an independent state but have failed to achieve any success so far. The recent crisis emerging in the wake of Islamic State as a regional and global threat; instability in Iraq, Syrian civil war, political chaos in Turkey, growing Saudi-Iranian rift and Iranian response to US position on Iranian nuclear deal is opening a new chapter in the shifting regional order. The Kurdish question is now coming back to the table as power is shifting due to both, domestic factors and regional imbalances. The recent referendum might not have major political significance due to non-binding features in the immediate time but the responses and concerns from regional and global players unveils a new phase of Kurdish question. The Kurdish referendum

thus becomes an important event that provides scope to know what would shape the politics in the region and what would be the likely future of Kurdish demand for separate statehood. The cost of referendum and possibilities of negotiations would be a notable inquiry in understanding the implications of the recent referendum.

## **Illuminating the Popular Shadow over Erbil – Baghdad Relations**

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Abstract:

On September 25, 2017, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) held a controversial independence referendum, the consequences of which continue to shape Erbil's relationship with federal officials in Baghdad. The ensuing backlash ended up costing the KRG a third of its hard-won territory,<sup>1</sup> which then Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi did not hesitate to reconquer with the help of both regular forces and the country's controversial Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), also known in Arabic as al-Hashd al-Sha'abi.

The aim of this article is to elaborate on Baghdad's rationale for deploying the PMU as a state-sanctioned paramilitary umbrella for the recapturing of Kirkuk, and to discuss the long-term implications of the PMU's presence across the disputed territories. For that purpose, the author will begin by providing background information on the emergence of the PMU following the invasion of Mosul by the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in 2014, as well as their institutionalization in the course of the military campaign against IS, referred to in Arabic as Daesh. Second, the article will illuminate the variables behind the KRG independence referendum, which lead to Baghdad's decision to reclaim Kirkuk with the help of the Iraqi Army and several brigades from within the PMU. Lastly, the analysis will comment on the current rapprochement between the KRG leadership and federal Iraqi counterparts in the course of the legislative elections and government formation process in both Erbil and Baghdad. Having emphasized the overall footprint of the PMU's presence across the disputed territories, the author will conclude by drawing the attention to the structural problems of administrative fragmentation and addressing the implications of a failed unification process of KRG security forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Nussaibah Younis, "Baghdad and KRG Locked in a Standoff," Atlantic Council, February 1, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/baghdad-and-krb-locked-in-a-standoff>.

## **Iraqi-Kurds from political stability to political upheaval; 2005 – 2017**

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Abstract:

Following the change of Iraqi political system in 2005, Iraqi Kurdistan has been granted autonomous region within unified Iraq. Since then, Iraqi Kurds have sought to bring the old dream of independence into reality through political stability. Politically, it was the most stable period. However, these period of prosperity and stability have been dramatically changed into upheaval and crisis. KRG's politically they are in disputes. The unilateral Kurdish referendum in September, 2017 has brought almost the Kurdish dream of independence into unthinkable by losing most the political privileges they have. While the referendum has encouraged Iraqi government to take action against the KRG, it cannot be alone accounted for the political the KRG is in now. The KRG was in deep crisis even before the referendum. Thus, the main purpose of this research is to answer the question, "What accounts for the KRG's political upheaval?" How can we understand the political change?

**The study aims at achieving the following goals:** First, understanding what has gone done in relations to state building in the Iraqi Kurdistan. Second, assessing the political system in IK by dealing with the administrative system, especially political parties to understand their relationship and the impact of this relation on the political system in IK.

**The objectives of the study are:** The research attempts to clarify the political structure of IK. And what accounts for the dramatic change?

**The rationale of the research can be justified by numerous reasons.** First, it is the desire of the Kurdish people to establish an independent democratic political system in the region where authoritarianism and dictatorship is a model of the political system. Secondly, the study is significant because of the on-going Kurdish issue in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria.

