

Regional implications of Iraqi Kurdistan's quest for independence

SUMMARY

Strengthened by its victories over ISIL/Da'esh, the government of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in Iraq has announced that it plans to organise a referendum on independence. The deadline is still unclear, as political divisions have led the region to an institutional stalemate. Negotiations with the federal Iraqi government will focus on the territorial scope of the referendum. The Kurdish leaders want to include the 'disputed areas', in particular Kirkuk, in the poll. However, Iraq is not keen to be cut off from this oil-rich region, which is already at the heart of a dispute on the sharing of oil revenues. The status of Mosul after it is recaptured from ISIL/Da'esh is also under discussion.

Even if the referendum were to take place and the 'yes' side won, it is not certain that a Kurdish state would emerge. Such a state would be weakened by internal divisions and poor economic conditions. In addition, Syria, Turkey and Iran, neighbouring countries that have complex relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, are worried that an independent Kurdish state would encourage their own Kurdish populations to seek greater autonomy. Yet, the perspective of a Greater Kurdistan is remote, since the regional Kurdish landscape is dominated by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and its affiliates, which do not share Iraqi Kurdish leaders' ideology or strategic alliances.

As for the EU and the great world powers, although they consider Iraqi Kurdistan to be a reliable ally in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh (again recently in the battle for Mosul), they do not want to openly back the fragmentation of the Middle-East.



Masoud Barzani,
president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

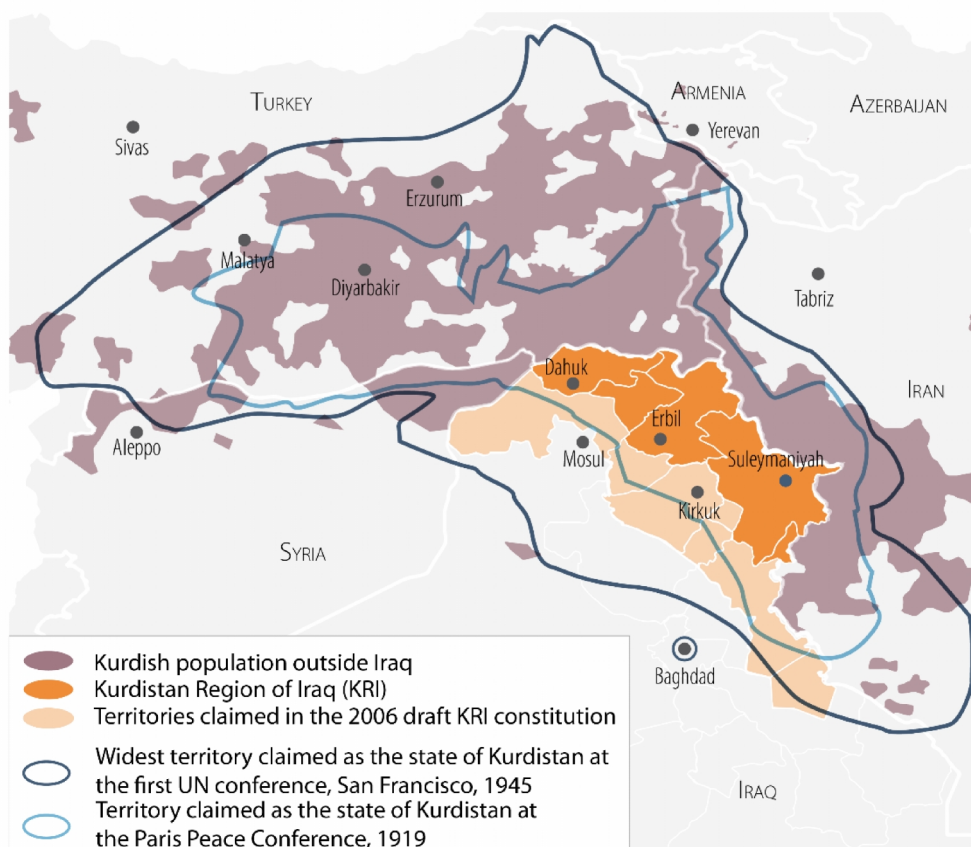
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Background and issue

