

*Part I*

**Contemporary Kurdistan**



## *Chapter 1*

# **From a Revolutionary Movement to an Institutionalized Administration**

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The brutalities committed against the people of Kurdistan by the former Baath regime led to horrendous casualties. The chemical attack in Halabja and other areas in Kurdistan resulted in more than 5,000 deaths, the notorious Anfal campaigns led to 182,000 people being buried alive, 8,000 Barzanis and 12,000 Faili Kurds were kidnapped and never returned, over 4,500 villages were destroyed, and thousands of people were relocated to other areas in Kurdistan and central and south of Iraq. The people of Kurdistan have long been fighting to obtain their rights in Iraq. It has been a rocky road to say the least, and they are still fighting for the same rights today.

The Kurdish–Iraqi armed struggle began in 1961, resulting in major casualties on both sides. The struggle was led by General Mustafa Barzani, in an attempt to establish an autonomous Kurdistan in northern Iraq. The war, which lasted until 1970, engaged over 80 percent of the Iraqi army in the combat against the Kurds.

Despite major losses, the Kurds engaged in a series of negotiations following the war, in an attempt to resolve the conflict, which led to the Autonomy Agreement of 1970. While the agreement was supposed to grant some primary rights to the people of Kurdistan, the Iraqi government embarked on an “Arabization program” in many parts of Kurdistan. This quickly led to the resumption of the war, further escalating the Kurdish–Iraqi conflict. The Kurds made serious attempts to reach out to the international community about the injustice and brutalities they endured from the Iraqi government. Yet, the former regime continued carrying out chemical attacks, bombarding Kurdish areas, kidnapping civilians, and committing mass killing of hundreds of thousands of Kurds.

Twenty-six years later, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 688, while the United States, in cooperation with the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey launched Operation Provide Comfort, which established the no-fly zone over the 36th Parallel and shielded

much of what is now the Kurdistan Region from aerial strikes by the Iraqi air force. In the Spring of 1991, when the Kurdish uprising against the former regime of Baath and its institutions began, and within a few days the Kurdish cities and towns were liberated. The first parliamentary elections took place on May 19, 1992; the first parliament was seated on June 4, 1992; and the first government cabinet in the Kurdistan Region was established on July 4, 1992. This marked a new era for the Kurdistan Region in the eyes of the international community. The establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was a major turning point in contemporary history of Iraqi Kurdistan. It was an important opportunity to introduce Kurdistan to the world and to advocate for its legitimate rights. At that time, cooperating with the outside world in terms of governance and self-rule was an entirely novel process.

Since then, the KRG has taken consistent steps towards expansion and development of its ties with the outside world. It has taken concrete steps to produce skilled employees in the field of diplomacy and international relations by establishing strong academic and government institutions. On the other hand, the adoption of an open-door policy with the international community was based on the KRG's core values of respect and consideration. Together, these practices allowed for the international community to become familiar with the essence of self-governance of the Kurdistan Region.

Looking back at history, the people of Kurdistan have experienced such brutalities and atrocities, but have time and again proven resilient. The Anfal operations, the use of chemical weapons, and the overall loss of hundreds of thousands of people simply encouraged the people of Kurdistan to attempt to broker a power-sharing agreement with Baghdad, which in the end, did not work as Baghdad was not ready to reciprocate on our intentions. The Kurds have always acted as part of Iraq, but were never treated as equal citizens, let alone as partners. Living under centralized rule, a monarchy, a republican system, and even as part of an autonomous region within a federal system, all resulted in the same: their status as equal citizens never improved because the mentality in Baghdad has not changed as they are not ready to share power with us.

After the Iraq liberation operation in 2003, the Kurdistan Region and Iraq stepped into a new era of cooperation with Iraq and the international community. It was an important move for the Kurdistan Region to again demonstrate its capability in dealing with internal and external issues. Since 2003, the U.S. began the operation to liberate Iraq, and while they

spent huge treasures attempting to re-establish a new federal Iraq, the role of the Kurds as their most steadfast ally should not be underestimated. When American forces immaturely departed in 2011, not a single U.S. soldier had lost their life on Iraqi Kurdistan's territory. At that time, the political leadership in the Kurdistan Region gathered its efforts to re-engage with Iraq to be inclusive and representative of the rights of all of its components and communities. In addition, serious efforts were made in distributing power and revenue, and creating a strong federal foundation throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

### **Department of Foreign Relations (DFR) and its Role in the Economic and Political Developments of KRG**

The first cabinet of the KRG established the Ministry of Humanitarian Aid and Cooperation, which at that time acted as a Foreign Affairs Ministry and worked as a focal point for building bridges with the outside world. Aside from delivering a message of the Kurdish quest to the international community, the ties were on a larger scale focused on cultural ties and receiving humanitarian support. Over time, as the KRG made serious efforts in establishing stronger institutions the means of connecting with other nations were shaped into an institutionalized one for a more formal outreach around the world.

