

CHAPTER III

THE KURDISH STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

In this chapter, the writer will discuss about the United States involvement in the Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan conflict, how the conflict between Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan occurred; including what efforts has the United States done toward the conflict under its interest.

A. Iraqi-Kurdish Conflict

The Iraqi-Kurdish conflict consisting of a series of wars and insurrections by the Kurds against Iraqi central authority during the 20th century, which began shortly after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and lasted until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Yildiz, 2004). Some put the point marking the conflict began from Mahmud Barzanji's attempts to establish an independent Kurdistan Kingdom, while others dealt with the conflict only as a post-1961 rebellion by Barzanis (Heo & Jr., 2007). The conflict lasted until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, although tensions between Kurdish autonomy and the Iraqi government were ongoing. Kurds are an ethnic minority distinct from Iraq's Arab majority. There are major Kurdish populations in several Middle Eastern countries, but they are particularly concentrated in three provinces in Iraq's northeast (Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah), an area widely referred to as Iraqi Kurdistan.

Figure 1.1 Area inhabited by Kurds in Iraq



Sources: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2017/10/iraqi-kurdish-independence-referendum-road-171024102636556.html>

The Iraqi-Kurdish conflict emerges since the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1918 which brought hope to the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey to have their own nation-state. They began searching for the right homeland to establish a Kurdish state. However, British colonization in some areas of Mesopotamia including Iraq left the ethnic Kurds disappointed because it impeded their aspiration to live in a country of their own. They have to take a bitter reality when the country of Iraq established after the British colonization. The Kurdish people must be willing to share their place and enter the territory of Iraq. A similar fate is experienced by Kurds in Iran, Syria and Turkey.

The first chapter of the Kurdish row of Iraq following the end of World War I and the arrival of British troops. Mahmud Barzanji began a secessionist effort in 1919 and in 1922 proclaimed a short-lived Kurdish Kingdom (Heo & Jr., 2007). Although the Mahmud uprising was defeated, another Kurdish sheikh, Ahmed Barzani, began actively opposing the mandatory Iraqi central government during the 1920s. The first

of the great Barzani rebellions took place in 1931, after Barzani, one of the leading Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq, defeated a number of other Kurds. (CIA, 2012). He eventually failed and took refuge in Turkey. The second Kurdish secessionist attempt by Ahmed Barzani's brother, Mustafa Barzani in 1943, but the rebellion also failed, resulting in Mustafa's exiled people to Iran, where he participated in the effort to form the Kurdish Republic in Mahabad. In 1958, Mustafa Barzani and his fighters returned to Iraq from exile, and attempts were made to negotiate Kurdish autonomy in the north with the new Iraqi government of General Qasim. The negotiations ultimately failed and the First Iraqi-Kurdish War erupted on September 11, 1961 which lasted until 1970 and inflicted 75,000-105,000 casualties (Heo & Jr., 2007). Despite efforts to resolve the conflict by providing Kurds with recognized autonomy in northern Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan), negotiations failed in 1974, resulting in a continuing animosity known as the Second Iraq-Kurdish War, resulting in the collapse of Kurdish militia and the reconquest of northern Iraq by government troops Iraq. As a result, Mustafa Barzani and most KDP leaders fled to Iran, while the PUK gained power in a vacuum, leading an insurgency campaign against the Iraqi central government. Since 1976, the relationship between PUK and KDP has rapidly deteriorated, reaching its peak in April 1978, when the PUK troops suffered major defeats by KDP, which received the support of Iranian and Iraqi air forces. During this period, Ba'athist authorities took the opportunity to undertake large-scale displacement and colonization projects in Northern Iraq, aimed at shifting demography and thus stabilizing the Kurdish base of power.

