

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE INTEREST OF THE UNITED STATES TOWARDS IRAQI KURDISTAN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM**

In this chapter, the writer will focus on interests that underlie the United States' foreign policy in rejecting the Iraqi Kurdistan's 2017 independence referendum by providing relevant data that implies the motives behind its objection toward the independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan. The factors below provided based on its national interests that turns into foreign policy.

#### **A. Military Security to Protect from External Threats**

The United States decided to refuse and object the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum in 2017 for several reasons, one of them is for its military security. The US always focus on their military security issue in the region of Iraq, where also Iraqi Kurdistan is, ever since the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The military security interest of the United States implies on their Counterterrorism policy which has become one of their vital foreign policy. In reviewing the evolution of US counterterrorism policy since 9/11, it is important to remember that the US campaign against al Qaeda began before 9/11. Two decisions by the Clinton administration paved the way for Bush's declaration of war on terrorists. In 1996, the US Congress passed legislation that imposed economic sanctions on designated terrorist organizations. The ponderously named "Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996" contained an assortment of counterterrorism measures, one portion of which was directed against extremists considered obstacles to the Middle East peace process. It changed the framework of US policy from combating terrorist tactics to punishing designated terrorist groups. Following the terrorist bombings of US embassies in Africa in 1998, the United States directly attacked al Qaeda. As the first military attack on a terrorist group rather than a state sponsor of terrorism, this set an important precedent. The Clinton administration, which had initially viewed terrorism as a law enforcement problem, also

approved efforts to kill Osama bin Laden. This would have been considered a violation of the long-standing executive order prohibiting assassination unless the United States regarded itself as being at war with al Qaeda, in which case bin Laden could be viewed as an enemy military commander. Targeting bin Laden was thus a further step toward putting terrorism into a framework of war three years before Bush declared the Global War on Terror or GWOT, as it came to be called (Thrall & Goepner, 2017).

The 9/11 attacks occurred less than nine months after Bush took office and would define his presidency. This was the deadliest attack in the annals of terrorism and the greatest loss of life on American soil since the Civil War. Intelligence had failed. No one knew what might happen next, 9/11 fundamentally altered perceptions of plausibility. Bush's Global War on Terror did not begin with a clearly articulated strategy but was, rather, a desperate effort to prevent another attack of equal or greater magnitude. Prevent was the key word. The worst terrorist attacks in the 1970s killed tens of people. Escalating terrorist attacks in the 1980s raised this to the hundreds by the 1990s, attacks of this scale were not uncommon (Jenkins, Willis, & Han, 2016). On 9/11, terrorists killed thousands. Extrapolation suggested that future terrorists would escalate to weapons of mass destruction to kill tens or even hundreds of thousands. The terrorist threat was seen as existential. Counterterrorism immediately became the Bush administration's highest priority. The war on terrorism signaled national mobilization and decisive action, without further questioning. Congress backed the war effort with a formal expression of support, authorizing the use of military force against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks. It was tantamount to a declaration of war. However, the goal was not simply to punish the terrorists, as Clinton had done, but to disrupt, disable, and destroy al Qaeda, it was to be a fight to the finish.

Some in the administration spoke of a more-ambitious objective: taking down all terrorist groups. Although this idea did not survive the bloody conflict in Iraq, the definition of the

enemy was broadened to include states identified as the “Axis of Evil,” comprising Iran, Iraq, and North Korea (GPF, 2011). This reflected the administration’s tendency to see terrorism as primarily state-driven and its determination to act preemptively. It opened the way for the invasion of Iraq, which turned out to be a costly distraction.

Some criticized the US response as being exclusively military. It was not. Where the rule of law prevailed, law enforcement techniques were used. Where it did not, military means were necessary. American diplomacy brought other countries on board in the Global War on Terror. The Bush administration was committed to the spread of democracy and the re-engineering of Arab society to bring it about. At the same time, Bush was determined to avoid turning counterterrorism into a war on Islam. The campaign to scatter al-Qaeda and hunt down its operational leaders succeeded in degrading the organization’s operational capabilities, but it did not dent their determination to continue the struggle. Ironically, the Bush administration benefited from al Qaeda’s continuing terrorist campaign, which included major terrorist attacks in Kenya, Tunisia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, and India. The direct threat to their own security persuaded governments, some of which might have remained passive, to undertake efforts to destroy local jihadist networks while actively cooperating with international intelligence efforts. The terrorists’ operating environment became a lot more hostile. The new level of international cooperation was rocked by the US invasion of Iraq and by subsequent revelations that detained prisoners were being subjected to abuse and torture. Nonetheless, improved US intelligence and intelligence cooperation worldwide remain undeniable achievements.

