Anglo-American University

School of International Relations and Diplomacy

The Geostrategic Influence on Self-Determination:

The Iraqi-Kurdistan Case 2017

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by

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I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are properly cited and included in the bibliography.
I hereby declare that no portion of text in this thesis has been submitted in support of another degree, or qualification thereof, for any other university or institute of learning.

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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzed the geostrategic influence on Iraqi-Kurdish self-determination. In previous studies on the topic of Iraqi-Kurdish autonomy and Kurdish self-determination in general, the analysis and underlying factors for failed independence were reduced to domestic affairs and inner-Kurdish issues. Whether it is the language barrier through different Kurdish dialects, tribal fights or political disputes, the Kurdish question is viewed from a bottom-up approach. Recent scholarly discussion on the issue of self-determination suggest that external actors do play a significant role in determining new states. Hence, the research question follows this rationale, specified to the Iraqi-Kurdish case and its recent independence referendum in 2017 to answer: "How are geostrategic interests affecting the Kurdish self-determination aspirations in future-Iraq?" After the establishment of the importance of international recognition through external actors, the theoretical underpinnings of the neo-realist lens aided in explaining the role of differing interests that explain state behavior to understand its effect on the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum of 2017. Specifically the notions of balancing threats, balancing interests and alliance dependency. Those three variables and their indicators were the framework for this study, which relied on an analysis of relative capabilities in the year 2017, the threat-perception of Iraq and the Kurds, regional aims of the involved actors in 2017, and the possible alliance dependence on Great Powers. This framework aided the analysis of determined involved actors

that were previously and are presently involved with the host-state Iraq and Iraqi-Kurdistan. Those states included the Great Powers U.S. and Russia, the Middle Powers Germany, France and United Kingdom, as well as regional actors Turkey, Syria and Iran. After the analysis of government statements, newspaper articles, and scholarly works on the relations of the involved states, this qualitative study found out that each variable explains a subset of involved states more decisively. The balancing threats notion explains the disapproval from regional actors Turkey, Iran and Syria, of the Iraqi-Kurdistan independence referendum 2017 decisively. The balancing interests notion (regional aims in 2017) explains Great Powers United States' and Russia's disapproval decisively. Alliance dependency and balancing interests explain the Middle-Powers Germany, France and United Kingdom disapproval decisively, where alliance dependency may have played a key role in the disapproval. Conclusively, if geostrategic interests of external actors do not align, and the host-state Iraq remains relatively weak, the prospect of an independent Kurdistan remains low. Hence, geostrategic interests affect Kurdish self-determination in future-Iraq negatively. The subsequent implication for other secession movements that surge independence is that geostrategic interests may decide self-determination success.

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"They are a majority in their homeland, Kurdistan, which only through an accident of geopolitical history has been rendered an appendage of other states."

- Henri Barkey in "*The Kurdish Awakening*" (2019)[1]

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[1] Henri J. Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (2019)

Chapter 1: The Role of International Recognition for Self-determination

1.1 Introduction

This study analyzes the influence of geostrategic factors on the self-determination aspirations of the Iraqi-Kurds. Concisely, it tries to answer the question: how are geostrategic interests affecting self-determination in future Iraqi-Kurdistan? Before analyzing the impact of geostrategic interests, the scope of self-determination and the different concepts surrounding it enlighten on the importance of geostrategic interests and their role in explaining unsuccessful self-determination in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Hence, the first section of this study describes scholarly discussions regarding the normative ideas of self-determination and territorial integrity. It underlines the notion that to understand self-determination a different measure other than the application of those norms in state practice is insightful. In the scholarly discussion on the nature of self-determination and its validation, the highlighted importance of international recognition explains whether self-determination is successful. From this perspective, the study suggests that in order to explain successful self-determination, understanding underlying factors of international recognition of statehood are essential. Those underlying factors in the neorealist lens constitute diverse interests that sovereign states have in the regional configurations, which consecutively shape their decision to recognize or disapprove a secession movement, such as the case of the Iraqi-Kurdistan independence referendum of 2017 in this study.

Following this logic, this chapter starts with the scope of self-determination and the issues surrounding its application within international relations and international law. Consecutively, the importance of international recognition of secession movements within the scholarly debate underlines why geostrategic interests are an essential dynamic in understanding

the unsuccessful self-determination of a secession movement, such as Iraqi-Kurdistan and its independence referendum in 2017.

1.2 Scope of Self-Determination in the Kurdish Case

How to define self-determination? This historical question is complex and highly debated in scholarly works throughout[2], especially when it comes to who has the right to use and enforce it. In order to scale self-determination for this work and understand why the right itself or the principle of self-determination[3] is hard to measure, the account of different perspectives give essential insights. This holds even more significance due to the case analyzed in this study, which is Iraqi-Kurdistan/Autonomous Region Kurdistan that held an independence referendum in 2017. The establishment of a regional Iraqi-Kurdish government in the Iraqi constitution 2005 happened through the involvement of external actors after the American invasion of Iraq 2003. This may imply that human rights violations of the Iraqi-Kurdish population through the Baath-regime resulted in a complete authority change within Northern-Iraq. However, as suggested in the following chapters, the underlying nature of external involvements could entail interests that do not offspring from purely normative ideas, but are rooted in a rational measurement of diverse interests. The controversial dichotomy between self-determination and the sovereignty of host-states result in a complex mix of state practices that are hardly comprehensible. Hence, the preferred approach to define self-determination is a set of criteria with a possible application to know what constitutes successful self-determination. The consideration of normative discussions

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[2] **See**: Neil MacFarlane and Natalie Sabanadze, "Sovereignty and self-determination: Where are we?," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 68, no. 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702013511184; Mikulas Fabry, *Recognizing states: International society and the establishment of new states since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); James Summers, "The internal and external aspects of self-determination reconsidered," in *Statehood and Self-Determination: Reconciling Tradition and Modernity in International Law*, ed. Duncan French (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[3] UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, UN General Assembly, 993 (1966), https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cescr.pdf .

and the ambiguous nature of self-determination through the international relations lens of self-determination give an initial outlook on the issue.

1.2.1 International Relations and Self-determination

The first step towards a greater understanding of self-determination within international relations and the underlying factors that affect it is to define its scope. This is possible through a glance on the Charter of the United Nations.[4] The Charter states it as a universal right "to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace."[5] The principle of self-determination in this sense could entail different meanings and may refer to the rights of individuals. Stating self-determination as a universal right within the UN Charta, it means that the right of people, who want to make use of this right, is respected. It is sensible how hard it is to define who can use self-determination. This holds even more validity considering that territorial integrity is another mentioned right within the UN Charta.[6] Another treaty of the United Nations interprets self-determination.[7]

There is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 by the United Nations General Assembly taken into force in 1976.[8]As stated in "Article 1. [...] All peoples have the right of self-determination [and] […] by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."[9] How to interpret this? This article implies a liberalistic and value-based right for

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[4] United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 1 UNTS XVI (October 24, 1945), https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf.
[5] Charter of the United Nations, 3.
[6] Ibid.
[7] UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (December 16, 1966), 3.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid, 5.

every grouping that consider themselves as "peoples"[10] in the international realm, it nevertheless results in complications due to the extent of this interpretation. As noted by Sterio, "under the principle of self-determination, a group with a common identity and link to a defined territory is allowed to decide its political future in a democratic fashion."[11] This would entail many groups and minorities resulting in a chaotic surge for self-determination and the damaging of territorial integrity. What remains is a norm or right poorly measured and applied, and hence results in issues as sensible in the following. While the UN Charta legitimizes it as a universal right, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defines its scope, both leave a wide room for interpretation. There are issues regarding self-determination, as it contradicts with the important right of territorial integrity.

Since the end of the Cold War there is "[...] tension between ''the order cluster'' (sovereignty, non-intervention, and territorial integrity) and ''the justice cluster'' (the rights of individuals and groups and self-determination."[12] As implied, self-determination goes against the idea of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but has support in times of human rights violations.[13] Do states adhere to that? MacFarlane and Sabanadze conclude in their historical analysis of the self-determination right and sovereignty that "strong norms of non-intervention and territorial integrity are [...] recent, and for much of the modern period, they have been weakly followed in state practice."[14] This suggests that norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity are not the integral line followed by states, which underlines that state behavior follows other means. They highlight "[...] in some cases, the principle of non-intervention wins over the emergent norm of

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[10] Ibid.
[11] Milena Sterio, "On the Right to External Self-Determination: "Selfistans," Secession and the Great Powers' Rule," *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 19, no. 09-163 (2010): 5, https://ssrn.com/abstract=1337172.
[12] MacFarlane and Sabanadze, "Sovereignty and self-determination: Where are we?," 610.
[13] Ibid, 611.
[14] Ibid, 618.

protection, [and] in others, the norm of protection supersedes the principle of non-intervention."[15] If one issue comes clear through this perspective is that explaining state behavior through a set of norms is inconsistent. It seems like the underlying modus operandi by which states act is not through norms. It would even suggest that those "norms" might be another concealed tool for rational self-interested states in the international system. They both even highlight that "which one wins has little to do with the level of repression"[16], which underlines that human rights violations and remedial secession rights do not explain when self-determination is given to a set of people or nation. Consecutively, this would suggest that the ongoing clash between norms and weak adherence to them, means other measurements should be considered, because to enforce norms and rights is vaguely consistent to understand why states respect them or not.

Milena Sterio, another scholar, describes the issue of self-determination as a norm to show awareness against human-right violations and states, "[…] in theory [...] we could simply look to the human rights record of the mother state, and if the record showed violations, we could determine that the minority group should be allowed to separate."[17] However, this is mostly not the case in practice implying that another set of criteria should be included to understand successful self-determination.[18] As stated by Sterio "the four criteria [needed] include a showing by the relevant people that it has been oppressed, that its central government is relatively weak, that it has been administered by some international organization or group, and that it has garnered the support of the most powerful states on our planet."[19] She also implies

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[15] Ibid, 621.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Sterio, "On the Right to External Self-Determination: "Selfistans," Secession and the Great Powers' Rule," 3.
[18] Ibid, 4.
[19] Ibid.

that" […] the fourth criterion is the most crucial one: that any self-determination seeking group must obtain the support of the most powerful states […]."[20] The importance of international recognition, underlined through the support of powerful states, implies more practicality in explaining successful self-determination, as sensible in the next pages, when regarding self-determination in International Law.

1.2.2 International Law and Self-determination

The substantial commencement for the analysis of self-determination is the definition of state recognition. The critical assessment of successful self-determination lies within the definition of state recognition. International law on statehood has itself a controversial debate on what constitutes recognition. Is it a matter of domestic authority or is it a matter of external recognition through sovereign states granting rights to the would-be sovereign state? James R. Crawford outlines this debate in his book "*The Creation of States in International Law*"[21]

1.2.2.1 Declarative and Constitutive Theory of Statehood

The definition of the declaratory theory of statehood is the following: "According to the declaratory theory, recognition of a new State is a political act, which is, in principle, independent of the existence of the new State as a subject of international law."[22] However, a group of people, or a stateless minority, may still face human atrocities, difficult legal issues when stepping into relations with sovereign states, and is dependent on the grace of those sovereign states, resulting in a difficult position to further their political, economic, and social position. They may face ongoing backlash from the host state and are dependent on them, even if

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[20] Ibid.
[21] James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law*, 2. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).
[22] Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law*, 22.

external actors get involved. In addition, if external actors get involved it clearly underlines the importance of recognition, and as underlined previously, those involvements are not necessarily bound to human rights. The current regime of statehood within the international system emphasizes the constitutive theory of statehood, which regards the necessity of international recognition.

According to the constitutive theory of statehood: "In every legal system some organ must be competent to determine with certainty the subjects of the system [which] in the present international system that can only be done by the states, acting individually or collectively."[23] The following notions of Ryan D. Griffiths underline the importance of international recognition and the constitutive regime

1.3 Importance of International recognition for self-determination

Ryan D. Griffiths outlines the important notion of international recognition and its underlying dynamics in his chapter "*Kurdistan's independence and the international system of sovereign states*"[24] in Alex Danilovich' edited book "*Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern Politics.*"[25] Griffiths implies that "[...] the constitutive theory of statehood is mostly correct [...] [because] in the modern, interconnected and highly globalized international system, sovereign recognition matters greatly."[26] When a constitutive regime is the prevailing one presently, "successful" self-determination is highly dependent on the recognition of sovereign states within the international system.[27] He regards the sovereignty regime of the international system as an

[23] Ibid, 19.
[24] Ryan D. Griffiths, "Kurdistan's independence and the international system of sovereign states," in *Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern politics,* ed. Alex Danilovich (London: Routledge, 2017), 131-146.
[25] Alex Danilovich, ed., *Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1-208.
[26] Ryan D. Griffiths, "Kurdistan's independence and the international system of sovereign states," 131.
[27] Ibid, 132.

exclusive club that can give and take rights of states and its "club members establish admission criteria to filter applicants."[28] It underlines that state behavior may follow through strategic aims and interests. Griffiths outlines "[...] [that] constitutive recognition [is], where self-determination is perceived as a positive right and the sovereignty club is forced to determine who counts."[29] The correlation of the current regime likelihood and Kurdish independence aspirations underlines the notion for this study:

Figure 1: Likelihood of Kurdish independence and statehood regime by Griffiths extracted from Danilovich's book "Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern Politics"[30]

	Likelihood of Kurdish Independence	Likelihood of Regime
Declaratory Independence	medium	low
Consent-based Regime	low	medium
De Facto Regime	high	low
Constitutive Regime	medium	high
Constitutive Regime + Remedial Right	high	medium
Constitutive Regime + Primary Right	high	medium

The chart in Figure 1 highlights that the highest likelihood of a statehood regime is a constitutive regime[31], which implies that the support of powerful states and regional actors may be of essential value in explaining state practice regarding secession movements. Hence, "[...] assessing this possibility for Kurdistan requires that the key players and their interests are identified."[32] Looking back at the Kurdish independence referendum of 2017, all involved actors and powerful states were against the full division of Iraq and a new independent Kurdistan,[33]

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid, 139.
[30] Ibid, 141.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] David Zucchino, "After the Vote, Does the Kurdish Dream of Independence Have a Chance?," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/30/world/middleeast/kurds-iraq-independence.html.

which underlines the importance of recognition for successful self-determination. It underlines the important role of powerful and regional actors in the assessment of successful self-determination.

Various scholars working on the emergence of new states and the dynamics behind it have underlined the notions[34] mentioned by Griffiths. They underline the importance of international recognition in new emerging states. In the case of international recognition for Kosovo's independence for example, Caspersen takes the normative discussion into perspective and mentions, "political considerations clearly predominated, while normative standards were relegated to arguments available to use by great powers if it suited their strategic interests in particular circumstances."[35] Normative considerations are not the underlying factor in state recognition. This is even more the case as "[…] the criteria for state recognition are uncertain and largely dependent on great-power interests."[36] Another pair of scholars underline these notions. Riegl and Dobos think, "[…]external actors [are] the main factor determining the de facto outcome of a secession and recognition process that stands above all."[37] They outline, "[…] external actors always take into consideration the power potential of the independence movement and the parent state, as well as the geographical limitation of its power."[38] Those underlying factors are in essence geostrategic interests, because if " […] external actors identify important interests in intervening with enough commitment in the process of secession, it will dramatically

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[34] **See e.g..**: Eiki Berg and Martin Mölder, "Who is entitled to 'earn sovereignty'? Legitimacy and regime support in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh," *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 3 (2012).; Nina Caspersen, "The Pursuit of International Recognition After Kosovo," *Global Governance* 21 (2015): 393-412; Bridget Coggins, "Friends in High Places: International Politics and the Emergence of States from Secessionism," *International Organization* 65, no. 3 (2011): 433-67; Martin Riegl and Bohumil Dobos, "Power and Recognition: How (Super)Powers Decide the International Recognition Process," *Politics & Policy* 36 (2018): 442-71.

[35] Caspersen, "The Pursuit of International Recognition After Kosovo," 397.

[36] Ibid, 407.

[37] Riegl and Dobos, "Power and Recognition: How (Super)Powers Decide the International Recognition Process," 446–47.

[38] Ibid, 449.

alter the outcome regardless the secessionist entities' effectiveness or the strength of its

normative claims."[39]

In conclusion, the current recognition regime is constitutive, meaning that international

states decide who is going to be a new member or not. External actors have a significant

influence on secession movements' recognition. Furthermore, recognition is dependent on the

interests they are following in the region of the secession movement. A theoretical lens to

understand what constitutes those interests and aims emphasizes the effect of geostrategic

interests on the Iraqi-Kurdistan self-determination aspirations. Hence, the following chapter

enlightens on neo-realism as the underlying lens that explains the effect of geostrategic interests

on the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum in 2017.