The conflict re-emerged as part of the Iran-Iraq War, with Kurdish parties collaborating against Saddam Hussein and KDP also gaining military support by the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 1986, Iraqi leadership grew tired of the rising and disloyal Kurdish entities in northern Iraq and started a genocide campaign, known as Al-Anfal, to drive out Kurdish fighters and take revenge on Kurdish populations - an act often described as Kurdish genocide, with an estimated 50,000 to 200,000 victims

(HRW, 2003). After the Persian Gulf War, a series of uprisings destroyed Iraq, but only Kurds reached an unknown autonomous status in one of Iraq's no-fly zones, formed by the US-led coalition. In the mid-1990s, the conflict between KDP and PUK erupted once again, resulting in a bloody civil war, which ended in 1997. Despite mutual recognition after the 2003 Iraq war that overthrew the Ba'ath government, the relationship between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraqi central government became tense between 2011-12 due to the issue of power sharing and oil exports.

The Kurds were arguably genocidal under Saddam Hussein's rule, but granted a massive autonomy under the Iraqi constitution established after the US invasion. The Kurdish Regional Government is given almost exclusively control over Iraqi Kurdistan, in practice setting it as a quasi-independent state. Most importantly, the constitution does not give Kurds control over Kirkuk - an ethnic mixed area just south of Kurdistan that happens to be home to 40 percent of Iraq's oil reserves. However, the Kurds claimed it as their right, the claim was partly driven by historical complaints (Saddam tried to clear ethnic Kurds from the Kirkuk region) but mostly because they wanted money derived from huge oil reserves.

The central government maintains an uneasy control over Kirkuk until June 2014. That's when the ISIS began to hit northwestern Iraq and descend to Baghdad, in a wave that (at the time) seemed unstoppable. Iraqi forces left Kirkuk in a bid that ultimately succeeded in halting ISIS's progress and Kurdish troops moved in. So between 2014 and now, the Kurds control Kirkuk and all the officers' wealth, although legally speaking it still belongs to the central government. Until recently, the Iraqi government and Kurds alike had been too preoccupied by the fight against ISIS to hash out their disagreement over Kirkuk. But the terrorist group has, over the past three years, been pushed out of nearly all of its territory in Iraq. As the ISIS fight began to wane, the nature of the post-ISIS political order became a more pressing concern. That included the status of the KRG and so-called disputed territories like Kirkuk.

B. Route to Independence

1. The Iraqi Kurdistan's First Referendum in 2005

This is an independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan that was held on 30 January 2005, with the final result showing the majority of votes, 98.98 percent, in favor of independence (Knickmeyer, 2005). Organized by the Kurdistan Referendum Movement along with Iraqi parliamentary elections and the 2005 Iraq Kurdistan election, the referendum calls on the people of Iraqi Kurdistan whether they prefer the rest of Iraq or support independent Kurdistan. On 22 December 2004, a non-partisan delegation led by Ardishir Rashidi-Kalhur, president of the American Kurdish Education Society met with Carina Perelli, Head of the UN Election Assistance Division and staff, at United Nations Headquarters in New York, to hand over more than 1,732,535 signatures, collected in support of calls for a referendum on independence over the future of South Kurdistan (Knickmeyer, 2005).

The call for a referendum on secession from Iraq was the most open-ended Kurdish push towards independence since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Kurds might choose to remain part of Iraq if it becomes a democracy promised by Iraqi and US leaders. The local parliament of Kurdistan assumed made the decision to push the right to vote in the new constitution, which is being drafted by the committee. Many Sunni Arabs, a minority group that has ruled the country for eight decades, are opposed to Kurdish independence and a push for autonomy by some Shiite Arabs in the south of the country. Shia are the majority of Iraqis. More than 90 percent of voters questioned in Kurdistan during the 2005 Iraqi national election said they wanted independence, according to a frequently quoted survey at the polls. The debate over how much autonomy to grant Kurds in the north, Shiism in the south, and Sunni in central and western countries has become one of the most difficult issues to be solved before Iraq can draft the constitution. Kurdish leaders are courageous in pushing their claims. They launched a map which they wanted added to the new constitution which claims hundreds of miles of territory stretching south of Baghdad. The

region includes Kirkuk, the disputed oil-rich city (KurdMedia, 2005). This referendum, however, not resulted in independence form but rather resulted as new Iraqi Constitution, defining Iraq as a federalist state composed of territories and governors. It recognizes both the Kurdistan Territories and all laws passed by the KRG, makes the KRG remains the only local government in Iraq.