President Obama entered the White House skeptical of the efficacy of US military power as the primary counterterrorist tool, as evidenced by his order to replace the term “Global War on Terror” with “Countering Violent Extremism” (Jenkins B. , 2017). Operationally, the change was less evident. Like Bush, Obama found that his intentions ran

into inconvenient realities on the ground. Obama's goal of ending US participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while avoiding outright defeat proved impossible. Although the war in Afghanistan was viewed as a black hole, endlessly consuming blood and treasure with no good end in sight, removing the Taliban was viewed as morally more justifiable than the invasion of Iraq, since a Taliban return to power would reverse the real gains that had been made in Afghan society. When the military situation in Afghanistan appeared to be worsening, Obama ultimately opted to send reinforcements, although he accompanied the decision with a schedule for the eventual departure of all American troops, which he was later forced to abandon. While most other nations withdrew their forces from Afghanistan, American forces remained and, in 2017, had to again be reinforced. Iraq's refusal to sign a status-of-forces agreement that would protect US troops in Iraq against local prosecution gave Obama the opportunity to bring those troops home.

Many thought the United States had departed prematurely, but disengagement from Iraq proved to be temporary. Two years into his administration, Obama had to deal with rapidly evolving events resulting from the tumult that began with the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. In the following months, protests and armed uprisings occurred across the Arab world. Governments fell or were toppled, as in the US-backed bombing of Libya, which led to Qaddafi's overthrow and spread chaos throughout the adjacent countries of Africa. Protests in Syria turned violent and soon escalated into a complex civil war that led to a schism in al Qaeda and the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS), followed by its dramatic expansion across eastern Syria and northern Iraq. Confronting this situation, Obama sought to avoid new military commitments, especially of American ground forces. In an effort to limit US casualties, share costs, ensure local ownership of responses to terrorism, and reduce perceptions of American unilateralism, Obama sought to assemble coalitions and lead from behind. This caution led to further criticism that he was weak.

The collapse of Iraqi defenses as ISIS forces swept east obliged the United States to renew military operations to prevent further massacres and to prevent ISIS from becoming a new base for terrorist operations against the West. Washington assembled an international coalition and led an ongoing air campaign, which supported ground offenses by Iraqi and US-led Kurdish and Arab recruits in Iraq and Syria. The tumult sweeping across the region also engulfed Yemen, weakening its already fragile government and opening the way for long-restive rebel tribesmen to launch a new civil war. The collapse of government resistance in Yemen prompted military intervention by Saudi Arabia and other surrounding countries, which was supported logistically by the United States. By the end of its second term, the Obama administration, which had assumed office determined to end America's military role in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, found itself both directly and indirectly engaged in military operations in Asia and the Middle East.

While the Obama administration was wary of committing ground forces, it was not reluctant to take out terrorist leaders. Obama risked the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. He also oversaw a tenfold increase in the targeted killings of terrorist leaders and cadre that Bush had initiated. Special operations and airstrikes became the principal expression of America's counterterrorist strategy. Both Bush and Obama recognized the need to work with partner nations that did not share American values but promoted political reforms. Obama renewed the idea of tackling the root causes of terrorism; poverty, corruption, and oppression. His policy pronouncements reflected the view that terrorism in the Middle East could be reduced only by eliminating a major cause of grievance; the existence of dictatorial regimes, hence, the Obama administration supported the Arab Spring, the invasion of Libya, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and initial efforts to unseat the Assad regime in Syria, or at least oblige it to become less dictatorial. Like Bush, Obama considered it America's mission to deliver democracy to the world, although Obama

placed greater emphasis on expanding human rights. As determined as Bush to avoid counterterrorism becoming a war on Islam, Obama sided with those he viewed as progressive Muslims, including the Muslim Brotherhood, against Arab dictators.

Obama sought to avoid taking sides in the deepening divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims, although the United States backed Saudi-led military efforts in Yemen. Faced with declining support for continuing sanctions, the Obama administration negotiated an agreement with Iran that critics, including Donald Trump, felt provided insufficient guarantees that Iran would not develop nuclear weapons. Some in the Obama administration may have hoped that ending the sanctions on Iran would facilitate a rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. While continuing the wars, the Obama administration sought to reverse some of what it viewed as the excesses of the Bush administration. Obama banned the use of brutal interrogation techniques and sought the closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp as one of his first executive orders. He succeeded in reducing the number of prisoners held there but faced fierce resistance in closing the facility. He eventually surrendered none of the assertions of executive authority claimed by his predecessor, including the right to indefinitely detain persons arrested in the United States for terrorist activities, both US citizens and non-citizens (Jenkins B. , 2017).