Chapter 2: Theory and Method

2.1 Introduction

As stated by Wood: "Clearly no "successful" secession is complete until it has become

institutionalized in a new government, legitimate at home and recognized abroad."[40] The

establishment of a domestic authority and legitimacy through autonomy in the case of

Autonomous Region Kurdistan happened through its constitutional establishment in 2005.[41]

Nevertheless, its independence aspirations, as emphasized through the independence referendum

in September 2017 resulted in disapproval.[42] The dependent factor then for this study is

recognition measured through support or disapproval of the referendum from regional and

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[39] Ibid, 462.
[40] John R. Wood, "Secession: A Comparative Analytical Framework," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne De Science Politique* 14, no. 1 (1981): 133.
[41] Mohammed Shareef, "A Paradigm Shift in US-Kurdistan Region Relations Post-2014: The Evolution to a Strategic Partnership," in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, ed. Mohammed Shareef and Gareth Stanfield (New York: Oxford University Press), 463.
[42] Zucchino, "After the Vote, Does the Kurdish Dream of Independence Have a Chance?"

international actors, as they constitute the legitimacy of a sovereign state and hence their support or disapproval weighs immensely on the success of a secession movement.

2.2 Balancing-of-threats, balancing interests and alliance dependence

As international recognition is essential for measuring successful self-determination, the subsequent implication is to understand why involved actors do support or disapprove a secession movement. The theoretical underpinnings of neo-realism enlighten on the behavior of states and the subsequent stands they take towards a sovereign state and the secession movement it hosts. Hence, the following sections firstly underline the ideas of Stephen Walt in his work *Alliance Formation and the Balance of Threat*[43] through his theory of balance-of-threats. Secondly, Saideman in his book *"The Ties that Divide. Ethnic Policy and International Conflict"*[44], edits the original idea of Walt through applying his theory on secession movements used as an independent value in this research. Thirdly, Randall Schweller's idea of balancing interests as emphasized through Colin Elman gives another independent variable and dimension to the research analysis.[45] Finally, Benett, Lepgold and Unger in their work "*Burden-sharing in the Persian Gulf War*"[46] add the last independent variable called alliance dependence to this research design.

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[43] Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985), https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540.
[44] Stephen M. Saideman, *The Ties that Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy, and International Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
[45] Colin Elman, "Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics," *International Organization* 59, no. 2 (2005).
[46] Andrew Bennett, Joseph Lepgold, and Danny Unger, "Burden-Sharing in the Persian Gulf War," *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (1994).

2.2.1 Stephen Walt's Balancing-of-Threats

Walt underlines that states ally with another with the intention to "balance with or against […] [a] threatening power."[47] With this realization, Walt suggests to consider factors such as aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and offensive intentions, when determining if states act to balance against threats.[48]

For Walt, aggregate power is essentially, "the greater a state's total resources (i.e., population, industrial and military capability, technological prowess, etc.), the greater a potential threat it can pose to others."[49] Furthermore, Walt recognizes that geographical proximity plays another key role in balancing threats.[50] It implies that this is not solely important for alliance formation, but also in regards to the recognition of a secession movement. It could result in supporting a secession movement, which balances out the threat a state may pose. Nevertheless, a secession movement itself could also pose a threat, which may result in disapproval. The third indicator Walt is mentioning are offensive capabilities, where he implies that "the immediate threat that such capabilities pose may lead [states] to balance by allying with others."[51] If a state holds extensive offensive capabilities, which could threaten other states, it may result, considering and including the factor of proximity, in alignment of states within a geographical proximate area.[52] Lastly, and to conclude all four factors mentioned by Walt to explain state behavior, offensive intentions have to be regarded, where Walt suggests, "states that appear aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them"[53], which lies in the judgement of another state. In conclusion, these four factors if taken into consideration result in the possibility

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[47] Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," 8–9.
[48] Ibid, 9.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 10.
[51] Ibid, 11.
[52] Ibid, 10.
[53] Ibid, 12.

to explain state behavior in the international system, which, as stated, act to balance against perceived threats.[54]

Stephen Walt did an extensive work on understanding the underlying factors that contribute to states allying with and act against each other. However, it mostly concentrates on alliance formation and the nature of impactful Great Powers, especially in the Cold War era. Hence, its adjustment to fit the case is essential, as the geostrategic effect on Iraqi-Kurdistan's self-determination do not only involve sovereign states and their actions, but more specifically, how they act with an entity not completely sovereign. Hence, the edited version of Walt's balance of threat in Saideman's book *The Ties That Divide*[55] considers secession movements accordingly.

2.2.2 Saideman: Edited version of Walt's Balance-of-threat in accordance to secession movements.

Saideman extends "[...] [Walt's] approach, suggesting that there is an additional way to balance threats: supporting efforts, particularly those of secessionist movements, to weaken one's adversary by promoting its dissolution."[56] This would mean that balancing threats could happen as a tool of foreign policy in the dimension of secession movements such as Iraqi-Kurdistan. The threat notions implied are vice-versa if the secession movement is regarded as a threat. This is even more likely if the secession movement is in a neighboring state, possibly sparking ethnic threats within the own country.[57] His premises for the research can be concluded as following: Balancing-of-threats explains support or disapproval of secession movements in terms of the involved state's relative power to the host-state, the threat-level perception of the

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[54] Ibid, 8–9.
[55] Saideman, *The Ties that Divide*.
[56] Ibid, 18.
[57] Ibid, 34.

host-state in terms of its offensive intentions (aggressive policies) and the secession movement (ethnic threat), as well as the proximity to both host-state and secession movement.[58] For the research analysis, the indicator aggregate power/relative capabilities expresses as *power relative to Iraq* and expressed as either *weaker* or *stronger*. The two indicators offensive intentions of host-states formulated as *Iraq's threat-level* and ethnic threat/offensive intentions of the secession movement expressed, as *Kurdish threat-level*, are valued as either *high, medium* or *low*.[59] Geographical proximity to the host-state is considered if it's a neighboring state, resulting in either higher or lower threat-perception of neighboring states indicated through either *yes* or *no*.[60] Saideman conducted the measurements of relative power through data sets from Correlates of War and the Composite Index of National Capabilities[61] used in this study partially. The analysis of bilateral relations of involved actors with the host-state and secession movement before the independence referendum of Iraqi-Kurdistan in 2017 emphasize the threat-level perceptions, outside of relative capabilities.

The second independent variable for this study is the strategic positioning of states within the surrounding regional setting of Iraqi-Kurdistan in order to add the dimension of strategic aims outside of threat reduction. For this Randall L. Schweller's typology of states/balancing of interests as outlined in the article "*Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Relations*"[62] by Colin Elman can give implications.

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[58] Ibid, 62.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Elman, "Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics"

2.2.3 Schweller's balancing-of-interests.

Elman outlines the most important aspects of Randall L. Schweller's balancing-of-interests of his book "*Deadly Imbalances*"[63], which are essential for the analysis and method.

Schweller's idea of balancing-of-interests focusses on a "[...] state's relative capabilities; and [...] its interests, expressed as its view of the current distribution of power, that is, whether it supports the status quo."[64] Schweller's balancing-of-interests answers the question of state behavior through the support or opposition of a relative status quo.[65] It gives a great understanding on the issue of interests that are outside of security for the case study of Iraqi-Kurdistan's independence referendum 2017 and the effect of regional aims. Security is not the sole motivation for state behavior; strategic aims are also involved in state behavior. Elman underlines the difference to Waltz as "explicitly incorporating nonsecurity motives into the menu of possible state preferences, and by including lesser powers."[66] Schweller's balancing of interests outlines that states with smaller capabilities can take a stance towards the international system, which do not necessarily have to involve alignment with a Greater Power, and even affect the international system through their policies.[67] This consecutively means states' stances regarding the status-quo affects secession movements and their host states, because support or non-support could be a tool or sign to further regional strategic aims. The regional aims of states in this case study of Iraqi-Kurdistan could implicate geostrategic motivations to approve or disapprove the Kurdish referendum 2017. Hence, the regional aims of states correlate with their stance towards the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum of 2017, as a change of the status-quo may

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[63] Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's strategy of world conquest* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1998).
[64] Elman, "Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics," 315–16.
[65] Ibid, 318.
[66] Ibid, 319.
[67] Ibid, 317.

influence the strategic outlook of the involved actors. Consecutively, the two categorizations

essential for this study are whether the *regional status-quo is supported* suggesting a negative

stance towards secession movements and *revisionist* strategic aims suggesting support for the

Iraqi-Kurdish secession movement, as their successful establishment and recognition results in a

change of the regional status quo. *Indifference*, however, may imply a neutral perspective on the

secession of Iraqi-Kurdistan, suggesting indifference to their secession from the host-state Iraq.

As implied in Elman's article, a time-framed perspective has to be chosen, as interests and

capabilities change throughout time.[68] Hence, for the involved actors in the case study, their

regional aims represents its stance to the status-quo in the year of the independence referendum

of Iraqi-Kurdistan, which is 2017. Outside the measurement of relative capabilities, the

interpretation of their regional aims or "view of the current distribution of power"[69] happens

through secondary sources and policy statements in 2017 towards the regional actors. As the

balancing-of-threats notion covers military, economic and offensive capabilities, Schweller's

notion is particularly interesting to understand the involved actors' stance towards the wider

regional setting. As mentioned, both, capabilities in military, and economic terms, and, regional

aims, expressed as whether the status-quo should be uphold, complement and reinforce each

other to result in a conclusive interpretation of the involved states' stance towards the regional

status-quo in the year of the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum 2017. Hence, Schweller's balancing of

interests is particularly interesting for the year of the referendum. Finally, the last independent

variable merged into the research design is the suggested alliance dependence notion by Bennet,

Lepgold and Unger.[70]

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[68] Ibid, 319.
[69] Ibid, 315.
[70] Bennett, Lepgold and Unger, "Burden-Sharing in the Persian Gulf War"

2.2.4 Bennett, Lepgold and Unger on Alliance Dependence

As highlighted by Bennett, Lepgold and Unger:

> "states in alliances inherently face two fears,[...] abandonment, whereby an ally realigns with one's adversary or fails to help against it [...] [or] entrapment, when one becomes entangled in a conflict central to an ally's interests but peripheral to one's own in the hope that preserving the alliance will outweigh the risks and costs of future war."[71]

This describes the basic premise of alliance dependence as another independent value in the analysis of secession support in this study. The Great Powers are the "alliance leader [which] can catalyze effective alliance action if […] [they] strongly value a public good and is willing and able to pressure others to help achieve it.[72] Alliance dependence is an useful independent variable for this study, as it implies the effect of international organizations on the international system, but more importantly whether or not subordinate allies' of Great Powers and their behavior towards a secession movement is affected through their membership to an international organization or ties to a Great Power or both. The notion of alliance dependence is helpful as it considers how Great Powers are able to exert influence on their allies[73], which consecutively may result in a dependence regarding stances towards the recognition of secession movements, due to strategical reasons. Consecutively, for the case study it is possible that Middle Powers and Regional actors follow different interests regarding the host-state and secession movement, but their dependence on a Great Power could result in them taking the same supporting or disapproving stance towards the independence referendum of a secession movement. Bennett, Lepgold, and Unger outline that measuring alliance dependence relies on whether "dependence

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[71] Ibid, 44.
[72] Ibid, 74.
[73] Ibid.

pressures outweigh fears of entrapment […] [resulting in] coalition members' dependence on the United States in terms of military and economic ties or other assistance that would be hard to replace." [74] For the consistency of this study, the same would be the case for alliance dependence on Russia. The involvement in an international organization such as NATO or through involvements in alliances may imply alliance dependence of an involved actor. If a Great Power or leader of an alliance does take a supporting stance, and one of the involved actors is alliance dependent, it makes sense that their stance reflects in the dependent allied actor. If a Great Power or leader of an alliance does take a disapproving stance, and one of the involved actors is alliance dependent, it makes sense that their stance reflects through a disapproving stance towards the secession movement.

2.3 Research Design/Method

Elman summarized explanatory typologies as "[...] classifications based on an explicitly stated theory."[75] Explanatory typologies try to investigate "causal relationships [and] particular outcomes [that] are associated with different combinations of values of the theory's variables."[76] This fits the goal and underlying notion of this study. It is a qualitative study as most of this study is relying on the interpretation of secondary sources and primary sources, except primary data for measuring relative capabilities in 2017.

The goal of this study is to understand how different forms of geostrategic interests affect self-determination in the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum case in 2017. As outlined in the previous chapters, self-determination, due to its vague nature and wide room for interpretation as a norm, needed criteria to measure it. It suggests that the detrimental factor to determine successful self-

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[74] Ibid, 44.
[75] Elman, "Explanatory Typologies in Qualitative Studies of International Politics," 296.
[76] Ibid, 298.

determination is international recognition by sovereign states within the international system.

International recognition has underlying factors that result from varying interests defined in the

outlined premises of balancing-of-threats, balancing of interests, and alliance dependency. Figure

2 contains a symbiosis of the gathered independent values and their indicators into an

explanatory typology and the units of analysis for the case study of Iraqi-Kurdistan 2017.

2.3.1 Measurement of relative capabilities
      An essential notion of the neorealist lens to explain state behavior is the prevalence of

relative capabilities. The notion of Saideman[77] to use the Composite Index of National

Capabilities (CINC) as a reference[78] in order to measure relative capabilities will hint at the view

of involved actors towards the regional power setting in the case study of Iraqi-Kurdistan 2017.

As outlined by Saideman, the formula used in the Composite Index of National Capabilities to

calculate a states' share of the world's resources (CNC value) is the following:

    "[(military personnel of x/world total)+(military expenditure of x/world total]/2 +

    [(energy use of x/world total) + (x's production of iron and steel/world total)]/2 + [(x's

    urban population/world total) + (x's total population/world total)]/2 /3."[79]

The CINC calculates relative capabilities annually, as capabilities change throughout time. The

year chosen for the calculation of relative capabilities is 2017, as this study analyzes the effect of

geostrategic interests on Iraqi-Kurdistan through its independence referendum 2017. Figure 4 of

this study in the appendix outlines the detailed findings with extra information on the calculation.

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[77] Saideman, *The Ties that Divide*, 34.
[78] J. D. Singer, "Reconstructing the correlates of war dataset on material capabilities of states, 1816–1985," *International Interactions* 14, no. 2 (1988), https://doi.org/10.1080/03050628808434695.
This is the wished citation from the Correlates of War Project, for National Material Capabilities (v5.0) visit: http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/national-material-capabilities
[79] Saideman, *The Ties that Divide*, 171.

The indicators of a state's relative capabilities according to the CINC are military expenditure, military personnel, primary energy consumption, production of iron and steel, urban population and total population.[80] The primary data for this measurement stems from the World Bank,[81] World Steel Association,[82] and United Nations World Urbanization Project.[83] The consecutive final CNC value of each state in 2017 hints at the power ranking of the involved actors amongst each other to add insight on regional aims in 2017. Furthermore, it hints at the relative power relationship of the involved actors to the host-state of the secession movement Iraq, which adds insight on the balancing of threat notion. The detailed results of these findings are attached in the appendix in Figure 4 and simplified in Figure 2.

2.3.2 Determination of involved actors and status-quo of region

As this study compares the influence of geostrategic interests in Autonomous Region Kurdistan 2017, the selection of involved actors are Great Powers, regional actors directly involved with the host-state, and middle powers that are involved through relations with the host-state sensible in previous operations. For the case study of the independence bid of Autonomous Region Kurdistan in 2017 the Great Powers are United States and Russia, the Middle Powers Germany, United Kingdom and France, and the surrounding regional actors Iran, Turkey and Syria.