The Kurds are the Middle East's fourth-largest ethnic group. They are mostly Sunni Muslim,¹ but have a strong cultural identity and traditions that are distinct from Sunni Arabs. Their aspiration for a state of their own has [not been realised](#) because it has never served the geopolitical interests of the great powers, and also because of [political divisions](#) among the Kurds themselves. Kurds live mostly in mountainous areas, as isolated communities;² [political parties](#) often have a local area of influence and vie to keep or extend it, but none enjoys support in all Kurdish areas. After the First World War, Kurdish-inhabited areas were split [between several countries](#) (see Map 1). Nowadays, most of the 30 million [Kurds](#) live in the border areas of Iraq (5.5 million Kurds, of a total of 32.6 million Iraqis), Turkey (14.7 million Kurds, of a total of 81.6 million inhabitants), Iran (8.1 million Kurds of a total of 80.8 million inhabitants) and Syria (1.7 million Kurds, of a total of 18 million inhabitants).³ In the four countries, Kurds have been subject to various levels of discrimination, triggering in turn rebellion and repression.

Map 1 – Proposed 'Greater Kurdistan'; Iraq: Kurdistan Region and disputed territories



Sources: [ETH](#), 2014; [USIP](#), 2011; Institut kurde de Paris & University of Columbia, 1998 (through [Vox.com](#)).

In Iraq, in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's toppling, the United States directly [influenced](#) the [Iraqi Constitution](#) of 2005. The [Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) (KRI, capital city: Erbil) was given considerable autonomy, as a reward for its role in helping to oust Saddam Hussein. KRI is the only recognised 'region' in Iraq with its own government, parliament (see Figure 1), judicial powers and security forces. It has a [draft constitution](#) that has not yet been ratified by a popular vote. Despite KRI's broad autonomy, the federal government retains exclusive powers, in particular in foreign policy and the distribution of oil revenues. Iraqi Kurdish leaders wish to unravel the ties with Iraq, and consider autonomy as a first step [towards independence](#). Since 2014, the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional

Government ('the KRG') has been declaring that it is actively [preparing a referendum](#) on independence. In September 2016, Masoud Barzani, KRG president, implied it could take place [within less than one year](#).⁴ However, several obstacles still have to be removed before this can be achieved.

Territories and oil resources disputed with Baghdad

Barzani says [discussions](#) with the Iraqi government on the referendum are already taking place. Baghdad has [little legal basis](#) to challenge Kurdistan's right to hold a referendum; the Iraqi Constitution's Preamble states that Iraq is a '[free union](#) of people, land and sovereignty'. However, the geographical scope of the consultation is a contentious issue, because the KRG wants to include the inhabitants of the [disputed territories](#) in the poll.

Iraqi provinces neighbouring the Kurdistan Region are still disputed between Iraq's federal and Kurdish governments (see Map 2). Many Kurds live in these territories, but Arabs and Turkmen also make up a large proportion of the population. The absence of a census since 1957 and several waves of population resettlement ('[arabisation](#)' and '[kurdification](#)') mean that the exact share of the population is unclear. The inhabitants of the disputed territories should have been consulted on whether they wish to be part of the Kurdistan Region or to be administered by a different entity. According to [Article 140](#) of the Iraqi Constitution, this consultation on the status of the disputed territories should have occurred no later than 2007, but it has never been carried out. Almost all of the disputed territories are now de facto [under Kurdish rule](#), since Kurdish troops, the '[peshmerga](#)' – which are also divided along the lines of the Kurdistan Democratic Party / Patriotic Union of Kurdistan political rivalry (political parties: see Figure 1) – retook them from ISIL/Da'esh. The KRG intends to [consult](#) the population on the status of the disputed territories by its own means, in lieu of the central government. **Two referendums (or a two-question referendum) are likely to take place in the disputed territories:** if a majority of the inhabitants ended up voting to join Kurdistan, they would be entitled to take part in the referendum on Kurdistan independence. In **Kirkuk**, one of the major disputed territories, this scenario is [contested](#) by non-Kurdish parties, in particular [Turkmen](#), who consider Kirkuk to be their historic capital, and are afraid they will be sidelined or [discriminated against](#) by a Kurdish power. In June 2016, Baghdad proposed [an alternative](#) referendum on the autonomy of Kirkuk within Iraq, based on a [share of powers](#) between Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs.