The Bush administration saw the terrorist threat as coming from abroad and sought to destroy the ability of foreign-based terrorists to attack the United States. By 2009, when Obama took office, it was clear that foreign terrorists did not pose an immediate existential threat to the United States. However, homegrown terrorism increased on Obama's watch, with attacks in Fort Hood, Boston, Chattanooga, San Bernardino, and Orlando. Even though the numbers of casualties in these attacks were exponentially lower than those on 9/11, opinion polls at the end of Obama's term indicated that

Americans were almost as worried about terrorism as they had been immediately after 9/11.

President Trump inherited a war in Afghanistan, an ongoing military campaign against ISIS, involvement in Yemen's civil war, and military engagements elsewhere in the world. Many regarded this as a more dangerous, certainly a more complicated, mess than the situation Obama had inherited. Trump has been in office barely nine months. As yet, there has been no major terrorist crisis requiring hard decisions and testing views. We, therefore, must judge Trump's counterterrorist policy largely on the basis of his speeches, remarks to reporters, and tweets. These have been bellicose but operationally vague. To be fair, the formal counterterrorist policy pronouncements of both the Bush and Obama administrations tended to be sketchy on operational details, such is the nature of dealing with a diverse and changing adversary. Both administrations were ultimately defined more by what they did than by what they said.

Like Obama, Trump as a candidate was critical of continuing US involvement in Afghanistan, which he saw as a complete waste of lives and money. As president, however, he has agreed to send additional American forces to Afghanistan, where he promises victory. Trump has been combative about going after ISIS, promising that he would "bomb back" the terrorists and equally confident that the United States will defeat them. Trump sees the military as his principal instrument of power, which he feels Obama unnecessarily constrained. He has given greater latitude to his commanders. The rules of engagement have been relaxed. Since Trump took office, the US bombing campaigns in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen have all intensified.

At the same time, Trump ended US support for the Syrian rebels fighting against the government of Bashar al-Assad. That effort, which began in 2013, never had the wholehearted support of the Obama administration and achieved only disappointing results (Straus, 2014). Trump has reduced his predecessor's emphasis on soft power and human

rights. Trump repeatedly assailed Obama's unwillingness to even utter the term "radical Islamic terrorism" however, as president, Trump omitted the term from his recent 9/11 anniversary speech (Jenkins B. , 2017). Public comments by some of his political advisors suggest a broader definition of the enemy to include not just radical Islamic terrorism but Islamic belief itself, arguing that violence is a fundamental part of Islam, an inherently aggressive and violent ideology that threatens Judeo-Christian civilization. Trump himself has reinforced this view by imposing a temporary travel ban on persons coming to the United States from specified Muslim countries. Trump portrays radical Islamic terrorism (both Sunni and Shiite) as a foreign threat against which the US must protect itself with stronger borders, travel restrictions, reductions in refugee flows and immigration, and extreme vetting of those who want to come to the United States, to keep the bad guys out. Europe's greater number of terrorists and higher levels of terrorist violence are held up as an example of what happens when countries adhere to politically correct policies in dealing with terrorism and fail to control the influx of immigrants and refugees. In Trump's view, a similar fate awaits America if it does not name and confront radical Islamic terrorism.

The overall pattern, then, is of a candidate and president-elect talking tough, emphasizing military power, trashing America's alliances, and suggesting counterterrorist measures that would constitute violations of international law. The hard talk has been somewhat moderated, but not entirely abandoned, since Trump assumed office. Taken as a body, his statements represent a sharp departure from the counterterrorist policy of the Obama administration and while closer to the Bush administration's counterterrorist policy in several respects, the Trump administration's dark view of Islam, hostility toward immigration, and dismissal of America's traditional allies differ significantly from it.