2. The Iraqi Kurdistan's Second Referendum in 2017

This referendum originally planned to be held in 2014 amid a boost following the Northern Attack by the Islamic State (ISIS) during the Iraqi Civil War in which Baghdad-controlled troops left some areas, which were then taken by the Peshmerga and controlled de facto by the Kurds. This triggers the KRG President Barzani to finally set the date for a much-discussed referendum on Kurdish independence. The vote was held on September 25, 2017, triggering a showdown with Baghdad and frantic diplomacy as regional and international powers scrambled to the address and contains the likely fallout of a looming, high-stakes political divorce in Iraq. The ballots printed and Barzani insisted that on September 25, residents of Kurdistan and disputed areas would be asked: "*Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdish region outside of the regional administration to become an independent state?*" (McKernan, 2017). Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq began to seriously discuss the referendum in 2014, after years of clashing with Baghdad on budgetary contributions and oil revenues with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. In June 2014, when Mosul fell into the Islamic State (IS) group after the fall of the Iraqi army, Kurdish doubts about the security of their future in unified Iraq increased. But then the US launched an international military coalition attack against the IS and Maliki groups replaced by the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Given the urgent problems facing the nation, and with group IS fighters heading towards Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG leaders agreed to postpone plans for a referendum. Three years later, with the threat of the much-

diminished IS group and Mosul being freed, day after day for profit is on the ground in Iraq and Barzani has a very good position to bid what he sees as the best deal for his people. Kurdish Peshmerga fighters have been instrumental in fighting against the IS group and many Kurdish officials believe the referendum could increase Barzani's influence in future negotiations with Baghdad.

Despite all the odds, the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum went ahead as planned. Opposition against it is significant. Major international actors, the United States, Russia, Britain, and regional powers, Turkey and Iran, are opposed to voting (Galbraith, 2005). However, the Iraqi Kurds continued with the referendum. Despite fears of uncertainty likely to follow the vote, the atmosphere in the regional Kurdistan capital (KRG), Erbil, was festive on the day of the referendum. Approximately 72 percent of the voters were in a referendum and 92 percent support from an independence offer raised the morale of Kurdish leadership.

The vote is non-binding. The implications are expected to be more political than legal. In fact this is not the first referendum held by the Iraqi Kurds on the issue of independence. In 2005, they held another referendum on the same question, which received almost unanimous support from the Kurds. But there is a qualitative difference between the two voices. The first is an initiative led by civil society, while this initiative is a Kurdish government initiative. It was already ratified by parliament, which, after more than two years of closing, resumed the session on September 14. Nevertheless, the current referendum will not grant immediate independence. This is a point that is emphatically made by the Kurdish leadership of Iraq as well. This is more of a statement of intent, not a roadmap for independence. Under this position, the border of Iraq as an internationally recognized sovereign state and the internal border between the KRG and Iraq will remain intact after the referendum, at least for the foreseeable future.

Apart from this, this decision has caused many anxieties nationally, regionally and internationally. Especially regional

players such as Iran and Turkey have been feared by the referendum. For them, the referendum has moved away from a local problem requiring internal management to a growing crisis, attracting international attention and possibly intervention. Both countries try to threaten the KRG with dire consequences, if they move forward with a vote, which they do. There was almost unanimous rejection of the September 25 referendum call. Turkey has a sizable Kurdish population, estimated at around 14 million, and Ankara sees any step of independence by the Kurds in Iraq as a domestic threat. Ankara coincidentally has close ties with KDP Barzani - Iraqi Kurds are exporting their oil through pipes leading to the Turkish port city of Ceyhan and oil trucks crossing into Turkey. Iran also has a Kurdish population that periodically waged a rebellion and like Ankara, Tehran is also concerned about the potential effects of Iraqi Kurdish independence on the turbulent Kurdish population. The two countries' opposition to the referendum has seen an unusual alliance between Shia Iran and Sunni Turkey, the two powers who have opposed the stronghold in the Syrian conflict.