Iraq indeed has no intention of abandoning the region of Kirkuk, for it holds one of the [biggest oilfields](#) in the country, representing 10 % of Iraq's oil reserves. Iraqi Kurds already control some of Kirkuk's wells and pipelines and in 2014 brokered an [oil deal with Turkey](#), bypassing the Iraqi government. The KRG and the federal government are arguing over the distribution of oil revenues.⁵ In the run-up to the battle of Mosul, a 50/50 [sharing](#) of Kirkuk oil revenues was agreed, allegedly brokered by the USA.

The battle for Mosul

On 17 October 2016, Iraqi forces and the international coalition launched a military operation to [recapture](#) Iraq's second-largest city from ISIL/Da'esh. Iraqi Kurdish forces are involved in the assault. Before providing this help, Erbil negotiated a better arrangement on oil revenues. According to Barzani, [talks](#) on the battle for Mosul also addressed the [future status](#) of Mosul, where the KRG seeks to gain [greater influence](#). (The Mosul area is not presently considered to be a 'disputed territory' but is [claimed](#) by both Kurdish and Shia militias). Kurdish peshmerga agreed with the Iraqi government not to enter the city of Mosul, but Barzani allegedly said they would [refuse to retreat](#) from the areas around the city they have retaken from ISIL/Da'esh.

Oil revenues represent more than 90 % of the Iraqi central and Kurdish regional budgets. The KRG estimates it holds 45 billion barrels of [oil reserves](#); but, according to the International Energy Agency, these reserves would amount to no more than 4 billion barrels if the disputed territories were not included in the calculation. KRI's [economy](#) already faces [uncertain revenues](#) and is under pressure from ISIL/Da'esh attacks – the autonomous region hosts more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees and displaced Iraqis.⁶ **Without Kirkuk, the economic viability of an independent Kurdistan would be at stake.**

Political stalemate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Internal political strife in the Kurdistan Region is currently hindering the setting-up of a referendum. The Kurdish Electoral Commission declared itself [ready](#) to organise the practical aspects of a poll in all parts of the region. However, the independence referendum cannot be held without a sound political consensus: the wording of the question needs to be approved by the Kurdistan Parliament in Iraq ([KPI](#)).

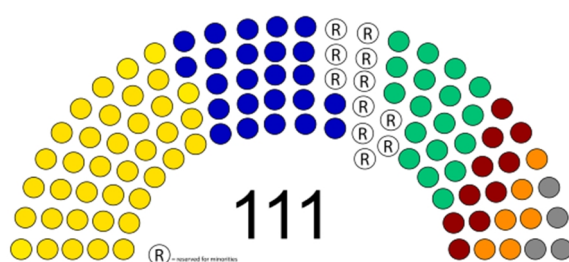
Figure 1– Kurdistan Region of Iraq: main political parties; regional parliament and government

Main political parties

The [main political parties](#) in the Kurdistan Parliament are:

- the [KDP](#), the **Kurdistan Democratic Party** (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*), led by Masoud Barzani. It draws its main support from Dohuk and the region's capital Erbil; it has fought for independence since 1946; it favours a free-market economy.
- the [PUK](#), the **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan** (*Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê*), led by Jalal Talabani. It is a splinter (1975) from the KDP, based mainly in the area of Suleymanyia; it has a leftist political stance and is a member party of [Socialist International](#). The KDP and PUK are [long-standing rivals](#), and made divergent strategic alliances before uniting against Saddam Hussein in 2002.
- [Gorran](#), the **Movement for Change** (*Bzutinewey Gorran*), led by Neshirvan Mustafa. Formed in 2009 by former PUK members to challenge the power-sharing arrangement between PUK and the KDP. Its main support base is in Suleymanyia and Kirkuk.
- [Political Islam](#) is also represented in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament but is still in the minority. Proponents have a conservative stance on social issues, and fight for a less secular and less presidentialist political system.

The Kurdistan Parliament in Iraq



[Picture](#) by Zirguez (CC0 public domain, 2014)

The [Kurdistan Parliament](#) in Iraq is elected every four years by popular vote (last election: 2013)

KDP	Seats:	38
Gorran		24
PUK		18
Islamic Union		10
Islamic Brotherhood		6
Other		4
(R) Reserved for minorities (Turkmen, Assyrian, Armenian)		11

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

[The KRG](#) is a coalition government, where the main parliamentary parties are represented. KDP and the PUK used to share ministerial and high official positions; but since 2013, when Gorran won more votes than the PUK in the Parliamentary elections, [power-sharing arrangements](#) have been difficult. A government could not be formed until June 2014, when Barzani's nephew (KDP) was appointed prime minister, Talabani's son (PUK) nominated deputy prime minister, and Gorran given ministerial portfolios.