The KRG's Council of Ministers made the decision in 2004 for a minister to be appointed to govern the KRG's foreign relations. Today, the Department of Foreign Relations (DFR) in the KRG has nine directorates and 260 permanent and contract-based employees at the department. The DFR has ties with many countries and there are 36 official diplomatic representations based in the region, including UNAMI and the 14 UN agencies, in the countries of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. International organizations are also present in the region and working in various sectors that play a vital role in serving the Kurdistan region. While a number of countries wish to open representations in Kurdistan and wish for the KRG to open representative offices in their countries, the dire economic situation has prevented a decision to be made in this regard on one hand, and on another hand, due to the fact that some

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<sup>1</sup> In a national referendum in 2005, Iraqis voted in favor of a new constitution. The new constitution, which was approved by 78 percent of voters, recognized the Kurdistan Region's institutions, including the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Kurdistan Parliament. This marked a new era for the Kurdistan Region in reaching out to the international community.

countries do not have representations in Baghdad and therefore not allowed to open representation in Erbil either as per the diplomatic requirements in Iraq.

The Department of Foreign Relations encourages nations to establish and expand their diplomatic missions in the Kurdistan Region, with a goal of strengthening and expanding on economic and investment ties. As a result, many economic fora have been organized due to the efforts of KRG representations abroad in cooperation with The KRG Board of Investment, resulting in attracting foreign investment to the region. Moreover, efforts have been made to establish ties between the KRG's regional economic and investment institutions with similar institutions in other countries. In particular, the KRG has focused on higher education, cultural, and educational partnerships. In this regard, there are many opportunities for study-abroad-scholarships and other educational exchanges for students on all levels. The DFR has worked to operate as a bridge between our local institutions and those of the international community.

Through strong ties with the international community, serious efforts have been made in recognizing the brutalities of the Baath regime against the people of Kurdistan and labeling them as acts of genocide. DFR has worked closely with the higher ministerial committee of holding ISIS accountable and recognition of the crimes committed against Yezidi Kurds among others. The KRG has made a serious effort to raise awareness about these genocides through state visits, meetings with foreign diplomats, the afore-mentioned committee with international organizations and agencies, and diplomatic missions of other countries in the region, which have resulted in fruitful discussions. In the field of human rights, the KRG has managed to cooperate effectively with international organizations and agencies as well as the United Nations in order to protect human rights, the freedom of expression, and the rights of people in prison and captivity in accordance to international human rights values and principles affirmed by the United Nations. The cooperation with international institutions, organizations, and other agencies on strengthening the role of women in society continues. In addition, the KRG has taken on an active role in the general assembly of the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) and in attempts to implement UN SCR 1325 on Women and Peace of the United Nations Security Council. As an active member of the KRG committee to fight human trafficking, necessary measures have been considered and applied in cooperation with the responsible institutions of the KRG, and efforts have been made to establish bilateral ties with the international community

on this matter. Hence, the DFR works to empower women and youth, developing the community inclusive of civil society and media outlets, and strengthening institutions.

## **The War with ISIS**

As a result of the wrong and distorted policies of Iraq as well as the political vacuum, ISIS emerged. The terrorist group, claiming to be the “true” Caliphate, occupied large areas of Iraq and Syria, including the city of Mosul. The Peshmerga were fearless in their fight against ISIS, and managed to recapture many areas, including the Yezidi city of Sinjar in November 2015. As legitimate, constitutional forces in Iraq, the Peshmerga should have been paid for, armed, trained and equipped by the federal government in Baghdad, but unfortunately, they were sidelined. Nevertheless, the Peshmerga proved their bravery and resilience and played a key role in the liberation operation of Mosul.

These military victories came at a considerable cost to the people of Kurdistan. Since the beginning of the conflict with ISIS, over 1,781 Peshmerga have been killed and more than 10,168 wounded and 62 still missing (Ministry of Peshmerga Announcement). Most of these fatalities and injuries were caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) an insurgency version of a landmine, snipers, booby traps, etc. In addition to the grave human costs, the KRG and the Peshmerga experienced a severe economic crisis. In 2014, Baghdad refused to give the KRG its fair share of the federal budget to which it is entitled; the necessary mechanisms and institutions to be put in place by the Iraqi government to ensure fair distribution of the yearly budget were never established. In addition, the steep drop in oil prices, the KRG’s main source of revenue, further crippled the economy. Yet, despite all this, the KRG remains a prosperous safe haven in Iraq.

The KRG’s DFR has formed diplomatic relations with many countries and officially with 36 missions of states around the world, including the neighboring nations of Turkey, Iran, and the Arab states. These ties have played a vital role in the fight against ISIS. “Since the 2014 crisis, over 1.7 million displaced people arrived in KRI [the Kurdistan Region of Iraq] and majority live with the host communities,” the KRG’s Joint Crisis Coordination Center (JCCC) announced. The Kurdistan Region faced an existential threat due to the onslaught of ISIS, however, the demonstration of an utmost degree of selflessness and dedication among the people, the resilience and sacrifices of the Peshmerga, and the strength of its

leadership, contributed to the military victory. Nevertheless, the challenges of the ideological war and the aftermath of the displaced people still remain. More than 1.7 million IDPs and refugees have registered, according to the JCCC, with 82 percent of IDPs living with host communities and the other 18 percent spread across 38 camps in the Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaimani governorates. According to JCCC statistics, 97 percent of all Syrian refugees in Iraq are in the Kurdistan Region—40 percent of them are living in nine camps, while 60 percent reside in host communities. Of the 500,000-people displaced from Mosul since the offensive to retake the city from ISIL began in October 2016. As of August 18, 2017, 226,000 are being sheltered in the Kurdistan Region Joint Crisis Coordination Centre in Kurdistan (JCCC).