It must be cautioned that the public face of Trump's counterterrorism policy may not accurately reflect a more fluid situation inside the administration. There are internal



differences. A draft of Trump's new counterterrorist strategy being prepared by the National Security Council reportedly says that the United States needs “to intensify operations against global jihadist groups,” but it makes no mention of “radical Islamic terrorism” (Jenkins B. , 2017). It argues that the United States must reduce the costs of the US “blood and treasure” in pursuit of its counterterrorism goals, rely on allies and partners, and avoid large-scale interventions and open-ended military commitments. The draft reportedly concedes that ending terrorism once and for all is impossible. However, it is important to underline that these principles derive from publicly reported excerpts from a draft document, no official policy document exists yet (Jenkins B. , 2017).

United States has warned the Iraqi Kurdistan to not to deliver their independence as their main focus is to diminish the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) and implies that their referendum will only cause adversities than benefits. The decision start to obvious ever since the Iraqi Kurdistan pre-referendum as they made a statement as follows:

*“The United States strongly opposes the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government’s referendum on independence, planned for September 25. The costs of proceeding with the referendum are high for all Iraqis, including Kurds. Already the referendum has negatively affected Defeat-ISIS coordination to dislodge ISIS from its remaining areas of control in Iraq. The decision to hold the referendum in disputed areas is especially destabilizing, raising tensions which ISIS and other extremist groups are now seeking to exploit. The status of disputed areas and their boundaries must be resolved through dialogue, in accordance with Iraq’s constitution, not by unilateral action or force.”* (USAGOV, 2017)

The US implies that the primary subject of Trump’s proposed overseas counter terrorism design is the IS, which he presents as the single greatest threat to the US. He proposes neutralising the group through aggressive “joint and coalition

military operations” and degrading its networks of mobilisation, including its cyber channels, through greater international cooperation and intelligence sharing (IPCS, 2017). By this means, the US government has strongly opposed the Kurdish referendum during the buildup to the vote, hailing the unity of Iraq as a greater source of peace and stability than the creation of an independent Kurdish state in the north.

More than sixteen years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, American forces are still deployed in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq and, in smaller contingents, they are training and supporting local forces combating terrorists across Africa and Asia. Whether one chooses to call it a "global war on terror," "countering violent extremism," or stopping "radical Islamic terrorism," it has been a very long campaign and it appears far from over. As commanders-in-chief, three presidents have now supervised this campaign. George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump have exhibited dramatic differences in rhetoric and style and some real changes in policy, but overall, there has been remarkable continuity in their efforts. Instead of sharp reversals, policy has evolved as circumstances have changed and as each administration has learned lessons from previous experience and has tried to avoid or correct what it viewed as mistakes. It is not the right time for a referendum, say the Kurds' dishonest friends. It is never the right time, say the Kurds' candid enemies. Massoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurds, knows that this is the best of all possible times. The rest of Iraq is a theocratic shambles, ISIS has been beaten back, and the collapse of Syria has thrown the entire post-Ottoman settlement into play (Green, 2017).

Iraqi Kurds want their independence. Even before the referendum results were announced, we knew a majority of Kurds had voted for it, the only real question was which position would be taken by the minorities living in Kirkuk and other disputed territories. Not surprisingly, Iraq and other countries with Kurdish minorities, Turkey, Syria, and Iran have condemned the referendum, fearing it will encourage their Kurds to follow the example. The United States, whose interests

are not directly affected by the fate of Kurdistan, has been equally vociferous in its condemnation, predicting it will create instability and undermine the fight against ISIS, now in its final and crucial phase. US rejection has encouraged many other countries to join in a veritable chorus of condemnation, with only Israel, always seeking regional, non-arab allies, supporting the Kurds' decision to hold the referendum (Ottaway, 2017).

The United States has backed these particular autonomous areas because of strong support and assistance it has received from Kurdish communities as US forces face threats to the US interests. United States also opposed after the referendum and emphasize its interest in military security with a statement:

*“The United States is deeply disappointed that the Kurdistan Regional Government decided to conduct today a unilateral referendum on independence. The United States' historic relationship with the people of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region will not change in light of today's non-binding referendum, but we believe this step will increase instability and hardships for the Kurdistan region and its people. The unilateral referendum will greatly complicate the Kurdistan Regional Government's relationship with both the Government of Iraq and neighboring states. The fight against ISIS is not over, and extremist groups are seeking to exploit instability and discord. We believe all sides should engage constructively in a dialogue to improve the future of all Iraqis. The United States opposes violence and unilateral moves by any party to alter boundaries.”* (USAGOV, 2017)

As it can be seen that the US decision here is emphasizing in eliminating the IS as it is their main priority in purpose to achieve their national interest in military security. Trump's commitment to preserving American leadership and international action is particularly clear in the wording that the National Security strategy uses in explaining the First Pillar, and explaining what it means to *"protect the American people,*

*the homeland, and the American way of life, means the US should pursue threats to their source.*" (USAGOV, 2017). President Trump implied in the strategy to prevent terrorists from reaching United States that the US commit to deter, disrupt, and defeat potential threats before they reach the United States.