The premise behind the selection of those Middle Powers for the case study of

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[80] J. D. Singer, "Reconstructing the correlates of war dataset on material capabilities of states, 1816–1985," *International Interactions* 14, no. 2 (1988), https://doi.org/10.1080/03050628808434695.
This is the wished citation from the Correlates of War Project, for National Material Capabilities (v5.0) visit: http://cow.dss.ucdavis.edu/data-sets/national-material-capabilities.
[81] The World Bank, *Military expenditure (% of GDP),* https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=FR&name_desc=true; The World Bank, "P*opulation, total*," https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sp.pop.totl; The World Bank, "*Armed forces personnel, total,*" https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ms.mil.totl.p1
[82] World Steel Association, "STEEL STATISTICAL YEARBOOK 2018," https://www.worldsteel.org/en/dam/jcr:e5a8eda5-4b46-4892-856b-00908b5ab492/SSY_2018.pdf
[83] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2018). World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision, Online Edition, https://population.un.org/wup/Download/

Autonomous Region Kurdistan 2017 is their involvement in previous operations. For the Autonomous Region Kurdistan that would be the Middle Powers' involvement in the Persian Gulf War, as well as the Iraq War 2003 and the support in the fight against the Islamic State. Furthermore, the regional actors involve those states that may portray a keen positive or negative interest of an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan, resulting in the selection of Iran, Turkey and Syria.

2.3.2.1 What is the regional status-quo in 2017?

Defining the regional status-quo evaluates whether the involved actors are supporting it or not. An article by Michael Mandelbaum implies the regional status-quo of the Gulf region.[84] Mandelbaum outlines that different actors, such as Russia, China, and Iran, are revisionist in their perspective regions[85], underlining the importance of evaluating the regional not global status-quo, which is the Persian Gulf in this case. Hence, due to Iran exerting influence and destabilizing the region[86] the involved actors' evaluated regional aims in 2017 relates to the surrounding region of Iraq and Iraqi-Kurdistan to understand whether they support the status-quo. Therefore, while Mandelbaum underlines Russia as a revisionist in its respective region[87], the dynamics change in regards to the Persian Gulf. Consequently, the American established status-quo in the Persian Gulf region adds insight to the measured relative capabilities in 2017 as an evaluation of the regional aims of the involved actors.[88] The evaluation of Mandelbaum's notion occurs in the selected actor's analysis of regional aims in 2017 within the case study.

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[84] Michael Mandelbaum, "The New Containment: Handling Russia, China, and Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (2019): 123–31.
[85] Mandelbaum, "The New Containment," 123–31.
[86] Ibid
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

Chapter 3: The Iraqi-Kurdish independence referendum 2017 and research results

3.1 Introduction

Henri Barkey describes the issue of the Kurdish self-determination aspirations fittingly, underlining the misery of the Kurdish question: "They are a majority in their homeland, Kurdistan, which only through an accident of geopolitical history has been rendered an appendage of other states."[89] The Iraqi-Kurdish Referendum 2017 was another historical moment of Kurdish self-determination aspirations held on September 25, 2017. Over 92,7% of the Iraqi-Kurdish population voted in favor of the independence referendum of September 25, 2017.[90] Nevertheless, all of the selected actors of this case study disapproved the decision of the official referendum, as outlined in the proceeding chapters. The backlash of it was that "[..] the Iraqi government, backed by Iran and Turkey, invaded Iraqi Kurdistan and conquered some 40 percent of its territory."[91] The analysis and research of the underlying factors that contributed to the massive disapproval of previously allied nations, regional actors and Great Powers suggest that there are geostrategic interests involved in the decision of those states.

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[89] Henri J. Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 2 (2019): 111.
[90] "Iraq's Kurds vote 'yes' to independent state in referendum – official results," September 27, 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/iraqs-kurds-vote-yes-to-independent-state-in-referendum-official-results/a-40711521.
[91] Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening," 109.

Figure 2: Results Autonomous Region Kurdistan 2017

		Balancing of threats (Saideman)				Balancing of Interests (Schweller)	Alliance Dependence (Bennett; Lepgold and Unger)	Outcome
		Power Relative to Iraq (8)*	Iraq's Threat	Kurdish Threat	Neighbors to Iraq	Regional aim of the state in 2017		
Great Power	Russia (**2**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**Low**	**No**	**Accepts limited revision/ supports status-quo**	**-**	**No Support**
	United States (**1**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**Low**	**No**	**Supports status-quo**	**-**	**No Support**
Middle Power	Germany (**3**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**Low**	**No**	**Supports status-quo**	**Yes**	**No Support**
	France (**4**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**Low**	**No**	**Supports status-quo**	**Yes**	**No Support**
	United Kingdom (**7**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**Low**	**No**	**Supports status-quo**	**Yes**	**No Support**
Regional Actors	Iran (**5**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**Medium**	**Yes**	**Limited aims revisionist**	**Yes**	**No Support**
	Syria (**9**)	**Weaker**	**Low**	**High**	**Yes**	**Indifferent**	**Yes**	**No Support**
	Turkey (**6**)	**Stronger**	**Low**	**High**	**Yes**	**Accepts limited revision/ Supports status-quo**	**No**	**No Support**

*power rankings amongst each other indicated in brackets

3.2 Results of research and analysis

After analyzing various secondary and primary sources, this thesis has found that unrecognition of the independence of Iraqi Kurds is associated with certain geostrategic interests demonstrated in Figure 2. The following chapters of this thesis is dedicated to how these values on Figure 2 were derived and what they actually mean. Before going into chapter specific details, the notions of Figure 2 will be briefly outlined.

The first two chapters established the notion that international recognition is crucial in determining successful self-determination of secession movements. Additionally, international recognition in the form of approving independence bids of secession movements has underlying geostrategic interests. According to different scholars that use the neorealist lens, these geostrategic interests form by either states balancing against threats, balancing interests or a state's dependence on a Great Power. Those underpinnings were fittingly edited for the application on a non-state actor, such as the Iraqi-Kurds, to understand how and if geostrategic interests are affecting their independence referendum of 2017. Consecutively, the collection of data and measurement of relative capabilities firstly established the power rankings of the selected actors amongst each other to hint at possible strategic interests and threat-perception of the host state Iraq and the Kurds. The case study of the involved actors analyzed their threat-perception of Iraq and the Kurds, regional aims in 2017, and possible dependence of certain states on a Great Power. The implication is that each established independent value has shaped and weighed the decisions of the involved actors differently. The relative international strategic standing and geographical position towards Iraq and the Kurds greatly shaped the actors decision. Consecutively, these results portray that geostrategic interests in its different forms affected the 2017 independence referendum of the Iraqi-Kurds negatively. Hence, geostrategic

interests are affecting Kurdish self-determination in Iraq negatively. The concluding chapter gives an implication for the future of Iraqi-Kurdish independence bids.

3.2.1 Iraq's relative power in 2017

As outlined in Figure 4 in the appendix, Iraq, of the involved actors in this case study ranked as the eight place with a CNC value of 0.00436108 only followed by Syria. In terms of relative capabilities, it underlines that Iraq does not pose a threat, except to Syria. Relative capabilities are only one of various indicators to understand the effect of geostrategic interests in regards to Iraqi-Kurdistan, Iraq and the surrounding region. It is part of the individual actor's threat-perception of Iraq as a host-state. Additionally, relative capabilities hint at regional aims in 2017. Nevertheless, relative capabilities are not decisive to hint at regional aims in 2017.

3.2.2 How different independent values explain non-recognition from different states

Through Figure 2 several implications follow, indicated through the different geographical and strategic positions of regional actors, Middle and Great Powers. Firstly, the Great Powers United States and Russia, who are not alliance dependent due to the implications of alliance dependency previously established, have only two other independent values that possibly explain their disapproval of the Iraqi-Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. One is their threat-perception of Iraq and the Kurds, paired with the geographical distance to both host-state and secession movement. The case study implied that the balancing-of-threat notion of Saideman is not able to emphasize disapproval. Both the United States and Russia hold friendly relations with Iraq and the Kurds prior to the referendum. Consecutively, the regional aims of both Great Powers in 2017 are indicative to understand their disapproval of the Kurdish independence referendum. For Middle Powers Germany, France and the United Kingdom a similar notion holds true, with an added insight.

The Middle Powers prior to the independence referendum did not perceive the Kurds or Iraq as a threat, additionally due to the geographical distance. However, just as the Great Powers, they have strategic interests in the surrounding region in regards to the regional actors. For those three selected Middle Powers another notion that is possibly decisive in their decision to disapprove the Kurdish referendum holds value: alliance dependence. All three actors have crucial interest in sustaining their relationship with the US, who is essential as the main NATO provider in order to keep an aggressor like Russia from breaching European security. All three states may take the same position of the United States due to the possible abandonment of the US in the future in providing their security. Before risking this, it is strategically sound to support the US involvement in other states and hence take the same strategic position. The United States established the Global Coalition against Daesh in 2014 preceding the independence referendum in 2017. They took part in it and supported the fight against ISIS through different means as NATO partners and allies. These three states know the importance of US support for future conflict or in the fight against a non-state enemy, which has already perpetrated their domestic security through terrorism. For Middle Powers, regional aims and alliance dependence have influenced their disapproval of the Kurdish referendum. The United States knows the value of the Kurds as a strategic tool, but wants to confine it within the established borders, due to the regional aim to keep the status-quo. The possibility of US backlash by undermining its position towards the Kurdish referendum is negative for Middle Power's European security. Nevertheless, the alliance dependence notion as independent value to explain disapproval is not cohesive enough to explain disapproval of an independence bid solely. Hence, alliance dependence for the Middle Powers slightly weakened in its weight to emphasize disapproval of the Kurdish referendum. Conclusively, the leading geostrategic interests for Middle Powers are

their regional aims in 2017 and alliance dependence. For regional actors, the balance-of-threat notion is decisive in their disapproval.

The regional actors Turkey, Iran and Syria, who have a Kurdish minority, disapproved the independence bid due to the possible ethnic threat of an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan that is additionally risky due to proximity. Hence, balancing-threats explains the disapproval of regional actors most fittingly. There is no crucial animosity between the regional actors and the Kurdish Regional Government, but the possibility of their independence potentially sparking domestic uprisings and further Kurdish influence is decisive for disapproval. The prospect of Kurdish independence threatens the security of those states, who all faced Kurdish issues previously. Additionally, but not decisive in their decision, are the regional aims of the regional actors in 2017. It was established that revisionist aims result in the revision of the regional setting, hence an independent Kurdish state, would further revisionist aims. This is not the case, as none of the regional actors approved the Kurdish referendum, even when following limited revisionist aims or accepting limited revision. Furthermore, the strategic importance of Iraq, who none of the regional actors perceived as a threat, adds emphasis to this. Disapproving the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum due to dependence on a Great Power is not decisive. Regional actors are heavily involved in the regional power plays and threatened through a secession movement. Hence, the stance of a Great Power to disapprove the secession movement's independence bid does not decide the regional actor's decision. The regional actors are themselves affected by the possibility of an independent Kurdish state and its threat to their states. The threat of Iraq adds one conclusive notion to the study.

One finding that connects all actors together is their low threat-perception of Iraq. It is reasonable that if Iraq would portray a threat to any of those actors, specifically the regional

actors, that the decision may have resulted differently.

The following pages of the thesis will show how the values indicated in Figure 2 were derived and coded. This enlightens on the dynamics of threat-perception, regional aims and possible dependency on Great Powers of the selected actors in the case study of Iraqi-Kurdistan and their failed independence referendum of 2017. These notions will underline how geostrategic interests affect the Kurdish self-determination aspirations negatively.

Chapter 4: Great Powers: United States and Russia

4.1 United States

The United States opposed the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum 2017 before it taking place.[92] The following outlines the underlying geostrategic interests of the US in the surrounding region and in Iraq to understand its disapproval.

4.1.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

One of the crucial actors in the case study of Iraqi-Kurdistan is the United States, due to their previous involvement in Iraq 2003 and the region. A bilateral strategic framework established in 2008 described the goals of the United States in regards to Iraq as a state, after the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the establishment of a Coalition Provisional Authority in 2005. The Strategic Framework Agreement of 2008 describes the American threat-perception of Iraq, as it outlines different provisions on consecutive development of a bilateral relationship that previously suffered under constraints. The agreed withdrawal of the American occupation forces established in the Strategic Framework emphasized that Iraq does not portray any threat anymore.[93] Yeltiv outlines that: "The Strategic Framework Agreement signed in December 2008

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[92] Heather Nauert, "Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's Planned Referendum," news release, September 20, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274324.htm.
[93] Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, U.S.-Iraq, 2008, https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122076.pdf.

was designed to normalize and buttress the U.S.-Iraqi relationship."[94] Furthermore, it outlined

economic and security provisions that underline the low threat-perception of Iraq.[95] Additionally,

the low threat-perception of Iraq in regards to their intentions is sensible through developments

after 2011. The Global Coalition to defeat ISIS to fight against the growing insurgency of the

Islamic State of Iraq and Levante (ISIS) established by the United States in 2014.[96] The U.S.

State Department outlines that in the global fight against terrorism, which "poses a threat to

international peace and security,"[97] support from all surrounding actors and states suffering

through the insurgency has to happen, one of those allies being Iraq. It underlines that the U.S. –

Iraq relations developed substantially from hostility to one of cooperation to develop stability in

the region, and against the growing insurgency of terrorism through ISIS. It implies a low threat-

perception of Iraq, however the same holds true for the U.S. relationship with the Autonomous

Region Kurdistan.

The Iraqi-Kurds do not pose as a threat, considering the United States implemented their

autonomy into the constitution of Iraq in 2005. The United States and Iraqi-Kurdistan have a

close relationship underlined through American economic interests. After Iraqi-Kurdistan

established hydrocarbon laws it "enabled the [Kurdish government] to enter into contracts with

international oil companies, including various US oil companies."[98] However, this decentralized

approach to American surge for energy security, in the context of the world market[99], does not

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[94] Steven A. Yetiv and Katerina Oskarsson, *Challenged hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 40.
[95] Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq, U.S.-Iraq, 1.
[96] U.S. Department of State, The Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS, https://www.state.gov/s/seci/index.htm .
[97] Ibid.
[98] Paul Pineda, "The Kurdish Issue on the USA Foreign Policy Agenda," in *Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern politics*, ed. Alex Danilovich (London: Routledge), 184.
[99] Julien Mercille, "The radical geopolitics of US foreign policy: the 2003 Iraq War," *GeoJournal* 75, no. 4 (2010).

extend the likelihood of policy change regarding the independence aspirations.[100] Economic

interests are hence not the main driver for the utility of Iraqi-Kurdistan. The growing insurgency

that happened after 2011 does underline the importance of the Kurds in the U.S. strategy to

combat terrorism and establish stability in this region. The use of Syrian Kurdish fighters, YPG,

and of Iraqi-Kurdish military, Peshmerga, underlines that the Kurds do not pose a threat,

considering their armament through the United States.[101] The security cooperation, in regards to

the fight against ISIS, means that the Kurds can be trusted enough to get hold of arms and

military equipment in regards to fight the real threat in the eyes of the United States. The Kurds

hence, are not a direct threat, neither through offensive intentions nor through an ethnic threat,

considering their distant geographical position, but an important strategic tool for the

containment of terrorism.

4.1.2 Regional aims of the U.S. in 2017

When it comes to strategic interests or essentially the regional aims of the United States

in regards to the surrounding states and the host-state within the year of the referendum 2017, it

is understandable why the independence referendum may have triggered a negative response

from the United States. As outlined by Porter "[---] [US] grand strategy—preponderance,

reassurance, integration, and nuclear inhibition—will persist despite shifts between presidencies

[…]."[102] Hence, U.S foreign policy and strategic interest in the region follows that grand

strategy.

One of their closest allies in the region is Turkey, who is also a NATO member. Turkey,

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[100] Paul Pineda, "The Kurdish Issue on the USA Foreign Policy Agenda," 184.

[101] Mohammed Shareef, "A Paradigm Shift in US-Kurdistan Region Relations Post-2014: The Evolution to a Strategic Partnership," 472.

[102] Patrick Porter, "Why America's Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment," *International Security* 42, no. 04 (2018): 18–19, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00311.

who does have historical reservations against the Kurds and their self-determination proclaims, due to their own Kurdish population and the armed fight against the Kurdish Workers' Party PKK, holds value to the stability of the region and their own state.[103] In 2017, despite Turkey's divert towards Russia as underlined by the tripartite agreement in Astana in May 2017, US still holds vital strategic interest with Turkey as its ally. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson underlined this position to "[…] reaffirm Turkey's important role in ensuring regional stability."[104] It is this predicament as a NATO ally making the Turkey essential in this region, especially regarding Iranian influence. As noted by Tillerson "[…] the United States [continue] high-level engagement with [its] […] NATO Ally."[105] As 2017 also marked the year after the failed coup attempt against Turkey's governments, U.S. Department of State spokesperson Heather Nauert underlined "[…] the United States' steadfast support for Turkey's democracy and democratic institutions."[106] Conclusively, while Turkey displays signs of diverting towards Russia, U.S. is still highly engaged with its NATO ally, as it understands Turkey's strategic role in containing hostile regimes, such as Syria and Iran.