**Methodology,** the study will draw on the existing literature about the political system in countries to explain the political stability in IK. Therefore, the research will use the conceptual approach. The methodological approach used in this research is a qualitative argument, drawing on indication from policy literature and scholarly, non-governmental reports and governmental databases in order to

gain a wide-ranging and accurate understanding of the research question which is what accounts for the political upheaval?

## **The Impact of ‘Āshūrā’ Rituals on Shi‘a-Sunni Relations in Iraq**

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Abstract:

This academic study endeavours to explore the impact of the annual commemoration of ‘Āshūrā’, observed by millions of Iraqi Shi‘a Muslims, on Shi‘a-Sunni relations in Iraq. Whilst these commemorations were restricted by successive Sunni-dominated governments (1920s-1970s), and were banned (1970s-2003) under the rule of the Baath Party (1968-2003), after the fall of this regime in 2003, ‘Āshūrā’ rituals have emerged as the most powerful cultural, religious, and political event in Iraq. It has been estimated that over 20 million Shi‘a pilgrims – Iraqi and from abroad – commemorated ‘Āshūrā’ in Iraq in 2017. The study indicated that ‘Āshūrā’ rituals are powerful system that have come to signify more than simply the tradition of mourning but becoming more indicative of a sectarian split. Furthermore, this study shows that the narrative of Karbala has been adopted by the Shi‘a-dominated governments and Shi‘a militias; increasing the alienation of the Sunni and in turn, further complicating Shi‘a-Sunni dynamics in Iraq and the surrounding region.

## **The KRG’s Independence Referendum: A Turning Point in Iranian-(Iraqi)Kurdish Relations?**

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Abstract:

Iranian opposition to the IKR’s Independence Referendum can be seen as a confluence of its close relationship with Iraq-proper and anxieties over its own Kurdish population. This paper presents these elements as essential to providing an understanding of Iran’s relations with the KRG post-referendum. Iran’s interest in Iraq-proper largely falls in line with its revolutionary aims to export the *velayat-e faqih*, guardianship of the Islamic jurist. Moreover, Iraq is central to Iranian attempts to instate a Shi‘a crescent in the region. Iran’s strategy to create an “Islamic Republic of Iraq” is rooted in political, military, and religio-

cultural action. Although both Iraq's largest political bloc, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, and its most prominent Shi'a authority figure, Ayatollah Sistani, oppose Iranian intervention in the country, Iran maintains a vast influence over Iraqi politics. Moreover, its financial and practical support of groups within *Hashd al-Shaabi* provides the Iranian state a huge amount of power and influence throughout Iraq-proper. Certainly, it is difficult to view the IKR's Independence Referendum in isolation from *Hashd's* subsequent campaign of "sectarian cleansing" in the Disputed Territories.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Iran's invested interest in Iraq-proper, this paper provides that Iranian responses to the Referendum need to be viewed in light of its internal security dimensions. The Iranian government has long-standing ties with the KRG. During the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi Kurds were allied with Iran. Moreover, the fight against ISIS saw *Sepah* (the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps) and Kurdistan's *Peshmerga* fighting side by side. Iran has a cultural, commercial, and security presence in the IKR and the Iranian government holds significant ties with the PUK. This paper concludes that the double-backing of Iran and its stringent response to the Referendum, is also inextricably tied to anxieties over the country's domestic Kurdish population, who are deemed a source of risk to Iran's national security. The IKR's Referendum is thus considered in terms of a potential threat to the Iranian frontiers.

## **The impact of KRG referendum and its regional consequences: Nation-state Dilemma approach**

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Abstract:

This paper will shed the light on the dilemma faced by the Kurdistan regional government, and its quest to obtain independence and the regional consequence of it. In the aftermath of the World War I, orchestrated by colonial powers, the ethnic group in the Middle East, the Kurds throughout history failed to align themselves with superpowers in order to establish a state.

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<sup>2</sup> NATO Association of Canada, 'Iranian interest in Iraq and ramifications on NATO', 10 September 2018, <http://natoassociation.ca/iranian-interest-in-iraq-and-ramifications-on-nato/> [accessed 15 May 2019]