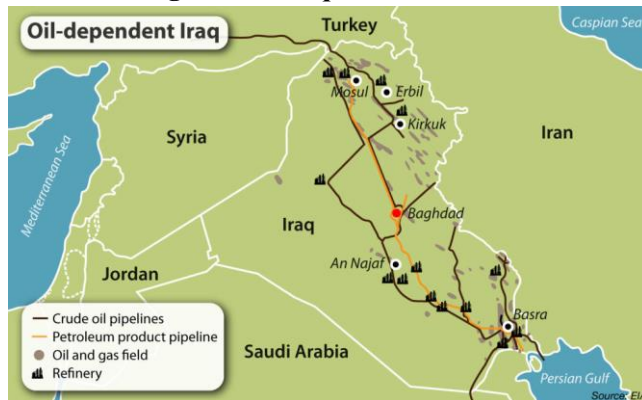
President Trump makes it all out for its country for military security in combatting terrorism. Under President Trump's leadership, the United States is defeating the terrorists who threaten its homeland and citizens. By working with local forces and giving commanders on the ground increased flexibility, implying that they have almost completely defeated ISIS. Since President Trump took office, ISIS has lost nearly 100 percent of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. Along with their partners, they will continue to pursue the thousands of ISIS fighters who remain at large, and will not rest until they have achieved the enduring defeat of ISIS and decimated global jihadists and their networks (NSD, 2018). In this term, the United States sees that this referendum is a complete distraction for them to achieve its national interest in defeating ISIS, as it means a lot for the US to feel secure from any global threat such as terrorism.

### **B. Stabilizing Economy to Achieve Economic Welfare**

The interests of the United States further relate to economic interests and security, namely the effort to secure exports from Iraq to the United States. Securing exports in this term is the quantity or amount of goods production from Iraq to the United States. When viewed from the economic factors of Iraq after the invasion of 2003, Iraq is a country that experiencing an interesting economic development. In 2004, the growth rate of domestic gross product (GDP) reached as highest in history with 54.16 percent (Economics, 2018). The development of Iraq's economy is supported by mainly oil production. This economic achievement will be disrupted if the internal security of Iraq and the Middle East region is not conducive. Recognizing that the independence referendum of

Iraqi Kurdistan will cause instability within the region become the main point for the decision of the United States in the referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017. The United States' top import categories with Iraq in 2017 were mineral fuels/oil for about \$6.0 billion (USTR, 2017). It is all about the oil, and Kirkuk, which is located within the Iraqi Kurdistan territory, is home to about 10 percent of Iraq's total reserves of 140 billion barrels (Kennedy, 2016). The oil production of Iraq will get distracted as both Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan are over the oilfield in the Kirkuk region and also will considered impacted to the Iraq exports as well thus will threatened United States' national interest of economy welfare by receiving the export goods in stable condition.

**Figure 1.2 Iraq's Oil Location**



Source: <http://www.crystolenergy.com/iraqi-oil-dilemma-freeze-not-freeze/>

During this stage, the US pursued a new and more flexible policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan, but it was always limited by the US' position on maintaining Iraq as a unitary state. In this regards, the US sought to make Iraq a strategic partner, maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq, and secure the flow of Iraqi oil. These factors influenced US policy towards the Iraqi Kurdistan's demands as discussed in the study. Within this context, the US attempted to transform Iraq into a strategic partner to strengthen the US's hegemony in the region. In particular, during this stage, the US exclusively stressed the importance of maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq. A strong and stable Iraq would block the Kurds attempts at hegemony and secure the flow of Iraqi oil without disruption. Therefore, US policy was to keep the Kurds inside Iraq and put pressure on the Iraqi Kurdistan to achieve this aim. In addition, the US was worried that the partition of Iraq would lead to instability and the expansion of terrorist groups inside Iraq, and would thus pose a threat to US interests (Byman, 2017). In this regard, the US was concerned that any partition of the country could lead to a further partition and to an endless war among different groups, leaving Iraq and the region in deep crisis and threatening its regional policy. Therefore, the US administrations rejected partition of Iraq and even all suggestions for the disintegration of Iraq into three distinct federal regions.