From a different perspective, there is Iran, with whom the United States holds animosity. The animosity to Iran follows due to its influence on the Iraqi government and their religious ties as Shiites, undermining the efforts of the United States to establish stability in Iraq and the region, by supporting militant Shiite rebels and supporting the Assad-regime.[107] This influence and gain of Iran in the region makes it hard for the United States to back down from the region,

[103] Kenneth M. Pollack, "Fight or Flight: America's Choice in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2016): 62–75.
[104] Rex Tillerson, "Secretary of State Tillerson To Travel to Ankara and Brussels Share," news release, March 24, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269098.htm.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Heather Nauert, "On the Occasion of the One-Year Anniversary of the Attempted Coup in Turkey," news release, July 24, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/07/272625.htm.
[107] Yetiv and Oskarsson, *Challenged hegemony*, 26–27.

especially since Trump is president.[108] Different statements and sanctions against the Iranian

government underline the U.S. view of Iran's misconduct and policies in the region in 2017, as

Iran supports terrorist Shiite organizations and conduct missile shipments. As outlined in early

2017 by an official spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State, the supposed missile support

to the Houthis in Yemen was illicit.[109] Furthermore, the US was supportive for Turkey and

Russia, but emphasized Iran as a regional destabilizer and unreliable partner regarding Iranian

efforts in the Astana agreement that resulted in a tripartite agreement between Russia, Turkey

and Iran.[110] The U.S. sanctioned Iran to halt its support of rebel forces in the region, as the U.S.

has vital interest in a stable Iraq, Turkey and the Gulf countries.[111] President Trump also

criticized the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, with the intent of it

undergoing a review.[112] Conclusively, U.S. strategic interest in regards to Iran is one of

containment through allies in the region, such as the Gulf countries, or wishfully Turkey, who

underwent a minimal shift towards Russia in 2017. As emphasized by Mandelbaum, the U.S.

wants Iraq to be stable, and the Kurds to be a balancing force against the regime of Iran, to

sustain the regional status-quo, and deter Iranian influence and activities.[113]

In regards to Syria, the United States outlined that the Assad regime removal is vital due

to its use of chemical weapons and the influence of Iran. In several occasions in 2017, the

Department of State made this clear. The US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley

stated, "the illegitimate Syrian government, led by a man with no conscience, has committed

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[108] Emma Sky, "Mission Still Not Accomplished in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2017): 14.

[109] U.S. Office of the Spokesperson, "Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act Sanctions," news release, March 24, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/269084.htm.

[110] Heather Nauert, "Statement on Russia, Turkey, and Iran's De-Escalation Zones Plan for Syria," news release, May 4, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/270647.htm.

[111] Rex Tillerson, "Iran Continues To Sponsor Terrorism," news release, April 18, 2017, https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2017/04/270315.htm.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Mandelbaum, "The New Containment", 123-24

untold atrocities against his people for more than six years,"[114] which underlines the U.S. perception of Syria. He furthermore stated" […] Iran has reinforced Assad's military"[115], which hints at the Iranian influence as a destabilizing force in the region. The U.S. saw the need to cooperate with Russia even though Russia supports the Assad regime, urging Russia to back down from their support of the Assad regime, which underlines the U.S. view on Syria.[116]

4.1.3 Conclusion

      If the Iraqi government would portray an enemy, as well as two surrounding actors, it makes strategic sense that the United States would support the Kurdish efforts of becoming independent. However, Iraq, as implied through the Strategic Framework of 2008 and the Coalition against Daesh, is a partner and not regarded as a threat. Furthermore, leaving Iraq to the influence of Iran would result in the loss of a strategic partner, as well as triggering one of their close allies in the region, Turkey, who already slightly diverted to the East in 2017. It is a balancing act of rationally measuring the best strategic outcome for the region. The United States want to secure the allied nations in the Persian Gulf that portray essential strategic partners, in the security, strategic and economic sphere. Conclusively, the U.S. supports the regional status-quo in 2017.

4.2 Russia

      Russia's Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov underlined that Russia opposes the referendum and supports Iraq's territorial integrity approximately a month after the Iraqi-Kurdistan

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[114] Nikki Haley, "Remarks at an Emergency UN Security Council Meeting on Chemical Weapons in Syria," news release, April 5, 2017, https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7745.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Rex Tillerson, "Statement From Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson on the Current Situation in Syria," news release, July 5, 2017, https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2017/07/272371.htm.

referendum for independence.[117] In the following, the geostrategic interests of Russia in the surrounding region and Iraq underline Russia's strategic reasoning for disapproval.

4.2.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

Russia and Iraq have a friendly historical bond, which even after the Iraq War of 2003 held strong. Several factors underline this, both in security cooperation in the fight against ISIS, as well as through economic interests in oil fields. Back in 2015, "Iraq [...] reached a deal to share intelligence with Russia, Iran and Syria in the fight against ISIS militants."[118] Nevertheless, Iraq acts in two different strategic directions, as its part of the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS led by the U.S. However, the interest to support Iraq in their fight against ISIS implies that Iraq does not portray a threat to Russia, but an ally in the fight against Islamic terrorism, which is also a problem for Russia domestically. In addition to a security interest of Iraq as a stable partner in the fight against ISIS, there are economic interests involved in their relations. As outlined by Vasiliev, "Russia sought to maintain a working relationship with the Iraqi administration, with a view that old ties and interests of the Iraqi people would make it possible [...] to continue the former Russian-Iraqi cooperation in the economic and military fields."[119] Nevertheless, one issue between the Iraqi government and Russia was the settlement of Iraqi debts settled in February 2008, where "[Russia] agreed to write off Iraq's debt in the amount of $11.1 billion immediately, another $900 million- over a few years and to restructure another $900 million over 17 years."[120]

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[117] "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Moscow, October 23, 2017," news release, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2917837/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_qrIndex=2.

[118] Jethro Mullen and Yousuf Basil, "Iraq agrees to share intelligence with Russia, Iran and Syria," *CNN*, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/27/middleeast/iraq-russia-iran-syria-intelligence-deal/.

[119] Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (Oxford: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 353.

[120] Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy*, 353–54.

Furthermore, this debt reduction resulted in the "opportunity for Russian oil companies to return to Iraq."[121] Several Russian oil companies in 2009 were able to make use of one of the "largest untapped oil deposits in the world"[122] situated in Iraq, called West-Qurna-2 in the area next to Basra. However, one of the issues was that Baghdad did not allow international companies to work in the regions held by Iraqi-Kurdistan, "without a permission of the federal government,"[123] solved later on. It underlines the economic aspects of the Iraqi-Russian relations, which would not be tangible if Iraq would pose a threat to Russia.

In an interview with Rudaw, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated, "[…] we definitely have a very positive attitude towards the Kurds [as] we have long-established links; and we know each other very well."[124] The involvement of Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft with Iraqi-Kurdistan in 2017 implies it furthermore.[125] Russia and Iraqi-Kurdistan also cooperated on the fight against ISIS, mutually reinforcing each other through visits.[126] Russia has a low threat-perception of the Iraqi-Kurds underlined by mutual economic and strategic partnership.

4.2.2 Regional aims of Russia in 2017

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[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Kurdish television channel Rudaw, Moscow, July 24, 2017," *International Affairs (Russian)*, July 24, 2017, http://en.interaffairs.ru/lavrov/656-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrovs-interview-with-kurdish-television-channel-rudaw-moscow-july-24-2017.html.
[125] Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Russia becomes Iraq Kurds' top funder, quiet about independence vote," *Reuters*, September 20, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-russi/russia-becomes-iraq-kurds-top-funder-quiet-about-independence-vote-idUSKCN1BV1IH.
[126] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's consultations with Head of the Foreign Relations Department of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq Falah Mustafa Bakir," news release, November 1, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/iq/-/asset_publisher/WizNA2SGNvS5/content/id/2511392/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_WizNA2SGNvS5_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_WizNA2SGNvS5_qrIndex=1.

In regards to the surrounding states, it makes sense that Russia does not support the

Kurdish independence referendum, considering the strategic interests with their close allies, Iran

and Syria, as well as their refreshed ties to Turkey.

Russia has a strong historical bond with Iran, who wants strengthened influence in the

Iraqi government prospectively undermined by the possibility of an independent Kurdish state.

Hence, even though Iraqi-Kurdistan and Kurds do not pose a direct threat to Russia, it threatens

Iran. Several mutual visits of high officials underline their strong relations in 2017. Matter of

fact, "[in] March 27, […] Rouhani paid a two-day visit to Russia, where […] they] signed a

string of bilateral agreements to boost trade between the countries more than 70 percent."[127] The

Astana agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran, where the three parties agreed on de-

escalation zones for the post-ISIS future underline their mutual friendly and strategic relations.[128]

Both states support the Assad regime, even after the alleged use of chemical weapons against his

own population.[129] Russia's continuous support for support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action, for the Iranian non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, emphasizes their alliance and

strong strategic relations.[130] Furthermore, Russia is a strong ally of Iran, because it is an

[127] Farhad Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 58–59.

[128] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "JOINT STATEMENT BY IRAN, RUSSIA, TURKEY ON THE INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON SYRIA IN ASTANA, JANUARY 23-24th, 2017," news release, January 26, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/ir/-/asset_publisher/HUPBmpXjn4Ob/content/id/2610777/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_HUPBmpXjn4Ob_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_HUPBmpXjn4Ob_qrIndex=0.

[129] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic Walid Muallem, Moscow, April 14, 2017," news release, April 14, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/ir/-/asset_publisher/HUPBmpXjn4Ob/content/id/2726881/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_HUPBmpXjn4Ob_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_HUPBmpXjn4Ob_qrIndex=2.

[130] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's consultations with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi," news release, February 8, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/ir/-/asset_publisher/HUPBmpXjn4Ob/content/id/2632348.

important partner in times of economic sanctions against both states.[131]

The same is true for Syria, who is a close ally of Russia, as implied through the support of the Assad regime in Syria. Allison points out that there are Russian material and geopolitical interests in regards to Syria, which not only involve the amount of arms trade that is already established, but also the issue of leaving the regime, which is a close ally to Iran, open to de-stabilization of Western actors for geopolitical purposes of reducing Iranian influence in the region.[132] Political chaos and instability does not support Russia's strategic interest in the region.[133] Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov outlined the issue of regime change in Syria:

"Someone asked me about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In Iraq and Libya, the international community did its utmost to overthrow Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. We can see what this has resulted in. As regards the settlement of the Syrian crisis, let us draw conclusions from our past mistakes and opt not for replacing the leader but for rooting out the evil of terrorism. President Donald Trump has reaffirmed today that the main goal for the United States in Syria is to defeat terrorism. We fully agree on this."[134]

After reassuring the Assad regime, Russia even criticized US air strikes in April and their judgment of Assad's use of chemical weapons, defending him.[135] Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department, Artyom Kozhin alleged US of its geopolitical interest

[131] Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement*, 60.

[132] Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12046.

[133] Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," 805.

[134] Sergey Lavrov, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions following talks with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Washington DC, May 10, 2017," news release, May 10, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2751328.

[135] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic Walid Muallem, Moscow, April 14, 2017," news realease, April 14, 2017.

through backing rebel forces in Syria.[136] Furthermore, Russia reaffirmed the Astana agreement of

May 2017 with the essential involvement of the Syrian regime, emphasizing the strong relations

both states have.[137] Conclusively, Syria's relations to Russia emphasize that an instable Syria and

surrounding region would not benefit Russia's geostrategic interests. Hence, Russia's strategic

alliance to Syria impeded an approval of the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum 2017.

Russia's relations to Turkey in 2017 underline Turkey's slight pivot away from the

United States, as underlined through the tripartite agreement in Astana agreed on by Iran, Russia,

and Turkey. Russia supports regional security in regards to Turkey's negative perspective of the

domestic PKK.[138] Russia, in this sense, is an ally of two regional rivals, who both want to extent

their spheres of influence more. However, Russia condoned an airstrike of Turkey against

Kurdish rebel forces in April 2017, where Russia implied how essential they are as an opposition

against ISIS.[139] Conclusively, Turkey may have pivoted towards Russia, slightly away from their

close NATO allies, but in 2017, this nominal shift is not convincing for a complete shift towards

Russia.

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[136] Artyom Kozhin, "Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Artyom Kozhin's reply to a question from Lebanon's Al Mayadeen media network regarding the Trump administration's decision to stop arming the Syrian opposition," news release, July 23, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/sy/-/asset_publisher/9fcjSOwMERcf/content/id/2818871/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_qrIndex=22.

[137] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Joint statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in Astana 14-15 September 2017," news release, September 18, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/sy/-/asset_publisher/9fcjSOwMERcf/content/id/2864541/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_qrIndex=24.

[138] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Russian-Turkish interdepartmental consultations on combating terrorism and organised crime," news release, March 30, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/tr/-/asset_publisher/Fn23Klb76LY2/content/id/2712152/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_Fn23Klb76LY2_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_Fn23Klb76LY2_qrIndex=7.

[139] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Turkish airstrikes against Iraq and Syria," news release, April 26, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/sy/-/asset_publisher/9fcjSOwMERcf/content/id/2738658/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_qrIndex=14.

Russia did not support the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum due to several geostrategic interests attached to the surrounding region of Iraq. Russia has a low threat-perception of Iraq and the Iraqi-Kurds. The reasoning behind the disapproval of the Kurdish referendum lies within the geostrategic makeup of the region. Russia extends its sphere of influence through its allies Syria and Iran. Hence, a support for the Kurdish referendum would have resulted in the weakening of two strategic partners, not only in the fight against terrorism, but also regarding US and Western influence. Furthermore, as underlined by the rekindled relations of Turkey and Russia in 2017 through the Astana agreement that established different de-escalation zones in Syria, to weaken Turkey is not in the interest of Russia, who are strongly opposed to the Kurdish referendum. Hence, Russia's regional aims of accepting limited revision, but supporting the status-quo in the region explains that it is not aggressively seeking dominance in the region, but accepts Iran extending influence in the region. Russia leans towards supporting the status-quo in 2017 emphasizing the dynamics behind its decision of disapproving the Kurdish referendum.

Chapter 5: Middle Powers: Germany, France & United Kingdom

5.1 Germany

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel issued a statement emphasizing that Germany does not support the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum for independence.[140] The underlying geostrategic interests of Germany in the surrounding region and in Iraq and its alliance dependence on the U.S. outlined in the following underlines the rationale behind its disapproval of the referendum.

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[140] Sigmar Gabriel, "Statement by Foreign Minister Gabriel on the referendum in the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq," news release, September 26, 2017, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170926-bm-referendum-kurdistan/292594.

5.1.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

       Germany's position towards Iraq implies a friendly support of stability and cooperation

since the Iraq War of 2003. In economic terms, Germany aids Iraq through different measures.

Economically, Germany does hold trade relations with Iraq, but those trades stagnated due to the

ISIS crisis. From the years 2014-2015, the export of German products into Iraq were between 1

to 1.1 billion Euros, underlined by the foreign ministry stating: "the Iraqi market holds great

potential for the German economy."[141] The humanitarian aid of Germany to Iraq since the

beginning of the crisis in 2014 until 2016 consisted of 713 million Euro for aid measurements.[142]

Furthermore, in terms of security, Germany has sent military personnel, which trains the

military.[143] In 2015, former Foreign Minister Steinmeier stated to raise the amount of training

personnel from 100 to 150 to help Iraq.[144] Furthermore, Steinmeier underlined the importance of

a new reform proposed by Iraqi minister president Haider al-Abadi to lessen the sectarian divide

within Iraq, stating that he wishes Iraqi stability "[…] [where] every ethnic, religious and societal

group finds themselves in."[145] Germany clearly does not see Iraq as a threat, but regards ISIS a

threat, which is why Iraq needs to be a stable partner to balance against this threat in the region,

without the heavy involvement of German military personnel.

       Germany also holds friendly relations to Iraqi-Kurdistan, as outlined through the support

through military training and arms in their fight against ISIS. Germany, back in 2014, already

agreed for 100 military personnel to train the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, but did not want to

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[141] Auswärtiges Amt, Beziehungen zu Deutschland, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/irak-node/-/203980#content_1.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] *Die Welt,* *"*Steinmeier verspricht mehr Soldaten für den Irak," December 7, 2015,
https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article149687039/Steinmeier-verspricht-mehr-Soldaten-fuer-den-Irak.html.
[145] Ibid.

take part in the air strikes of the US-coalition outside of military aid.[146] Furthermore, the German

Defense Ministry agreed in 2014 to support the Iraqi-Kurds with "munitions worth a total of 70

million euros."[147] In regards to the security interest of having the Kurds on their side, it implies

that they portray a low threat and a strategic tool in the fight against terrorism and instability in

the region. However, Germany is allied and holds ties with some surrounding states, which may

lessened the likelihood of German support for Kurdish independence.