Main sources: [Rubin Center](#), 2013, [Kurdistan Regional Government](#), 2016.

Most Iraqi Kurdish parties publicly [support independence](#), but **the Parliament has been in recess for more than one year**. The reasons for the deadlock lie in the current position of Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Region. A presidential election should have taken place in 2015,⁷ but could not be held because of the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. Barzani then [stayed in power](#), although the opposition [refused](#) to approve the extension of his mandate, unless more power was given to the parliament. The unrest extended to governmental level. In October 2015, [ministers from Gorran](#), the main opposition party (political parties: see Figure 1), were ousted and the Parliament's speaker (Youssef Muhammad, Gorran) was [barred](#) from entering Erbil. Opposition parties are insisting on prior [reactivation](#) of the parliament before planning a referendum. For opponents, the urge for a referendum is merely a means to restore Barzani's [contested legitimacy](#), even if the latter pledged to [step down](#) once independence has been achieved. There is [no clear legal basis](#) for resolving the issue, as the Kurdistan Region has only a draft constitution and no constitutional court. [Negotiations](#) to break the political deadlock have not succeeded so far.⁸ The current stalemate reveals how the **Kurdistan Region in Iraq is politically divided**, with the risk Kurdish parties fall back on their respective strongholds (see Map 2). Experts fear this might add to [regional instability](#).

Iraqi Kurdistan's relations with its neighbours

Kurdish [geopolitics](#) are quite a complex matter. The fight against ISIL/Da'esh and the civil war in Syria, which have blurred the borders and destabilised central governments, have contributed to the [empowerment](#) of the Kurdish movements, armed by the anti-ISIL/Da'esh coalition. They have also aggravated factional conflicts: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Iraq's main Kurdish party, and Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are vying for [supremacy](#) over '[Greater Kurdistan](#)'.

Turkey

Renewed [violence](#) between the PKK and the Turkish government puts the KRG's [kinship solidarity](#) at odds with its [strategic alliance](#). [Turkey's Kurds](#) do not enjoy the same autonomy as their Iraqi fellows, although in the 2000s, reforms progressively lifted the ban on the use of the Kurdish language. By contrast, Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey have developed close [economic ties](#): Turkey is the main [supplier of goods](#) to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and buys [oil](#) directly from the KRG, outraging both the [Iraqi government](#) and the PKK. Despite this relationship, Turkey, which also wants to placate the Iraqi [Turkmen community](#), is officially for a [unity government](#) in Iraq.

The Kurds of Iraq and Turkey have fought together against ISIL/Da'esh, but Barzani has kept [a firm stance](#) against the PKK, notably because the latter has gained [influence in Iraq](#) and supremacy in Syria's Kurdistan.

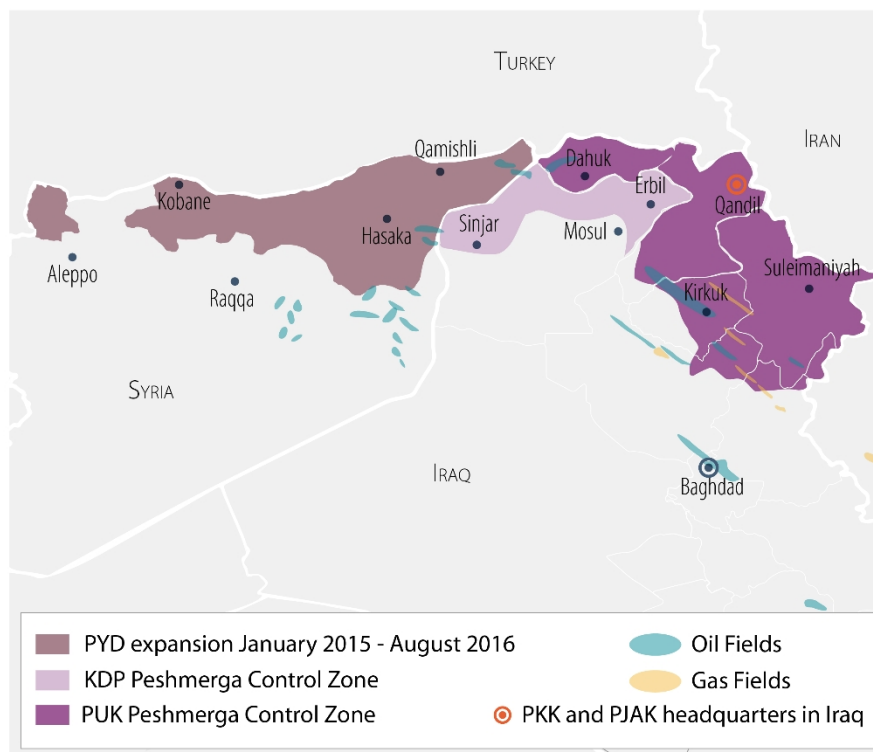
The [PKK the Kurdistan Workers' Party](#) (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*), was founded in 1978. It has a Marxist stance and has been involved in several waves of guerilla war against Turkey since 1984, [the latest](#) ongoing since July 2015. Its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in jail since 1999, recently renewed a call for [peace talks](#). The PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by [Turkey](#), the [EU](#) and the [USA](#). The legal Turkish Kurdish Party HDP (founded in 2013) [distances](#) itself from armed violence but is [accused](#) by the government of links with the PKK. The PKK has bases in Mount Qandil and Mount Sinjar in Iraq. (see Map 2).