On August 15, Iran's chief of staff general, General Mohammad Bagheri, arrived in Ankara for a three-day visit, the first ever by Iran's top military commander, in a public sign of a match between two rival powers over them share the fear of Kurdish separatism (Jacinto, 2017). In August 2017, there was an intense diplomatic movement between Erbil and Baghdad as international envoys roam between the two cities, trying, at least, to persuade Barzani to delay a referendum. However, people living in northern Iraq strongly support independence for the Kurdistan region and successfully hold this second independence referendum. The election commission says 92.73 % of the 3.3 million Kurds voted in favor of secession (BBC, 2017).

C. The United States Intervention in the Conflict

The United States' intervention toward the conflict starts from 1963, which is in the main phase period of time of

the Iraqi-Kurds conflict. Then Iraqi leader Abdel Karim Qassim was ousted in a coup reportedly backed by the US government. Furthermore, Washington advised Kurdish Iraqi citizens to support the newly installed central government headed by the Iraqi Baath Party, a secular Arab nationalist nationalist movement. Following this push, an agreement was reached between the Kurdish Democratic Party and the central government, which promised more autonomy for the Kurds. The deal was negotiated with a politician who would later be known for the brutal suppression of the Kurds: Saddam Hussein, at that time the vice president of Iraq. The Iraqi Baath Party has become a threat in the eyes of the US government. President Richard Nixon and the Shah of Iran began funding the Kurdish peshmerga guerrillas and supporting their claims for autonomy. In 1972, Hussein signed the "Friendship and Cooperation Agreement" with the Soviet Union (Noack, 2017).

After the startling Algeria Agreement between Iran and Iraq was reached, the United States suspended its support for the Kurdish rebels, leading to fragmentation of opposition and increased vulnerability to Hussein's new attacks. While he demanded brutal retaliation against the Kurds (including the 1988 catastrophic chemical weapons attack that killed thousands), the United States broke off all official ties with previously supported opposition. Iraq occupied Kuwait, prompting the First Gulf War, ending alienation between the United States and Kurds that have lasted for more than a decade. Iraq was defeated in Kuwait, but subsequent uprisings from Iraqis and Shi'a Kurds (Baath Hussein Party mainly seen as Sunni supporters) failed to gain US support. The rebellion was unsuccessful, but the Kurdish region received a level of protection in 1991 when the "safe haven" was established by the United Nations. A US-backed opposition group called the Iraqi National Congress will be based in Kurdistan in the following years. However, the Kurdish division emerged.

As a result of this rivalry, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) attacked the Iraqi National Congress in Irbil with the help of Hussein's army. Many rebel fighters were arrested and

executed by the attackers after the United States refused to provide air support. The US invasion of Iraq resulted in cooperation between two main Kurdish enemies, KDP and PUK. Kurdish troops fought alongside US troops against Hussein's government. A regional Kurdish parliament is formed. Soon after, the oil discovery sparked fears inside Iraq's central government in Baghdad that the Kurdish autonomous region could try to escape. Furthermore, tensions between Turkey and Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq emerged and provoked clashes. Turkey's harsh measures against Kurdish residents themselves extended the border into Iraq.

After the peaceful years after the autonomy region of Iraqi Kurdistan's formed, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq or ISIS emerged in 2014 in the region from the ashes of Iraq's al-Qaeda branch and soon took control of much of northern Iraq as national troops fled. Kurdish troops moved into a vacuum, halting the progress of extremists and taking over long-ruled territories such as Kirkuk. The Kurds urged Washington to get more weapons and support. The Iraqi Kurds voted for independence in a referendum that led to an international reaction. The Iraqi government promised to take action against the region and the United States declared the result unlawful. As Iraqi forces moved against Kurdish gains in recent years, the United States declared itself neutral in this moment.