5.1.2 Regional aim of Germany in 2017

Germany supports the status-quo due to its strategic interest in regards to the surrounding

actors in 2017. German-Turkish relations underwent a rough period underlined by different

perspectives on issues of press-freedom, the alleged Turkish support of the terroristic

organization ISIS, and their handling of Syrian border town Afrin. Nevertheless, both NATO

members hold economic ties that both do not want to undermine. The bilateral relations had

many difficulties in regards to President Erdogan's policies domestically, towards press-freedom,

and German citizens.[148] In a statement addressing the diplomatic issues with Turkey regarding

the detainment of 22 German citizens for terrorism accusations, Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel

underlines the issue of Turkey's policies regarding press-freedom and the unrightfully

detainment of German journalists.[149] Nevertheless, Gabriel still emphasized the importance of

friendly bilateral relations, also in security aspects as NATO partners, returning back to friendly

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[146] Alexandra Hudson, "German cabinet approves training mission to Iraq," *Reuters*, December 17, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-germany-mission/german-cabinet-approves-training-mission-to-iraq-idUSKBN0JV16S20141217.
[147] Spencer Kimball, "German weapons deliveries to Iraq's Kurdish region," *Deutsche Welle*, September 1, 2014, https://www.dw.com/en/german-weapons-deliveries-to-iraqs-kurdish-region/a-17892161.
[148] *Süddeutsche Zeitung, "*Deutschland und die Türkei - Chronik eines Zerwürfnisses," July 24, 2017, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/aussenpolitik-deutschland-und-die-tuerkei-chronik-eines-zerwuerfnisses-1.3597933.
[149] Sigmar Gabriel, "Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on the situation in Turkey," news release, July 20, 2017, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/170720-bm-pressestatement-tur/291480.

tones, as they have political and economic ties, not to mention the own Turkish population in Germany.[150]

The nuclear non-proliferation deal established in 2015 with other European states and the United States underline German-Iranian relations in 2017. German and Iran's relationship developed good since Germany plays a mediator role for Iran, as German President Steinmeier played a major role for the nuclear deal back in 2015, even when American President Trump started denouncing it in 2017 due to the lifting of sanctions for Iran.[151] Furthermore, in an interview with a German newspaper, Foreign Minister Gabriel defended Iran and stated the importance of the U.S. remaining in the nuclear agreement, as they worked a long route for the establishment of it, even though the U.S. withdrew in 2018.[152]

Strategically, Germany does not support the Bashar Assad regime and their actions regarding the domestic population. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel addressed the issue of the Syrian regime to use chemical weapons on multiple occasions, specifically on the six years anniversary of the conflict in Syria.[153] After new reports of alleged chemical weapons, Gabriel emphasized condoning these atrocities and wanting Assad's regime to resign.[154] German Chancellor Angela Merkel underlined these positions, stating that US air strikes against the regime are understandable if Syria's regime uses chemical weapons against its own people.[155]

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[150] Ibid.

[151] Jefferson Chase, "Iran nuclear deal: Germany's special role and plans," *Deutsche Welle*, May 8, 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/iran-nuclear-deal-germanys-special-role-and-plans/a-43701214.

[152] Sigmar Gabriel, "Atomvertrag: „Die Rechtstreue ist ein wichtiger Punkt in der Außenpolitik"," *Das Handelsblatt*, October 27, 2017, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/171020-bm-handelsblatt/605556.

[153] Sigmar Gabriel, "Foreign Minister Gabriel on six years of conflict in Syria," news release, March 14, 2017, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170314-bm-syrien/288528.

[154] Sigmar Gabriel, "Foreign Minister Gabriel: the gas attack in Syria is a barbaric war crime – Germany is doing everything it can to help people in Syria," news release, April 5, 2017, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170405-bm-syrien/289086.

[155] Die Bundesregierung, ""Assad trägt alleinige Verantwortung"," Die Bundesregierung, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/-assad-traegt-alleinige-verantwortung--265278.

Gabriel emphasized the need for democratic processes and regime change in Syria.[156] Germany

is a supporter of the opposition forces in Syria, and wishes their involvement in the restructuring

of future Syria.[157] Conclusively, Germany is not supportive of the Assad regime and holds no

strategic interest in keeping the regime intact in 2017. Consecutively, and as emphasized through

supporting rebel groups in Syria, Germany is positive towards regime change in regards to this

regional actor.

Germany had a modest involvement in the surrounding region, which underlines its

strategic interests in 2017. Even though facing diplomatic issues with Turkey, and denouncing

the Assad regime in Syria, German foreign policy and strategic interests underline its support of

the status-quo in 2017. Even though Iran's destabilizing practices are condoned in the region,

Germany still regards the JCPOA as an essential tool for combating nuclear proliferation and

rekindling with Iran in the international arena, even when US disapproves the deal. Strategically,

revising the power positions in the region is not beneficial to Germany's standing. Furthermore,

Germany's support for the status-quo may involve its alliance dependence on the U.S. resulting

in adopting the same position to halt future American abandonment.

5.1.3 Alliance dependence

The question of German alliance dependence resolves around the issue of its dependence

on NATO security, which is largely financed by the United States.[158] How dependent is

Germany on NATO and the possible threat of future Russian aggression towards Europe?[159] This

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[156] Gabriel, "Foreign Minister Gabriel: the gas attack in Syria is a barbaric war crime – Germany is doing everything it can to help people in Syria"

[157] Sigmar Gabriel, "Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel on the Syria negotiations: no breakthrough, but minimum objective reached," news release, March 3, 2017, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/170303-bm-syrien/288286.

[158] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)," *Report*, June 29, 2017, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_06/20170629_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf, 7.

[159] Michael Mandelbaum, "Pay Up, Europe: What Trump Gets Right About NATO," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (2017): 108.

matter was of public debate, after President Donald Trump stated, that European countries, one

of them Germany, have to contribute more to NATO, by raising the defense spending to two

percent of the annual GDP.[160] As underlined by Mandelbaum, "that target is an arbitrary one, and

achieving it would not by itself maximize the alliance's military power."[161] Mandelbaum's

notions imply that military expenditure of NATO states emphasize alliance dependence, not the

sole military expenditure through members' GDP percentage.[162] In this perspective, Germany

spends $42875 million on defense in 2017, according to NATO estimates, while US spends

$683414 million on defense in 2017, which is approximately 72% of NATO's total.[163] Through

this implication, it would suggest that Germany is not ready to completely provide security in

times of possible Russian aggression towards Europe yet, without the involvement of NATO and

its biggest donor United States, reiterating that Germany is backing US strategic interests in

order to prevent defense abandonment in the future.

5.1.4 Conclusion
        Germany does not view Iraq or the Kurds as a threat to underline the balancing of threat

notion as an explanation for the disapproval of the Kurdish referendum. Furthermore, Germany

supports the status-quo in the surrounding region, as implied by their mediator role in regards to

Iran and ties to Turkey in times of diplomatic issues. Germany's dependence on US security as

part of NATO emphasizes its regional aims of supporting the status-quo in 2017. Hence, alliance

dependence of Germany underlines the notion to take a similar stance towards the Kurdish

referendum in 2017 as the alliance leader, United States, who wants to uphold the status-quo.

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[160] Mandelbaum, "Pay Up, Europe", 112
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.
[163] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)," 7.

5.2 United Kingdom

In a statement by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, the United Kingdom emphasized that it does not support the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum in September 2017.[164] The threat-perception of both Iraq and Kurds, and Britain's regional aims and alliance dependence underline its disapproval in the following.

5.2.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

The Government of the United Kingdom strongly supports the Iraqi government and their fight against ISIS as a partner of the *Global Coalition against Daesh*, wishing for further cooperation. [165] The former hostile relations in times of the American invasion in Iraq 2003 have halted. Britain did commit to support the fight against ISIS, as further supported through military training and air strikes.[166] In a 2017 visit of Premier Minister Theresa May to meet Iraqi Premier Minister Haider al-Abadi, both recommitted mutual relations.[167] Britain also underlined the need of further economic cooperation and friendship as outlined by the Memorandum of Understanding.[168] Consequently, even though Britain had hostile relations to Iraq in the past, the imminent terrorist threat of ISIS brought both parties close together. Hence, the bilateral relations of both states underline the low threat-perception of Iraq, furthermore emphasized through its relative low capabilities, low ethnic threat and distant geographical position.

A government response to the House of Commons in regards to Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office's position towards the Kurds underlines Britain's position threat-

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[164] Boris Johnson, "Foreign Secretary statement on Kurdish/Iraq tensions," news release, October 31, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-kurdishiraq-tensions.

[165] Government of the United Kingdom, Iraq and the UK, https://www.gov.uk/world/iraq/news.

[166] Foreign & Commonwealth Office, "UK steps up commitment to countering Daesh," news release, September 1, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-steps-up-commitment-to-countering-daesh--2.

[167] Ahmed Aboulenein, "British PM May meets Iraqi PM Abadi in Baghdad," *Reuters*, November 29, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-britain/british-pm-may-meets-iraqi-pm-abadi-in-baghdad-idUSKBN1DT1T6.

[168] Foreign & Commonwealth Office, "UK and Iraq signed a historic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)." news release, April 4, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-iraq-signed-a-historic-memorandum-of-understanding-mou.

perception of the Kurds.[169] Here Britain outlines its support for the Kurdish Regional

Government in their efforts in regards to Daesh (ISIS), but wishes a strong KRG within the

realm of Iraq's borders.[170] Furthermore, Britain supports the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) in

Syria as part of the Global Coalition against Daesh, which the Syrian Kurdish militia YPG is part

of, but underlines that breaches of borders are not in the interest of Britain and can result in

retaliation through the Turkish government.[171] Consecutively, Britain does not have an imminent

direct threat-perception of the Kurds, neither through their offensive intentions, nor through their

possible ethnic threat, as the geographical distance diminishes this issue.

Conclusively, Britain holds a low threat-perception of Iraq and the Kurds. Hence, the

threat-perception regarding both actors is not decisive in understanding British disapproval of the

Kurdish referendum in 2017.

5.2.2 Regional aims of the U.K. in 2017

The changing positive and negative dynamics between condemning Iran's behavior in the

Persian Gulf, specifically Yemen, and diverting from United States' position regarding the Iran

nuclear deal, supporting the effort of the JCPOA, underlines Britain's relations with Iran in 2017.

In July 2017, Boris Johnson underlined the importance of the Iran nuclear deal at its second year

anniversary.[172] American President Trump's strategy to get out of the Iran nuclear deal differed

from Britain's position, who wished to continue commitment despite the U.S. negative stance

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[169] House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, "Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK: Government response to the Committee's Third Report: Sixth Special Report of Session 2017–19" (2018), https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/983/983.pdf, 1–10.

[170] House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, "Kurdish aspirations and the interests of the UK: Government response to the Committee's Third Report," 1–10.

[171] Ibid, 6.

[172] Boris Johnson, "Foreign Secretary statement on second anniversary of Iran nuclear deal," news release, July 14, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-second-anniversary-of-iran-nuclear-deal.

towards the JCPOA.[173] Nevertheless, Britain also condemned Iran's involvement in Yemen, which in their perspective stirred up the regional security.[174] Hence, Britain understands the issue of Iran's expansionist policies, and regards Iran with caution. Considering Iran and strategic interest in weakening its regional influence, it does not make sense to do it through the support of Kurdish independence, as there is Iraq, the Gulf-Council-Cooperation countries allied with Britain, as well as Turkey, who all are not adversaries to Britain.

Britain's relations with Turkey are friendly as outlined through visits of Theresa May, as well as bilateral trade and strategic relations between both countries. In a strategic outlook, Turkey is still an important NATO ally, who is essential to fight regional terrorism.[175] In a meeting between Theresa May and Turkish President Erdogan in January 2017, she underlined the strategic importance of Turkey in combating terrorism.[176] In a further meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Yildirm, May reiterated this, underlining their mutual friendship.[177] Even the issue of recognizing Jerusalem by American President Donald Trump in 2017, enfeebled through Theresa May, implied Britain's wish to appease Turkey.[178] In Turkey's fight against the PKK, Britain also sides with Turkey.[179] Additionally, Turkey is an important economic partner in the

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[173] Boris Johnson, "Foreign Secretary statement on Iran nuclear deal," news release, October 11, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-iran-nuclear-deal.

[174] Alistair Burt, "Minister for the Middle East statement on Iranian involvement in Yemen," news release, November 9, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-for-the-middle-east-statement-on-iranian-involvement-in-yemen.

[175] House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, "The UK's relations with Turkey: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2016–17: Second Special Report of Session 2017–19" (2017), https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/333/333.pdf, 4.

[176] Theresa May, "PM meeting with President Erdogan: 28 January 2017" (Speech, January 28, 2017), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-following-talks-with-president-erdogan-28-january-2017.

[177] U.K. Prime Minister's Office, "PM meeting with Prime Minister Yildirim: 27 November 2017," news release, November 27, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-prime-minister-yildirim-27-november-2017.

[178] U.K. Prime Minister's Office, "PM call with President Erdogan of Turkey: 18 December 2017," news release, December 18, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-call-with-president-erdogan-of-turkey-18-december-2017.

[179] House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, "The UK's relations with Turkey: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2016–17," 8.

region,[180] especially considering its economic future due to the Brexit referendum. According to British government sources "the value of UK goods exports to Turkey in 2016 was $6.2bn and the value of Turkish good imports goods into the UK in 2016 was $12.2bn, making the UK one of Turkey's main trading partners."[181] Conclusively, British-Turkish relations in 2017 are of friendly and strategic nature, underlining that it is not in British interest to support an independent Kurdistan. Consecutively, Britain's policies regarding Turkey underline that Britain has strategic interest to disapprove the Kurdish referendum in 2017.

Britain emphasized its disapproval for the initial alleged chemical weapons' use of the Syrian regime against its own population throughout 2017. Initially in February 2017, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson condemned the Syrian regime's chemical weapon use after Russia and China vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution.[182] Minister for the Middle-East Tobias Ellwood underlined Johnson's notion.[183] The support of EU sanctions against the regime in March 2017 emphasizes Britain's negative perspective of the Syrian regime.[184]

Conclusively, strategically Britain would support a change in Syrian regime and possibly the division of Syria. However, strategically supporting the Iraqi-Kurdistan independence referendum of 2017 is not rational to further Britain's standing. Turkey's alliance with Britain and Iraq's stability importance to combat terrorism prevents Britain from supporting an independent Kurdistan. Hence, the support for the status-quo is reasonable for Britain

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[180] Center for International Development at Harvard University, "The Atlas of Economic Complexity,", http://www.atlas.cid.harvard.edu.
[181] House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, "The UK's relations with Turkey: Government Response to the Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2016–17," 3.
[182] Boris Johnson, "Foreign Secretary responds to UNSC vote on chemical weapons use in Syria," news release, February 28, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-responds-to-unsc-vote-on-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria.
[183] Tobias Ellwood, "Minister condemns war crimes committed during battle of Aleppo," news release, March 1, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-condemns-war-crimes-committed-during-battle-of-aleppo.
[184] Tobias Ellwood, "Minister for the Middle East statement on Syria sanctions," news release, March 20, 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-for-the-middle-east-statement-on-syria-sanctions.

considering their strategic interests. Britain's alliance dependence on the U.S furthers its support

for the status-quo.