The Iraqi crises, which were talked about worldwide, were mostly caused by Baghdad's poor governance. A sovereign Kurdistan Region, with access to international funds and a wider range of bilateral cooperation with international actors, today's crises could have been prevented. During the darkest times of war, in addition to international funds and loans, that the KRI was prevented from benefitting from, the KRI was even prevented from benefitting from their own resource reserves. The KRI has never been treated as an equal in this so-called federal system, and have always been considered subordinates. While fighting a war, managing the continued inflows of displaced people, and navigating geo-political minefields, the KRI is steadfastly tackling their massive economic challenges, and forging ahead to secure Kurdistan's political and economic viability.

## Referendum

Like every other independent nation, the people of Kurdistan are eagerly awaiting the day to declare their independence. The right of people to self-determination is a cardinal principle in modern law based on United Nations Charter norms (UN Charter). The KRG does not believe in the isolation that the Iraqi government has pushed it into, and they wish to interact and mutually benefit from the international community.

As a friendly and welcoming society, with a culture of hope and optimism, the government believes in its people. The Peshmerga, fighting on the frontlines for the safety of the people of Kurdistan, and whose families do not have enough money to pay for basic everyday necessities such as food, rent, or school, are ready to sacrifice their lives. The Kurdish society rejects extremism and adopts tolerance, peace, and coexistence. Kurdistan,

with all of its components and communities has since the beginning of its history been a land of tolerance and coexistence to different ethnic and religious groups who have been living all in peace. Despite all the wars, destruction and occupation that Kurdistan has faced for centuries, it has remained a land of many religions and beliefs. Kurdistan is the success story of the Middle East today. Nevertheless, the KRI is not claiming perfection, but, compared with its surroundings, the KRI has shown strength and resilience, especially considering that it is a landlocked, not entirely sovereign country.

The referendum is an important step to secure a better future for the people of the Kurdistan Region. All other ways to coexist in the country of Iraq have failed; they have tested decentralization, autonomy, and federalization, with no success. In order to live in peace, one needs a democratic environment, and in order to have a democratic environment, one needs democratic practices and a democratic culture. Unfortunately, fourteen years after the fall of the former regime, Iraq is suffering from the same problems as they did in 2003.

The Kurdistan region opted for a federal, democratic and pluralistic Iraq, and has played an important role in drafting a proper constitution, but the constitution has not been adhered to. Baghdad has been rather selective in implementing articles of the constitution that best serve their interests. The country never established the necessary institutions to ensure a fair distribution of the annual budget. This led to the breaching of the constitution in balancing the laws regulating militia groups, and the establishment of a heavily centralized power in Baghdad. The government in Baghdad went against their own parliament by cutting the budget without any laws being passed through the legislative body. Therefore, the referendum is a step forward in responding to the necessity of securing a better future for the people of Kurdistan but also to bringing about stability and security. September 25th will be an opportunity for the people of Kurdistan to express their will and their vision for a future.<sup>2</sup> That will be a mandate for the leadership in Kurdistan to negotiate with Baghdad to establish a partnership after independence, as they have failed to be good partners in the same country. The Kurdistan Region has demonstrated its stance for democracy, pluralism, power-sharing, an open society and the empowerment of women, respect for religious and ethnic minorities and a strong civil society and a free media. Today, the KRG is engaged in a very ambi-

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<sup>2</sup> September 25, 2017 is the set date for the referendum.

tious and serious set of economic reforms in order to ensure transparency and good governance. The international community, the U.S.-led coalition, the European Union, and the UN all play an important role in supporting the KRG at this stage.

The referendum is a national demand of the people of Kurdistan; it is not a political demand. This legitimate quest of Kurdistan represents an opportunity for dialogue and negotiation with Baghdad, which we have failed to obtain as part of one country, with whom we can become long-term partners as neighbors in peace and stability in the region. With regards to the broader region, KRI has assured its neighbors that this step will not go against the interest of these nations. The Kurdistan Region wants to build bridges with its neighbors, and assures them that an independent Kurdistan would be a partner and an ally. Kurdistan is determined to fight ISIL militarily and ideologically, and will continue to care for the refugees and IDPs that have sought a safe haven in its territory. Finally, it is important to engage in supporting the reform agenda that was started, empowering the institutions in the Kurdistan Region, strengthening the civil society, and supporting economic developments of this region. The Kurdistan Region is a success story; it is a beacon of hope for more stability and more security in the region.