Syria

In Syria, successive regimes resettled [Syrian Kurds](#) on a massive scale in other parts of the country, or deprived them of their Syrian nationality. Since the beginning of the civil war, Kurdish forces defending the northern territories against ISIL/Da'esh have been able to set up *de facto* autonomous Kurdish provinces, under the name '[Rojava](#)' or 'West' (see

Map 2). A power-sharing deal was agreed in 2012 between the Kurdistan National Council – a [shallow coalition](#) of other Syrian Kurdish parties backed by Iraqi Kurdistan – and the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Syria's Kurdish Democratic Union Party), but was [never applied](#); the [PYD and affiliated armed forces](#) have taken control of most Syrian Kurdish areas (see Map 2). The PYD is accused by both the KRG and Turkey of being an [affiliate of the PKK](#) and between March and June 2016, Iraqi Kurdistan temporarily closed its [borders](#) to Syrian peshmerga. It is unlikely that Syrian Kurds would join forces with Iraqi Kurdistan to claim independence; like the KRG in Iraq, Syrian Kurds are rather trying to enforce their positions within Syria for a post-ISIL/Da'esh era, as their involvement in the [battle for Raqqa](#) shows.

Map 2 – Control of terrain by Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria, as of August 2016; location of oil and gas fields



Sources: [Institute for the Study of War](#), 2016 (for Iraq); The [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), 2016 (for Syria); US Energy Information Administration, through [Vox.com](#), 2015 (for oil and gas).

Iran

Iran does not support Kurdish independence, but is [influential](#) enough to help [improve](#) relations between the KRG and the Iraqi government, in order to contain its own Kurdish insurgency and prevent Saudi Arabia from gaining influence. [Iran's Kurds](#) do not benefit from specific political rights or representation and are also [discriminated against as Sunnis](#). To fight against ISIL/Da'esh, Iranian Kurdish factions joined forces and became militarily empowered. They have now [turned their arms](#) on the Iranian regime, which is brutally repressing them. Iranian Kurdish fighters from the [PJAK](#) (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Free Life Party, considered an affiliate of PKK) are based in Iraqi Kurdistan (see Map 2), but their cause is [not supported](#) by the KRG. Iraqi Kurdish leaders are not willing to offend the Shia regime in Teheran, all the more since the two entities are currently discussing an [oil pipeline](#) from Iraqi Kurdistan to Iran.

International positions on an independent Iraqi Kurdistan

In the current context, the international community is reluctant to back the creation of a new state in the region. Iraqi Kurdistan's claim is reinforced by the fact that it has proven a more reliable [ally](#) of the Coalition against ISIL/Da'esh than the Iraqi army. Fragmentation of the Middle East might add to instability and would not guarantee the respect of minority rights however: the KRG is considered a model of [religious tolerance](#), but is accused of [discrimination](#) by non-Kurdish minorities. Regional autonomy within the existing borders remains the preferred option for the main international players.