5.2.3 Alliance dependency of United Kingdom

As outlined by Mandelbaum, the biggest threat Europe faces in recent years is Russian

aggression following the invasion of Ukraine 2014.[185] The consecutive NATO Wales Summit in

2014 urged members to start raising their military expenditure to 2% of their GDP in the

following years to recommit to NATO.[186] In 2017, Donald Trump criticized NATO members,

specifically Europe, to take word on the commitment; hence, this issue underlines the alliance

dependence notion.[187] According to Mandelbaum, the commitment to raise military expenditure

to 2% of the GDP "is [...] arbitrary […], and achieving it would not by itself maximize the

alliance's military power [but] […] would send a signal […] that Europe was taking its own

defense seriously."[188] The imminent threat of future Russian aggression in Europe binds

European states to the United States.[189] A recent NATO report on defense expenditure of

members, underlines this notion for Britain.[190] Britain spends $54,863 million on defense in

2017, while US spends $683,414 million on defense in 2017, which is approximately 72%

of NATO's total.[191] Britain, just as the other two involved European actors of this case study,

France and Germany, are alliance dependent due to the possible future threat of Russian

aggression. The alliance dependence notion complements the strategic interests of Britain in

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[185] Mandelbaum, "Pay Up, Europe", 108.
[186] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Wales Summit Declaration: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales," news release, September 5, 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.
[187] *BBC, "*Donald Trump tells Nato allies to pay up at Brussels talks," May 25, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40037776.
[188] Mandelbaum, "Pay Up, Europe", 112.
[189] Ibid.
[190] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)," 7.
[191] Ibid.

2017 and supports the idea that states who are alliance dependent would follow their alliance leader when they fear abandonment. It means that if the United States follows the strategic interest of supporting the status-quo in the surrounding region of Iraq, it follows that alliance dependent members, who face a possible future threat, which they would not be able to handle on their own, follow the US stance on the regional status-quo.

5.2.4 Conclusion

Britain's disapproval of the Kurdish referendum in 2017 is the result of two major factors of geostrategic interests. Britain is a major ally of the United States, who wishes to halt Iranian's revisionism of the region and influence in Syria and Iraq. Hence, Britain follows the United States, because it is alliance dependent in European security means, highlighted through military expenditure. Britain itself wishes to sustain the status-quo, because of its strategic interests in Turkey and Iraq. The wish to halt terrorism is important to Britain's own survival as it had issues with terrorism in the past. Furthermore, the Iraqi-Kurds do not pose a direct threat to Britain, but the PKK and Syrian Kurdish rebels threaten Turkey, which is not in the interest of Britain, as it is not an adversary state. Strategically, approving the Kurdish referendum of 2017 would have resulted in chaos, as Britain has friendly strategic relations with Iraq and Turkey. The threat-perception Britain had of both Iraq and Kurds were low, resulting in no decisive explanation for this Middle Power's disapproval through the notion of balancing threats. Conclusively, it is suggested that both alliance dependence and Britain's regional aims in 2017 underline why Britain's geostrategic interests disapproved the Kurdish referendum, with a stronger weight of Britain's alliance dependence on the United States.

5.3 France

France had a negative view on the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum 2017 already a month prior

to it.[192] The following outlines France's view of Iraq and the Kurds, its regional aims in 2017,

and its alliance dependence to understand the decision to disapprove the referendum.

5.3.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

Since the Iraq War 2003, France established good economic and political relations with

Iraq. One example is the release of former debts of "about €4,8 billion […] between 2005 and

2008."[193] Nevertheless, there was a substantial decline in trade the years 2015 to 2016 from

"€476 million in 2016 versus €1.26 billion in 2015, a drop of 61%."[194] This underlines that,

while Iraq is not a threat, it also does not hold extensive economic relevance for France, as Iraq

is only the "seventh-largest partner in the Middle-East."[195] However, "diplomatic, military and

humanitarian support to the […] Iraqi authorities in implementing a policy of national

reconciliation and in the fight against Daesh"[196] underline France's positive relations to Iraq and

its low threat-perception. Furthermore, several mutual diplomatic visits in 2016 and 2017

underline the political cooperation of both countries.[197] On the request of the Iraqi government in

2014, France even launched the *Operation Chammal,* to support the Iraqi military in their fight

against ISIS, mostly "through significant air support."[198] In conclusion, France does not view

Iraq as a direct threat, due to the lack of Iraqi offensive intentions, distant geographical position,

weak relative capabilities, and non-existent ethnic threat towards France.

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[192] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "Iraq - Q&A - Excerpts from the daily press briefing (28 August 2017)," news release, August 28, 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iraq/events/article/iraq-q-a-excerpts-from-the-daily-press-briefing-28-08-17.

[193] French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, France and Iraq, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iraq/france-and-iraq/.

[194]French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, France and Iraq.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Ibid.

[198] French Ministry of the Armed Forces, Back on the operation Chammal, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/actualites/newsletter/back-on-the-operation-chammal.

In the same regard, the Iraqi-Kurds are not a threat, as France aided the Kurdish military Peshmerga in the fight against ISIS, through military shipments, from 2014 to 2016.[199] [200] Just as with the Iraqi government, France and the Kurdish Regional Government had mutual diplomatic visits to underline their friendly relations and discuss regional engagement regarding ISIS.[201] The Kurds do not pose a direct threat to France neither through offensive intentions or ethnically, furthermore outlined through their distant geographical position.

Conclusively, France does not regard Iraq and Iraqi-Kurdistan as a threat, outlined by cooperation on the threat of ISIS and economic ties. Hence, the balancing-of-threat proposition to understand France's disapproval of the Kurdish referendum in 2017 is not decisive.

5.3.2 Regional aims of France 2017

The French Foreign ministry underlined the importance of relieving Iran's sanctions to advance economic relations between both countries in 2014.[202] Consecutively, the Iranian nuclear agreement furthered relations between both countries, where France, as part of the European parties in the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* of 2015, underlined relieving sanctions is essential for a relaxation of Western-Iranian relations. Even after the United States threatened renewed sanctions after its withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2017, France underlined the importance of the JCPOA.[203] France furthered their business ties with Iran, despite Donald

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[199] *Al-Jazeera, "*France to send arms to Iraqi Kurds," August 14, 2014, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/france-supply-weapons-iraqi-kurdistan-2014813143856260983.html.

[200] Mewan Dolamari, "Peshmerga to receive weapons from France," *Kurdistan 24*, April 13, 2016, http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8a7efc5f-084e-413b-ba00-c4231b560f81/peshmerga-to-receive-weapons-from-france.

[201] French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France and Iraq"

[202] French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France and Iran," https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/france-and-iran/.

[203] Julian Borger, "France tells Trump that quitting Iran nuclear deal risks 'spiral of proliferation'," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/18/france-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-jean-yves-le-drian.

Trump's threats of sanctions.[204] Even French gas company Total wanted to invest in Iran in

2017, [205] underlining the wish of positive economic and strategic relations. Furthermore, Minister

of Foreign Affairs Jean-Marc Ayrault visited Iran companied with "delegation of around 60

French firms, some of which will sign agreements with their Iranian partners."[206] Outside of

economic relations, France condemned Iran's alleged use of chemical weapons on multiple

occasions "[…] [calling] on Iran to put an end to all destabilizing activity in the region [...]."[207]

Despite US-Iran animosity, France underlined, specifically after the re-election of Rouhani that

Iran has to be involved in stabilizing the region.[208] Conclusively, France emphasizes the

importance of a reduction of Iran's destabilizing activities in the region, but also holds bilateral

economic interests with Iran and is a supporter of the Iranian nuclear deal. In regards to the Iraqi-

Kurds, it is not in the strategic interest of France to support the independence referendum of

2017.

In regards to Turkey, some issues in the domestic handling of journalists and even the

imprisonment of French journalists[209] have preceded French-Turkish relations in 2017.

Nevertheless, Macron underlines the importance of Turkey as an important partner in regards to

[204] John Irish and Parisa Hafezi, "France pushing Iran business ties despite nuclear deal 'limbo'," February 8, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-economy/france-pushing-iran-business-ties-despite-nuclear-deal-limbo-idUSKBN1FS1FP.

[205] John Irish and Sudip Kar-Gupta, "France's Total to quit Iran gas project if no sanctions waiver," *Reuters*, May 16, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-france-total/frances-total-to-quit-iran-gas-project-if-no-sanctions-waiver-idUSKCN1IH1XK.

[206] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "Iran – Visit by Jean-Marc Ayrault to Iran (January 30-31, 2017)," news release, January 30, 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/events/article/iran-visit-by-jean-marc-ayrault-to-iran-30-31-01-17#.

[207] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "Iran – Launch of a ballistic missile – Reminder of the statement by the spokesperson (23.09.17)," news release, September 23, 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/events/article/iran-launch-of-a-ballistic-missile-reminder-of-the-statement-by-the.

[208] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "Iran - Q&A - Excerpts from the daily press briefing (07 June 2017)," news release, June 7, 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/events/article/iran-q-a-excerpts-from-the-daily-press-briefing-07-06-17.

[209] John Irish, "France's Macron urges continued EU ties with Turkey," *Reuters*, September 7, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-turkey/frances-macron-urges-continued-eu-ties-with-turkey-idUSKCN1BI0SQ.

immigration issues and terrorism threats.[210] In economic terms, France and Turkey bilateral trade rose almost 2% in 2016 compared with 2015.[211] Recent data from *the Atlas of Economic Complexity* [212] displays that 2016 Turkey is their biggest economic partner in the Middle East of the Asian continent. The major discontent on Turkey's domestic affairs is overshadowed by France's will to retain the economic and security cooperation, underlining Turkey still as an important partner, even after strained relations. Consecutively, France would not support the Iraqi-Kurds bid for independence in 2017, as Turkey is a strategic partner in economic, security and strategic terms.

France's position towards the Syrian Civil War is to "fight terrorism [...] protecting civilian populations [...], fighting impunity for all war crimes [....] [and] a negotiated political solution [...]."[213] In regards to Syria's regime, France still condones Assad's suspected use of chemical weapons against its own population.[214] Political transition for Syria emphasizes France's position that it does not want the regime to stay.[215] Since 2011 France supports moderate Syrian oppositional forces in the Global Coalition against Daesh.[216] Hence, in terms of Syria, France would support a federal outcome in the future, possibly furthering Kurdish autonomy.

Conclusively, France is supporting of regime change in Syria including the Kurdish

[210] Irish, "France's Macron urges continued EU ties with Turkey"

[211] French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France and Turkey," https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/turkey/france-and-turkey/.

[212] Center for International Development at Harvard University, "The Atlas of Economic Complexity"

[213] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "War in Syria: Understanding France's position," https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/war-in-syria-understanding-france-s-position/.

[214] Lauren Smith-Spark, "France 'has proof' Assad regime was behind Syria chemical weapon attack," *CNN*, April 26, 2017, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/26/europe/france-syria-chemical-weapons/index.html.

[215] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "Syria - Situation on the ground (March 16, 2017)," news release, March 16, 2017, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/events/article/syria-situation-on-the-ground-16-03-17.

[216] French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, "War in Syria: Understanding France's position"

population in Northern Syria. For France it is crucial to fight terrorism considering the domestic terrorist attacks it faced. Hence, regional instability is not strategically coherent for France's fight against global terrorism, but a political transition involving all the oppositional forces to support this fight. Nevertheless, in regards to the Iraqi-Kurdish bid for independence this is not strategically decisive for France. Supporting Iraqi-Kurdish independence is not furthering the fight against terrorism and possibly spark more hostilities towards France, resulting in further terroristic hostilities against its support for a Kurdish state. Additionally, Turkey, Iran and Iraq, are in positive standing to France, even after strained relations. Furthermore, this can be emphasized through France's dependence on United States as a strong ally to halt possible future hostilities of Russia.

5.3.3 Alliance dependency of France

As outlined by Tiersky, "[Macron] as an Atlanticist,[…] is fully committed to NATO and knows that the United States is France's and Europe's natural ally."[217] From France's perspective, it has a keen interest in fighting terrorism as it had issues with it domestically. Hence, NATO allies provide assistance underlined by their involvement in the Global Coalition against Daesh to fight terrorism established by United States.[218] As outlined by Mandelbaum, "In recent years, Europe has become a dangerous place […] [due] to […] [Russian] aggression abroad, invading Ukraine."[219] This brings the US to the forefront of saving European security for possible future aggression from Russia.[220] France's involvement is thus also underlined through its security dependence on the U.S., as the U.S. spends $683414 million on defense in 2017,

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[217] Ronald Tiersky, "Macron's World: How the New President Is Remaking France," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 1 (2018).
[218] French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France's role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)," https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/defence-security/france-and-nato/.
[219] Mandelbaum, "Pay Up, Europe," 108.
[220] Ibid.

which is approximately 72% of NATO's total.[221] In contrast, France spends $44,333 million on defense in 2017, according to NATO estimates.[222] Conclusively, if the US has a keen strategic interest in keeping the status-quo in the region surrounding the Kurds, it implies that France will take a similar stance to avoid future abandonment of the US. Hence, alliance dependence may additionally explain the decision of France to disapprove the Kurdish referendum.

5.3.4 Conclusion

The reasoning towards the disapproval cannot be found in the threat-perception of both Iraq and Kurds, as both have good relations with France, as outlined through political and economic ties, as well as their strategic importance in the fight against ISIS, which is a major threat considering France's own struggle with terrorism.[223] In the regional context, France also holds positive relations with two of the three surrounding actors that have Kurdish minorities, Turkey and Iran. However, France condemns Syria's regime and wished Assad to resign, until Emmanuel Macron's election stated that the issue of a consecutive Syrian president was not on the highest agenda.[224] Strategically, there is no good explanation of supporting the Kurdish referendum in 2017 in order to change the relative power positions in the region for France's advancement. Hence, the regional aims of France in 2017 is valued as supporting the status-quo. France's alliance dependence on the United States in security means, may further explain the disapproval of the Kurdish referendum, as France is reliant on the U.S. as a strong NATO partner, for possible future conflict. As a dependent NATO partner, France will follow American strategic interests to lessen possible future abandonment. If US regards the sovereignty of Iraq as

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[221] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017)," 7.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Robin Simcox, "France's Perpetual Battle Against Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/france/2015-11-17/frances-perpetual-battle-against-terrorism.
[224] John Irish, "France sees Syria opportunity through closer dialogue with Russia," *Reuters*, June 29, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-france-idUSKBN19K16U.

necessary due to its strategic goals, then France follows suit. Hence, just as Germany and the United Kingdom, France's decision on disapproving the Kurdish referendum is a mix of its regional aims in 2017 and its security dependence on US, where its dependence had possibly more weight to its decision.

Chapter 6: Regional Actors: Iran, Turkey & Syria

6.1 Iran

In a joint statement with Turkish President Erdogan, the Iranian President Rohani strongly opposed the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum for independence.[225] Iran's threat-perception of Iraq and the Kurds, above regional aims in 2017 and possible alliance dependence to Russia, hint at the underlying reasons behind the disapproval of the Kurdish referendum. The following outlines these notions.

6.1.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

Iran holds strong relations with the majority Shiite regime of Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein and American invasion in 2003. The Iranian government followed "two complementary objectives: drive the United States out and prevent the formation of a new anti-Iranian Iraq."[226]In the south, the Shiite Islamists who fought against the Baath regime, with support from Iran, established cultural values banned under Saddam[227] Iraqi foreign minister describes the role of Iran in Iraq as the following:

> "The Iranians have a longstanding relationship with a lot of political forces in Iraq. They
>
> helped the opposition [to Saddam] materially and militarily. So they have a lot of

[225] Hassan Rouhani, "Iran, Turkey Presidents issue joint statement," news release, October 4, 2017, http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=1997&newsview=478116.
[226] Ray Takeyh and Reuel M. Gerecht, "Iran's ISIS Trap," *Foreign Affairs*, 2015, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-11-15/irans-isis-trap.
[227] Ali Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces," *Foreign Affairs*, no. 6 (2015): 35.

influence on opposition leaders. The other thing is we have cultural influence... bilateral cultural influence. This is a symbiotic relationship between Iraq and Iran. They are interdependent."[228]

The Iraqi-Kurdish autonomy legitimized through in Iraqi constitution of 2005 after the American invasion of 2003 underlines Iran's threat-perception regarding the Kurds. It "became an important point of reference for all Kurds, boosting Kurdish self-confidence beyond the borders of Iraq."[229] Even though the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) relies on Iranian help in military support, the gain through the 2005 constitution allowed the Iraqi-Kurds to hold one of the oil-richest reserves in the Middle East. For Iran, this means Iraqi-Kurdistan is able to use their soft power externally in the region and internationally with Western powers.[230] Furthermore, the KRG does promote *kurdayeti*, which is essentially Kurdish nationalism, potentially able to spillover borders to the Iranian-Kurds.[231] While the KRG is a political partner, and does not hold extensive offensive intentions against Iran, the ethnic threat they portray considering their own Kurds, is immense. Kurdish ideology and cultural activities, further the spillover effect even more, such as "art to promote pan-Kurdish propaganda, and their concerts [which] [...] are widely covered and broadcast to Iran."[232] The soft-power possibilities, whether intentional or not, result in a high ethnic threat-perception for the Iranians, that wish their Kurdish population to stay in the confines as "fellow Aryans and Muslim brothers."[233]

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[228] Tanya Goudsouzian, ""Look at the map": the US, Iraq and Iran," *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 21, 2019, https://mondediplo.com/outsidein/look-at-the-map-the-us-iraq-and-iran.
[229] Walter Posch, "Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers: Iranian Narratives on the Kurds," in *The Kurdish Question Revisited,* ed. Gareth Stanfield and Mohammed Shareef, 346.
[230] Walter Posch, "Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers: Iranian Narratives on the Kurds," 344-47.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid, 347.
[233] Ibid, 344-347.