Thus, Kirkuk and the disputed territories became the great challenges confronting US policy in Iraq. Moreover, in the Article 140 which was mentioned of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 pointed out that Iraqi Kurdistan should have their independence, which only become a mere promise to the Iraqi Kurdistan. This article was made after the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum in the same year. The US perceived the implementation of Article 140 to be a major threat to the security of Iraq, its territorial integrity, and to the US hegemonic ambition in Iraq and the region (Katzman, 2015). Article 140 of the 2005 The Iraqi Constitution emphasized that before the referendum, several measure have to be taken to reverse the

Arabization policy by the previous president of Saddam Hussein. This made by a constitution of The Law of the Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. They included specific clauses providing compensation for the forced migrants during Saddam Hussein presidential period and resolution of disputed territories including Kirkuk of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution stated:

*“The responsibility placed upon the executive branch of the Iraqi Transitional Government shall extend and continue to the executive authority elected in accordance with this Constitution, provided that it accomplishes completely (normalization and census and concludes with a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens), by a date not to exceed the 31st of December 2007.”* (Constitution of Iraq, 2005)

This statement shows that Iraq has promised to the Kurds that they would give them the independence through referendum. In this perspective, the US see a different point of view and believed that the best way to keep the Kurds inside Iraq was to prevent the incorporation of these areas into the Kurdistan region, particularly those rich in oil and gas such as Kirkuk. Therefore, the US took a different approach in an attempt to prevent the realisation of Article 140 related to Kirkuk and the disputed areas, and in this regard it played the key role of postponing a referendum in these areas in 2007. Further, the US never put pressure or took action to solve fundamentally the problem of Kirkuk and the disputed areas, and this was even clearer when they withdrew from the country without tackling it.

On the same note, in the struggle between Baghdad and Erbil, the US policy was in favor of Baghdad, since the US administrations were concerned that the expansion of the Kurdish autonomous region would encourage the Iraqi Kurdistan to move towards independence. Therefore, during this stage the US was in support of creating a strong central

government in Baghdad with the vast authorities, putting pressure mostly on the KRG to remain part of Iraq and ignored the Kurdish perspective, which demanded weak central authorities within a strong federal region.

However, despite the US policy to create a strong, stable, and strategic partner in a post-invasion Iraq, the US administration showed some flexibility towards Kurdish demands for autonomy and a federal region with limited authorities and in this regards there has been a change in the US perspective towards the Iraqi Kurdistan. The key reason behind this relative and limited change was linked to the rise of the important role of Iraqi Kurdistan for the US strategy to tackle the eruption of insurgency and the deterioration of security in Iraq, particularly from 2004 onwards, which created a serious threat to US policy in Iraq and the region (Cordesman, 2012). The US feared losing control of Iraq, perceiving that the state would become a 'safe haven' for terrorist groups. Hence, the US observed security and stability in the Iraqi Kurdistan and perceived the Kurds as reliable partners who would be influential for backing the US policy of keeping Iraq stable and secure. Further the US saw Kurds as a key US democratic and secular partners to confront the influence of Shia religious groups backed by Iran. In this regard the KRG interests became aligned with the US interests and strategy in Iraq and region. Therefore, in 2004 the US started revising its policy towards the Kurds and began supporting their struggle to establish Kurdistan as a federal region in Iraq, albeit with a limited authority (Hiltermann & Fantappie, 2018). This was the first political change in US policy towards the Iraqi Kurdistan.

Additionally, such steps could spread instability throughout the Middle East and affect the security of oil. Further, during this period, to some extent the US position in Iraq and the region was strong due to its military presence. Therefore, in this regard the Kurds had limited space to increase their power or challenge US pressure. Further, the US was aware that pursuing a policy in support of any border change or of any separatist movement would create a hostile alliance and



coalitions against its policy in the Middle East from both its allies and regional states, which could undermine its hegemony in the region and increase anti-US sentiments in the area. In particular, the US has relied on ensuring secure allies including Turkey and the Arab Gulf States (United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman) in order to enhance and maintain its hegemony. These states are considered central to containing Iranian and Russian expansion policies in the region, supplying oil to the global market, and providing the US with military bases. All these states opposed the partition and federalization of Iraq, arguing that an independent Kurdish state would threaten their territorial integrity. Therefore, they played a role in postponing the realization of Article 140 in which related to Kirkuk and other disputed areas and publicly supported a strong Iraqi central government in Baghdad.