United States

The US government is officially opposed to Kurdish independence and [favours Iraq's unity](#). Nevertheless, it has long been a supporter of the Kurdish cause. The KRG has an [office](#) in Washington 'which acts as an [embassy of sorts](#)' and has direct diplomatic relations with the White House: in May 2015, for instance, Masoud Barzani and [KRG leaders visited President Barack Obama](#) in Washington. In the framework of the fight against ISIL/Da'esh, Kurdish troops have benefited from a US '[train and equip](#)' programme. The political stalemate is [a cause of concern](#) for US officials.

Russia

Although Moscow has more apparent [links with Syrian Kurds](#), Russia also delivers [arms to Iraqi Kurds](#) to support their fight against ISIL/Da'esh. Some experts see it as a [competition](#) with the USA and Turkey in the area. Despite its [strategic alliances](#) with the Kurds, Russia firmly supports the [territorial integrity](#) of the countries in the region.

Israel

Moving against the tide, Israel's prime minister said in an interview in June 2014 that Iraqi Kurds [deserved](#) an independent state, a call taken up in 2016 by his [justice minister](#). Israel and the Iraqi Kurds have had [relations](#) since the mid-1960s, first linked by their opposition to the Iraqi state, now by their common need to contain the advance of ISIL/Da'esh. There are also economic considerations: Israel imports a large part of its oil from the Kurdistan region of Iraq (19 million barrels between May and mid-August 2015 corresponding to [77 %](#) of Israeli needs). Revenues from these sales in turn finance the peshmerga. The KRG's links with Israel however complicate its quest for support from other countries in the region.

Implications for the EU

The KRG, which has an [office in Brussels](#), is considered to be an important interlocutor for [the EU regional strategy](#) in Iraq and Syria, in particular for the delivery of EU aid to refugees and for the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. EU representatives have expressed [concerns](#) that the political stalemate could 'distract from the critical issue of defeating Da'esh'. At the same time, the EU remains [committed to Iraq's unity](#). For these reasons, the EU sometimes acts as [a mediator](#) between Erbil and Baghdad. In 2014, the EU Council approved the [delivery of weapons](#) to the Kurdish troops by some Member states 'with the consent of the Iraqi national authorities'.

The **European Parliament** has raised concerns about [Iraqi minorities](#), including the Kurds, on several occasions. Parliament has also encouraged [cooperation](#) with the Kurdish forces in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. In [July 2014](#) Parliament 'took note' of the announcement of a referendum for independence, and called for respect for non-Kurdish populations in the process.

Further reading

Gunes, C. and Lowe, R. *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Chatham House, London, 2015.

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Romano, D. and Gurses, M. (ed.), *Conflict, democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014.

Voller, Y., *The Kurdish liberation movement in Iraq: from insurgency to statehood*, Routledge, London, 2014.

Endnotes

¹ With the exception of [Yazidi, and Shia Failis and Shabaks](#).

² Kurds do not speak a common language: some speak only the language of their home country, and there are several [Kurdish dialects](#) (mainly Sorani, written largely in a Perso-Arabic script, and Kurmanji, written largely in Latin script).

³ Council on Foreign Relations estimates, based on CIA World Factbook 2014.

⁴ In previous declarations, he had hoped it would take place [before the end of 2016](#), 'if Allah so wishes'.

⁵ The Iraqi constitution states that Iraq's oil revenues shall be distributed 'in a [fair manner](#) in proportion to the population'. According to this rule, the KRG is entitled to [17 % of the country's oil revenues](#), provided Kurdish oil is exported through the Iraqi state organisation. But since 2014, the federal government has not given the KRG its share, while the KRG has failed to provide Baghdad with the agreed amount of oil.

⁶ 'In early 2015, the total number of refugees and IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons] added up to 1.5 million in KRI [Kurdistan Region of Iraq].' in *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Assessing the Economic and Social Impact of the Syrian Conflict and Isis*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2015).

⁷ Masoud Barzani was elected by the Parliament in 2005; in 2009, he was re-elected for four years by a [direct vote](#). In 2013, a [controversial law](#) voted by the Kurdish Parliament extended his mandate until 20 August 2015.

⁸ The situation has stalled, because Barzani's party, the KDP (for the main political parties see Figure 1), does not have an absolute majority in Parliament, and the opposition is too divided to challenge Barzani or propose an alternative candidate. Tensions have at times escalated into fighting between supporters of each side. Several rounds of [negotiations](#) on the Parliament's reactivation and the selection of a successor to Barzani until elections take place have failed (as of 20 November 2016).

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