6.1.2 Regional aims of Iran in 2017

Iran's regional aims in 2017 are two-fold. The strong backing of Syria by Iran and its military is a resemblance of Iran's goal to sustain the Assad-regime, as it is also a stronghold against possible aggression of Sunni Arab countries and Israel. Iran wants to keep the Shiite Alawite regime of Assad. Turkey, on the other hand, has a rivalry with Iran, due to their regional influence, resulting in a "frenemy"[234] relationship, which developed more friendly after the threat of an Iraqi-Kurdish referendum in 2017. Consecutively, that means Iran holds limited revisionist aims in the Persian Gulf, as it wishes to exert more influence in Syria, Iraq and the region.

Syria holds immense strategic importance for Iran, because of the Assad dynasty's hold of the government and Syria's geographical importance to resist against American, Israeli, and Sunni Arab nations, and their aspirations in the region.[235] Through these strategic means alone, Syria is an important ally. It underlines that Iran wishes to extend its influence in the country through their backed militia and military arms, religious ties, and strategic importance.[236] Iran persists on Syria being a neo-protectorate, even though there were domestic disputes on the form of future Syria.[237] While moderates like the Rohani government saw a positive outcome from the de-escalation zone agreement established in Astana in 2017, the Principalists and hardliners like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps still want to secure the Assad regime and further the idea of a neo-protectorate.[238] For Iran, it is thus important to have a Shiite ally in this geographical position underlining Iran's revisionist position in 2017 in the regional setting.[239]

The Iranian-Turkish relationship since 2015 was underlined through rivalry, especially

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[234] Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement*, 205.
[235] Ibid, 141–45.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Ibid, 149–50.
[238] Ibid, 154–57.
[239] Ibid.

considering the backing of different religious militias, where Turkey sees itself as the protector

of Sunnis in the region, while Iran wants to consolidate and extend its influence through Shiite

militias and governments.[240] This "frenemy relationship"[241] as called by Rezaei, found mutual

ground especially in regards to the Kurdish aspirations in Syria and Iraq, where they both saw

the Kurdish aspirations as a threat to their own territory and security, underlined furthermore

through the Iraqi-Kurdistan independence referendum in September 2017. The year 2017

brought both players back into some mutual strategic understanding in the Astana de-escalation

zones agreement in May 2017, where both players held different protectorates of Syrian

regions.[242]

6.1.3 Alliance dependency of Iran

Russian-Iranian relations are strong. Their partnership holds strong due to two reasons.

One is that Iranian-Russian alliance does not rely on a change of Iranian expansionist policies,

which are widely wished by Western states.[243] Secondly, due to sanctions imposed on both states

since 2014, and Russia's incursion in Ukraine, it makes sense for both states to strengthen their

relations, especially in the economic sphere.[244] Those deals found in the energy, infrastructural,

and security sector, imply that Iran regards Russia as an important ally, even though there is a

wish to normalize its relations with the West.[245] Since Russia got involved in the Syrian Civil

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[240] Ibid, 202–8.
[241] Ibid, 207.
[242] *Al-Jazeera, "*Final de-escalation zones agreed on in Astana," September 15, 2017,
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/final-de-escalation-zones-agreed-astana-170915102811730.html.
[243] Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement*, 53–62.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid.

War in 2015, it supported, as Rezaei calls it, the "binary option."[246] The binary option is the goal

of both Iran and Russia to keep Assad in regime and attack his opposition forces, under the light

of halting ISIS. The Russian involvement served a victorious result for Iran who supports Assad.

Through meetings in Astana, de-escalation zones were established between Turkey, Iran and

Russia for the post-ISIS era. [247] Even with Trumps election, Russian-Iranian relations did not

lessen, which the Astana agreement in May 2017, without the involvement of the United States,

underlines. Rezaei calls it the prospect of a "condominium"[248] in Syria, underlining both actors'

will to revise the status-quo in the region to maintain their spheres of influence.[249] Hence, Iran is

dependent on the alliance to Russia to further their goal of expanding its power position within

the region. Even though Iran is dependent on Russia as a strong ally, it does not explain how this

resulted in disapproval of the Kurdish referendum in 2017. The decision to disapprove the

referendum lies within the threat-perception of the Iraqi-Kurds, which outweighs Iran's

dependence on Russia in the strategic sphere as the decisive factor.

6.1.4 Conclusion
      Two major factors explain Iran's decision to disapprove the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum.

Firstly, the ethnic threat the Iraqi-Kurds display in regards to the own Iranian Kurdish population

explains the rational underlying ethnic factor in explaining disapproval. This paired with the low

threat-perception of Iraq and the importance of Iraq for furthering Iranian influence, made it

impossible for Iran to support the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum. Additionally, Iran's regional aims

of limited revisionism, as it wants to exert more influence in the region to oppose the Sunni Arab

regimes, Israel, and Western influence, by strong Shiite regimes and backed Shiite militias in

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[246] Ibid, 68.
[247] Ibid, 65–70.
[248] Ibid, 71.
[249] Ibid, 70–73.

Iraq and Syria, underline why the Kurds independence bid would strategically lessen Iran's influence. Approving the Kurdish referendum would weaken two of their allied nations, and weaken their strategic standing. Nevertheless, as implied in the first two chapters, revisionist stances towards the regional setting would imply a support for the secession movement as it would rearrange the power positions within the region. Hence, Iran's regional aims support its disapproval, but the possibility of Kurdish nationalism sparking aspirations in their own Kurdish population is decisive. The threat-perception of the Kurds, in a proximate area and the low threat of Iraq, explains Iran's decision.

6.2 Turkey

Turkey strongly opposed the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum for independence, even emphasizing that there are consequences following the referendum.[250] Turkey's threat-perception of Iraq and the Kurds, more than its regional aims 2017 and possible alliance dependence, imply why Turkey is strongly opposed to the prospect of Iraqi-Kurdish independence.

6.2.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

Turkey's threat perception of Iraq is relatively low, due to their alignment in the position on Kurdish self-determination.[251] However, Iraq' is allied with Iran, as they are backed militarily and through their Shiite ties, underlining Iran's stronghold in Iraq. Nevertheless, Kumral describes their relationship as one of "partial cooperation"[252] underlined by cohesion and sympathy. While there is political differences regarding the Syrian Civil War and alignment,[253] Turkey does not regard Iraq as a threat per-se, because it neither holds offensive intentions

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[250] Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Release Regarding the referendum that is being held in the KRG," news release, September 25, 2017, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-297_-ikby-referandumu-hk_en.en.mfa.
[251] Mehmet Akıf Kumral, *Rethinking Turkey-Iraq Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55193-1, 228.
[252] Kumral, *Rethinking Turkey-Iraq Relations*, 227.
[253] Ibid, 230.

against Turkey, nor facilitates an ethnic threat. In the research of relative capabilities, Iraq furthermore holds a very offensive position. Nevertheless, the economic relations of Turkey and the Kurdish Regional Government would suggest a strategic wish to establish an independent Kurdistan in Iraq, as it would further Turkey's hold of oil reserves in the region.[254] However, this would not explain the disapproval of the Iraqi-Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. Hence, as Kumral rightly underlines, Turkey understands that Iraq is a geopolitical hotspot for different actors,[255] but does not portray a threat itself. Consecutively, Turkey does not perceive Iraq as a direct threat, but its unfortunate geopolitical position and the use of Iraq through Iran and other actors, as a strategic threat. In conclusion, Iraq does not pose offensive intentions or ethnic threats in regards to Turkey.

Cerny's account of the spill-over effect of self-determination aspirations into Turkey and the surrounding states underlines the threat-perception Turkey has in regards to the Kurds:

> "[…] The image of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq [is] […] a beacon of hope, a source of emulation or a model case for, and potential supporter of, Kurdish national self-determination beyond Iraq"[256]

This possibility and the decade-long fight of the Turkish government with its own Kurdish insurgency, the PKK, implies how Turkey views the deed of a possible independent Iraqi-Kurdistan. Nevertheless, Turkey's relations with the Kurdish Regional Government is not one of animosity, as they have bilateral relations, furthermore established through an agreed pipeline in 2013.[257] Furthermore, "by 2012, 70 percent of all trade and investment between […] [Iraq and

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[254] Marina Ottaway and David Ottaway, "How the Kurds Got Their Way," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 144.
[255] Kumral, *Rethinking Turkey-Iraq Relations*, 229.
[256] Hannes Černy, *Iraqi Kurdistan, the PKK and International Relations: Theory and Ethnic Conflict* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 239.
[257] Ottaway and Ottaway, "How the Kurds Got Their Way," 143.

Turkey][…] was concentrated in Kurdistan,"[258] underlining the economic cooperation of the

KRG and Turkey. However, just as the Kurdish Regional Government does not portray a direct

threat, the prospect it gives to other Kurdish minority groups in the surrounding states does

display a threat. President Erdogan emphasized his dismay for the US support of the extended

arm of PKK in Syria, the YPG, stating, "We need to cleanse Afrin of the structure there called

the YPG terrorist organization."[259] The Kurdish rebel forces in Syria, on the Southern border of

Turkey and the domestic PKK are not the only Kurdish threat for Turkey, but also the domestic

political reach of the pro-Kurdish HDP, which "won 102 municipalities in the July 2016

elections, [and] Erdogan has since removed 94 of them from office."[260] In further response,

Erdogan "sought to delegitimize all Kurdish political activity by associating it with the PKK,

arresting large numbers of Kurdish activists and politicians."[261] Hence, the Kurdish threat in

Turkey's perception is imminent, domestically through security and political means, and

externally through security means. As a result, and because the ethnic threat-perception of the

Kurds are extensively high in Turkey's perspective, additionally through the close proximity, the

threat-perception of the Kurds is valued high.

6.2.2 Regional aims of Turkey in 2017

     Turkey's regional aims in 2017 is underlined through its pivot to Russia[262], as well as the

Astana agreement in May 2017, which established de-escalation zones in Syria.[263] Prior to 2017

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[258] Ibid, 144.

[259] *Reuters, "*Erdogan says Turkey must clear Syria's Afrin of YPG militia," November 17, 2017,
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/erdogan-says-turkey-must-clear-syrias-afrin-of-ypg-militia-idUSKBN1DH0ZV.

[260] Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening," 114.

[261] Ibid, 113.

[262] Colin P. Clarke and Ariane M. Tabatabai, "Is Major Realignment Taking Place in the Middle East?," *Foreign Affairs*, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2018-10-31/major-realignment-taking-place-middle-east.

[263] *Al-Jazeera, "*Final de-escalation zones agreed on in Astana".

developments, Turkey's relations with Syria were tense, due to the Assad's regime handling of rebel forces, and Sunni population. In regards to Iran, the same holds true, but an easing evolved after Rouhani came into office in 2013, resulting in Turkey's hope of Iran's reduction of Shia-expansionism.[264] Nevertheless, both regard each other as regional rivals, in the surge for regional hegemony.

Prior to the ease of Turkish-Iranian relations in 2017 as a result of the Astana agreement and the possible Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, both regional actors faced some issues regarding different views on the Syrian Civil War, the Assad regime and Iran's controlled sphere of influence within Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, their economic interdependence seemingly helped to ease their tension, as well as the growing Syrian Kurdish insurgency.[265] As noted by Elik: "Turkish objective in Syria has been the overthrow of the Assad regime by opposition groups, so Ankara has backed the Free Syrian Army since late 2011, while Iran […] [has] supported the Assad regime."[266] As noted previously in the section on Iran, both regimes supported different rebel groups in the region portraying their respective religious ties. Both Iran and Turkey want to further their strategic interests by either keeping Assad in power in Iran's respect, or get him out of office to weaken Iran's Shiite expansion policies and stronghold in Iraq and Syria in Turkey's respect. Nevertheless, "the strong economic ties of Turkey and Iran have prevented their disagreement over Syria from threatening the entire relationship."[267] The ties that hold both actors together is further expressed through Turkey's view on the Iranian nuclear proliferation agreement *Joint Plan of Comprehensive Action* that was initially agreed on in 2013 to ease

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[264] Süleyman Elik, "The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011–2016," in *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East*, ed. Hüseyin Işıksal and Oğuzhan Göksel (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 111.
[265] Elik, "The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011–2016," 105–14.
[266] Ibid, 109.
[267] Ibid.

economic sanctions that were imposed on Iran due to their nuclear program. Turkish Foreign

Minister Davutoglu stated, "[…] easing sanctions will also have a positive impact on Turkey as

well as creating a positive atmosphere to ease tension in the region."[268]

Both Syria and Turkey had a positive revival of previous historical animosity 1998 to

2011, which resurfaced when the Syrian uprisings started in 2011, and Turkey saw the Syrian's

regime acts towards its Sunni population and rebels as massively wrong.[269] As noted by

Hinnebusch, "Erdoğan called on […] Syria to implement far-reaching political reforms rather

than repressing protestors and urged Assad to share power with the Muslim Brothers."[270] Syria

did not support this idea, and the following discourse of the Syrian uprisings resulted in a major

animosity between both states. Foreign Minister Davutoglu even warned Syria of Western

intervention, while Syria stated that it would retaliate with regional war.[271] Turkey saw itself as a

defender of Sunni Islam, only hiding the surge for regional hegemony under the bid of defending

Sunnis.[272] As noted by Hinnebusch, "the Syrian Uprising […] gave way to intense Turkish-

Iranian rivalry over Syria, and moved Ankara into cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the

GCC."[273] This underlines the real intention of Turkey's position towards Assad, as it wished to

deter Iran's sphere of influence in the region, majorly in Syria. Hinnebusch calls Turkey's

policies within Syria, as a form of "neo-ottomanism"[274], where Turkey plays the democratic

Sunni protector for the other majority Sunni Arab regimes to extend its sphere of influence and

strategic interest, as Syria is a main transit country for Turkey to the GCC countries. The Astana

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[268] *Habertürk, "*Turkey expresses support for Iran nuclear deal," November 11, 2013,
https://www.haberturk.com/general/haber/897652-turkey-expresses-support-for-iran-nuclear-deal.
[269] Elik, "The Arab Spring and Turkish-Iranian Relations, 2011–2016," 108–9.
[270] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity: Turkey-Syria Relations Since the Syrian Uprising," *Orient: Journal of German Orient Institute* 56, no. 1 (2015): 14.
[271] Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity," 15.
[272] Ibid, 16.
[273] Ibid, 17.
[274] Ibid, 20–21.

agreement of 2017 relaxed relations. Nevertheless, Turkey regards the border region to Syria as a more immense threat, due to the Kurdish insurgency and the possibility of a Syrian Kurdish state, which it tried to undermine by the Operation Euphrate Shield,[275] as well as through the Idlib operation in 2017.[276]

6.2.3 Alliance dependence of Turkey

How dependent is Turkey on United States to underline the alliance dependence notion for the disapproval of the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum? It seems like Turkey's swift to Russia and Iran underline that Turkey is not bound by US perceptions of power positions in the region. Turkey, who previously was keen on supporting US objectives in Syria and the region, especially as they are NATO partners and Turkey may depend on NATO for future conflict, drifted towards Russia, underlined by the Astana agreement. The strategic hope of lessened American support of the Syrian Kurdish rebels YPG after Trumps election went unfulfilled.[277] As outlined by Vatanka and Tol, "the main driver of Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and Iran is its fear of further Kurdish advances in Syria"[278], underlining the essential Turkish perspective of an Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, which may fire up the Syrian Kurds. Additionally, foreign relations of US and Turkey did face other issues considering the intake of American clerics and the previous Turkish wish of extradition of state enemy Fetullah Gülen.[279] Consecutively, Turkey is not alliance dependent on the United States, as Turkey portrays foreign policy behavior that undermine its relations with the United States. Conclusively, this means that the alliance dependence notion

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[275] Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement*, 202.
[276] *Hürriyet Daily News,* "Turkey announces start of Idlib operation," October 7, 2017, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-announces-start-of-idlib-operation-120494.
[277] Alex Vatanka and Gonul Tol, "Turkey's New Alliances: Why It Is Partnering With Its Former Rivals," *Foreign Affairs*, September 4, 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-09-04/turkeys-new-alliances.
[278] Vatanka and Tol, "Turkey's New Alliances"
[279] Amanda Sloat, "How to Save the U.S.-Turkey Relationship," *Foreign Affairs*, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2018-07-30/how-save-us-turkey-relationship.

does not hold weight in Turkey's decision to disapprove the Iraqi-Kurdish independence referendum.

6.2.4 Conclusion

The high threat-perception of the Kurds as an ethnic threat domestically and externally underline Turkey's disapproval of the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum 2017. Domestically, the armed fight against the PKK destabilizes and threatens inner Turkish security, as well as the political rise of the pro-Kurdish party HDP. Externally, the Syrian Kurdish forces YPG threaten Turkey's borders. The imminent threat of sparking more unrest within Turkey underlines the balancing-threat notion, as the Iraqi-Kurds are proximate, and are able to spark ethnic threats within the Turkish borders by becoming independent. At the same time, Iraq is not a direct threat to Turkey, neither through intentions or capabilities. Furthermore, the implications of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq would result in regional instability, and threaten Turkey's strategic stronghold in the region. Turkey's regional aims in 2017 is accepting limited revisions, but supporting the status-quo underlined by their wish to further their influence, but at the same time not threatening the regional status-quo. Turkey's regional aims in 2017 is one of main discontent regarding the Assad regime and Iranian influence, however, also through a swift rapprochement with both regimes facing the Syrian Kurdish threat on the Southern border. Turkey, through the narrative of Sunni Islam, wishes to further their spheres of influence and weaken the Syrian and Iranian regime, the latter one constituting a main regional rival for hegemony. "Neo-otomanism"[280] underlines the notion that Turkey pursues a goal of establishing lost influence in the region, possibly regaining it through resembling a protector of Sunni Muslims to further their spheres of influence. In a regional perspective, Turkey wants to change the status-quo and exert

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[280] Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity," 20–21.

more influence, but at the same time, a considerable change of the status-quo in the Persian Gulf diverts it away from the majority Sunni Arab countries. Consecutively, the idea of Turkey's dual nature of accepting limited revision, but supporting the status-quo in 2017 does not decicively explain its wish to disapprove Iraqi-Kurdistan's independence referendum in 2017. Balancing threats explain Turkey's stance towards the Iraqi-Kurdish referendum in 2017 more extensively than balancing interests, as they facilitate a major ethnic threat for Turkey.

6.3 Syria

Syria opposed the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum in 2017, siding with Iraq and its territorial integrity.[281] The disapproval of Syria, just as with the other regional actors can be explained through the high threat-perception of the Kurds. As the Syrian regime holds essential issues domestically due to the Syrian Civil War, its regional aims in 2017 hint at indifferent aims towards the status-quo, because it is not capable to further its influence amidst its domestic issues. However, Syria is an ally of Iran and Russia, as previously outlined, and hence a proxy for geopolitics.

6.3.1 Threat-perception of Iraq and Kurds

Syria holds a low threat-perception of Iraq prior to 2017 due to its religious ties. As found in Figure 4 in the appendix, Syria is the only state that has weaker relative capabilities than Iraq. While Syria is weaker in its relative capabilities comparatively, it still does not perceive Iraq as a threat. Since the Syrian Civil War, Iraq sided with Syria throughout in multiple occasions.[282] From its support of the regime, to official mutual visits and the wish of solving the Syrian crisis

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[281] *Reuters, "*Damascus rejects Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum," September 25, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-syria/damascus-rejects-iraqi-kurdish-independence-referendum-idUSKCN1C00SV
[282] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations: STATE CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION AND THE MENA STATES SYSTEM," *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, no. 04 (October 2014): 22, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/60004/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_LSE%20Middle%20East%20Centre%20Papers_Hinnebusch_Syria%20-%20Iraq%20relations.pdf

politically,[283] both Shiite regimes did not oppose each other. Hence, Iraq's low offensive

intentions underline the fact that Syria views Iraq as a low threat, even when Iraq holds stronger

capabilities.   However, Syria views the Kurds as a high threat due to their own Kurdish

minority, which gained autonomy and territory in the Syrian Civil War. As outlined by Loqman,

"the Some 15%to 17% of the Syrian population is Kurdish."[284] The Syrian Kurds also gained

self-rule in the midst of the Syrian Civil War and portray a keen threat to the Syrian regime,

ethnically, as well as politically.[285] This partially autonomous region, Rojava , is a prime case of

the possible spill over effect from Iraqi-Kurdish nationalism.[286] Hence, Syria views the Kurds as

a high threat to its territory, which results in a high threat-perception of the Kurds. The Syrian

Kurds are not as strong in their autonomy claims as the Iraqi-Kurds, who have "[…] [the]

inclination to declare itself a new nation state in the international community.[287] This is why the

prospect of an Iraqi-Kurdish independence is so risky for Syria, who already struggles with

immense sectarian division domestically.

6.3.2 Regional aims of Syria 2017

As outlined in the previous chapter of Iran and Turkey, Syria is a hotbed for geopolitical

power plays, where Iran is an ally that tries to extend its influence and Turkey tries to halt it.[288]

As Syria dealt with domestic issues through the Syrian Civil War and does not hold the

capabilities to further regional aims, Syria has indifferent regional aims. As outlined previously,

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[283] Hinnebusch, "Syria-Iraq Relations," 22
[284] Loqman Radpey, "Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 3 (2016): 468, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1468109916000190
[285] Radpey, "Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq," 468
[286] Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening," 116
[287] Radpey, "Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq," 487
[288] Hinnebusch, "Back to Enmity," 20–21

Syria supports Iran's endeavors, because Iran keeps the regime in office.[289] Syria does not

explicitly seeks to change the status-quo of the region, but also does not support the American

established status-quo. Its regional aims do not explain its disapproval of the Iraqi-Kurdistan

referendum of 2017.

6.3.3 Alliance dependency of Syria

Syria is dependent on Russia to the extent of Great Power support to keep its regime in

office. In 2017 this was clear as Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council Resolution

that wished for sanctions of the Assad regime "[…] its use of chemical weapons."[290] The

subchapter on Russia underlined the alliance dependency notions of Syria. Without the support

of Russia, the Syrian regime would have resigned most likely already. The strong support from a

regional actor that holds strong capabilities and a Great Power allow Assad's regime to stay in

office. Politically, Syria is dependent on Russia. The Astana agreement furthers this rationale,

which called for de-escalation zones, but at the same time allows the Syrian regime to stay

intact.[291]

6.3.4 Conclusion

Syria disapproved the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum in 2017 due to the ethnic-threat it

portrays. Contrastingly, Iraq is not viewed as a threat even though it has stronger relative

capabilities. Syria's regional aims are ambiguous, as it deals with a civil war that impedes

regional involvement in power plays. Hence, disapproving the Kurdish referendum would not

have furthered its strategic standing in the region, but lessened the threat of Kurdish self-

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[289] Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy After the Nuclear Agreement*, 154–57
[290] Ibid, 71
[291] Russian Information and Press Department, "Comment by the Information and Press Department on work on Syria in the UN Security Council," news release, March 13, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/sy/-/asset_publisher/9fcjSOwMERcf/content/id/2676804/pop_up?_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_viewMode=print&_101_INSTANCE_9fcjSOwMERcf_qrIndex=9

determination domestically. The analysis leads to the balancing-of-threat notion to understand

Syria's disapproval. Additionally, while Syria is dependent on Russia, the own issues with the

Kurdish minority and insurgency decisively explains its disapproval, but not its dependence on

Russia.

Conclusion

How to define geostrategic interests? Geostrategic interests are largely dependent on the

geographical and strategical position to the secession movement, the host-state and the regional

setting. States that reside in geographical proximity to a host-state that inhabits a secession

movement such as Iraq and the secession movement of Iraqi-Kurdistan are likely threatened by

the prospect of a new state emerging. The Great Powers in this study do not perceive the host-

state Iraq or its secession movement Iraqi-Kurdistan as a threat. The only independent value that

explains their decision to disapprove the referendum is the regional aims they follow in 2017,

which underlines the established notions that the support of Great Powers will follow if strategic

interests are involved. For Middle-Powers the result was two-fold, as the involved actors

followed regional aims that supported the status-quo, but were also dependent on one of the

Great Powers, which imply that the alliance dependence notion might contributed to the Middle-

Powers decision of disapproving the referendum. They also do not view Iraq or the Kurds as a

threat, which underlines that balance-of-threats does not explain its disapproval.

Figure 3: Venn-diagram - How different factors influence different actor's
decision for disapproval
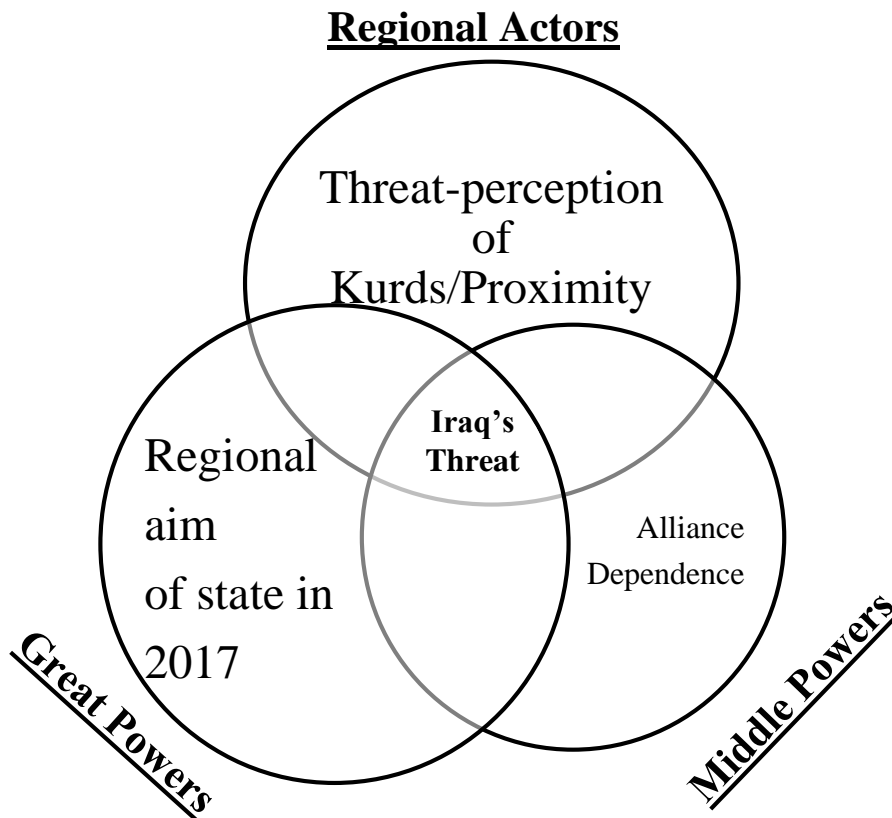
Conclusively, these findings are simplified into a Venn-diagram, expressed in Figure 3, to
understand how different independent values have weighed more in the selected actors decision
to disapprove the Iraqi-Kurdistan referendum of 2017. It highlights that Great Powers are
influenced mostly due to their regional aims in 2017 in the Persian Gulf and the low threat-
perception of Iraq. Middle Powers have disapproved due to their regional aims in 2017, alliance
dependence to the United States, and a low threat-perception of Iraq. The slight reduction of
alliance dependence is due to the weak correlation to the specific case of the Kurdish
independence referendum in the disapproval of both Middle Powers and regional actors.
Regional actors are mostly led by their close geographical position to Iraqi-Kurdistan and Iraq,

the low threat-perception of Iraq and higher threat-perception of the Kurds. For regional actors, balancing-threats is decisive in their decision. What does that imply for the future of Iraqi-Kurdish self-determination aspirations? Unless Great and Middle Powers do not have key strategic interests in the region that will permit the recognition of Iraqi-Kurdish independence, the prospect of an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan remains low. Furthermore, if the Iraqi-regime remains weak and the Kurdish Regional Government strong, the threat of an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan stays immense. Hence, geostrategic interests of all involved actors have to align in order to recognize an independent Iraqi-Kurdistan. Until then they remain an "*appendage of other states.*"[292]

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[292] Barkey, "The Kurdish Awakening," 111

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Appendix

Figure 4: Relative capabilities of involved actors 2017[*]

Case Study 2017	Military expenditure in thousands USD 2017 (**CNC value**) (*World Bank*)	Military personnel in thousands in 2016 (**CNC value**) (*World Bank*)	Primary Energy Consumption in thousands of metric coal in 2012 (**CNC value**) (*Composite Index of National Capabilities*)	Production of iron and steel in thousand tons 2017 (**CNC value**) (*World Steel Association*)	Urban population in thousands 2017 (**CNC value**) (*UN World Urbanization Project*)	Total population in thousands 2017 (**CNC value**) (*World Bank*)	**Final CNC value and percentage share of total resources 2017**	Power Ranking amongst involved actors
World Total	1 700 000 000	27 542,35	20 934 379	2 870 973	4 140 189	7 530 000		
United States	609 757 981 (**0.35**)	1 348 (**0.048942**)	3 159 873 (**0.15094181**)	104 007 (**0.036227**)	266 244 (**0.0643072**)	325 719,18 (**0.0432562**)	**.11561237** ~11.6 %	**1**
Russia	66 334 987 (**0.039021**)	1 454 (**0.052791**)	1 356 742 (**0.06480928**)	123 527 (**0.0430262**)	106 973 (**0.02583771**)	144 495,04 (**0.01918925**)	**.04077907** ~4.1 %	**2**
Germany	44 329 282 (**0.026076**)	179,1 (**0.006502**)	468 740 (**0.02239092**)	71 113 (**0.0247696**)	63 442 (**0.01532346**)	82 695,00 (**0.01098207**)	**.01767401** ~1.8 %	**3**
France	57 770 123 (**0.0339824**)	306,1 (**0.011113**)	234 432 (**0.01119842**)	26 183 (**0.0091199**)	52 101 (**0.01258421**)	67 118,65 (**0.0089135**)	**.01448524** ~1.4 %	**4**
United Kingdom	47 193 097 (**0.0277606**)	150,25 (**0.005455**)	315 502 (**0.015071**)	13 487 (**0.0046977**)	55 025 (**0.01329046**)	66 022,27 (**0.0087679**)	**.01250711** ~1.25%	**7**
Turkey	18 189 837 (**0.0106999**)	512 (**0.018589**)	181 211 (**0.008656**)	48 113 (**0.0167584**)	60 271 (**0.01455755**)	80 745,02 (**0.01072311**)	**.01333066** ~1.33%	**6**
Iran	14 548 050 (**0.0085576**)	563 (**0.020441**)	397 332 (**0.018979**)	23 529 (**0.0081954**)	60 380 (**0.01458388**)	81 162,79 (**0.01077859**)	**.01348924** ~1.35%	**5**
Syria	2 494 887 (2011) (**0.0014675**)	307,5 (**0.011164**)	23 394 (**0.001117**)	5 (**0.0000017**)	9 744 (**0.00235352**)	18 269,87 (**0.00242628**)	**.00308833** ~0.31%	**9**
Iraq	7 416 385 (**0.0043625**)	209 (**0.007588**)	55 190 (**0.002636**)	Not Known (**0**)	26 899 (**0.00649705**)	38 274,62 (**0.00508295**)	**.00436108** ~0.4%	**8**

*further info on next page

The indicators are divided by the global total for each indicator to evaluate a distinctive CNC value for each state and its individual indicators. The average of the sum of all indicators of state X results in a final CNC value, that hints at state X's relative share of the world's total resources.

The *Composite Index of National Capabilities'* formula contained two issues for the research. The first was the elusive calculation of primary energy consumption. Hence, for purposes of comparable accuracy for the different states considering calculation of the final CNC value, the value of the indicator Primary Energy Consumption or simply the energy use of state x is valued through the last obtained data from the CINC itself, which is 2012. The second minor issue involved the indicator military personnel, as the World Bank's last data during the research was from 2016. It was updated recently, at this stage my results were already finished. Hence, the calculation of military personnel of each state is from 2016. Nevertheless, the Composite Index of National Capabilities is used due to its reliability in tracing back the primary data used for the indicators in contrast to other similar power ranking systems. Other similar power ranking showcased the issues of not hinting at the used sources.