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The Kurds in Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Their Relations with Regional and International Powers: A Comparative Analysis of Iraq and Syria, 2003-2020

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Academic Year / Année Académique : 2020-2021
Masters 120 en sciences politiques, orientation relations internationales, à finalité spécialisée : diplomatie et résolution des conflits

Declaration of Ethics

I have written and coordinated my dissertation according to the Catholic University of Louvain's (UCLouvain) writing rules. I declare on my honour that all ideas in this work were written by me or have been cited from previous academical books, articles and other sources according to proper academic citation methods and without having solicited illicit external assistance, that it is not the resumption of a work presented in another institution for evaluation, and that it has not been published in the previous studies.

- I have obtained the data, information, and documents I submitted in this dissertation within the framework of academic and ethical rules,
- I refer to all the works I have used in my thesis, by referring appropriately,
- I have not made any changes in the data used and the results,
- I declare that the work I have presented in this thesis is original.

Seyhan Sonmez
Signature:

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Benoît Rihoux for his exclusive assistance and ideas. His advice and comments helped me to create an excellent work for this study.

I want to thank the interviewees for agreeing to participate and argue the questions regarding relevant subjects and provide me necessary information for this research.

I also want to thank my family and friends, Nidal Karajoul, Paula Pimenta, Felix Dejaiffe, and Claire Gaëlle Champagne, for their encouragement and recommendations.

Preface

> *"Everyday life in the middle east is dominated by numerous conflicts, which often appear strange to western eyes as they seem to elude the western understanding of ratio and logos. This is also true for the Kurdish question, one of the bloodiest fields of conflict in the Middle East still awaiting a solution*" (Ocalan, 2008, p. 7).

International powers can no longer reject the problem of Ethnic conflicts. Every year hundreds of thousands of people lose their lives due to conflicts between different ethnic groups who have lived for many years on the same land. Ethnic conflicts have occurred in the nineteenth century with increasing the idea of nationalism and ethnic awareness. Such ethnicity, religion, culture, and language factors have played critical roles in the ethnic and nationalization process, which usually put different communities' characteristics into conflict to continue their lives and communities.

In today's world, most Ethno-religious Conflicts occur among different ethnic and/or religious communities in the same territories. The example of the Kurdish people in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria is one of the most ancient and tragic ethnic struggles in history, which continues to be problematic in the Middle East. Also, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia are various illustrations that can be expressed.

Ethnic and religious factors are often used by different political parties to come to power, which increases the hatred and tension among other communities that may end up with conflict and civil war. For a decade, the Syrian Civil War, which arose from religious and ethnic hatred, took the lives of millions of people and displaced millions. Another example of the worst ethnic conflicts is the Yemen Civil War that began in 2014. It rose between two groups, causing severe damage and left millions of people suffering from hunger.

Ethno-religious conflicts are needed to be more considered than ever before. These conflicts are not only affecting people who are involved in that conflict but also affecting other countries by creating mass immigration movements. Thus, this situation revives the security concerns of regional and international actors. Ethnic conflicts arising from underdeveloped countries should not be served as political tools or a reason for proxy wars by regional and global powers.

Ethno-religious conflicts in Iraq and Syria have been problematic for decades. Although most of the population is Muslim in both states, the gap among various sects cannot be filled and has always been the country's biggest issue, impacting state infrastructure, society, and political and economic stability. However, the successive governments have tried to apply Arab

nationalism to fill the gap among sectarian groups. These nationalist policies led to conflicts between the Arabs and other ethnic groups, mainly the Kurds.

The Kurdish issue, however, occurred before the pro-Arab nationalist governments came to power. Yet, the problem was not as complicated as it was during the nationalist governments. The Kurdish issue in Syria did not even appear until the Baath party came to power in the 1960s. In Iraq, the Kurdish ethnic-national identity problem has existed since the 1920s and worsen after its independence in 1932. The worst years were after the Baath party came to power and followed pro-Arab nationalist policies towards the Kurds. Many Kurds have been killed, and many have essentially been displaced during Saddam Hussein's regime.

The Kurds also have struggled to achieve their objectives in these conflicts. In achieving their core objectives, they needed external assistance, which usually comes from Iran after the Second World War until the 1980s. Then, the help continued from the USA and some European powers to weaken Saddam Hussein's dictatorship regime after the Cold War. The struggle throughout history from the Kurds against successive Iraqi governments and the assistance from the external and regional power put forward the objectives and brought them autonomy in the 1990s and strengthened this autonomy from 2003 to onwards.

On the other hand, although some external powers have supported the Kurds in Syria, this support was not enough. Like Turkey and Iran, the regional authorities did not even recognize the Kurdish ethnic groups' existence in northern Syria, Rojava. Despite all Turkey's efforts to not let a Kurdish regional autonomy occur next to its borders with Syria, the Kurds have settled their autonomy unilaterally. Still, this autonomy, so-called '*democratic confederalism'*, is under the regional and international powers' economic and political embargo (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017). Therefore, the existence of this autonomy may not continue long without assistance by global authorities such as the E.U. and the U.S.

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Abbreviations

AKP:	Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*)
CIA:	U.S. Central Intelligence Agency
DAA:	Democratic Autonomous Administration
DFNS:	Democratic Federation of Northern Syria
EU:	European Union
FSA:	Free Syrian Army
HDP:	Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi)*
KDP:	Kurdish Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*)
KIB:	Kurdish Institution of Brussels
KRG:	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI:	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
ISSG:	International Syria Support Group
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDF:	National Defense Forces
PKK:	Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)
PJAK:	Kurdistan Free Life Party (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*)
PUK:	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê*)
PYD:	Democratic Union Party **(***Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*)
SDF:	Syrian Democratic Forces (*Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk*)
SKDP:	Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party
UN:	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US/USA:	United States of America
WMD:	Weapon Mass Destruction
YPG:	People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)
YPJ:	Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê*)

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Overall Introduction

Ethnic and religious/sectarian struggle is one of the main reasons that undermined most Middle Eastern countries' social and political stability, which gained their independence at the beginning of the 20th century. There are many reasons why Ethno-religious/sectarian conflicts are very influential in the region. Ethnic and religious communities in these countries are not adequately addressed by political parties, non-governmental organizations, bureaucracy, and researchers. As a result of the oppressive policies of rulers, ethnic and religious minorities are marginalized within discriminatory approaches.

Before digging into the matter of the Ethno-religious problem in Iraq and Syria, the reasons for the issue should be determined. Known as the cradle of civilizations, the Middle East geography has witnessed many ethnic and religious conflicts in the last century. Alongside political reasons, there are also historical and geographic reasons.

Firstly, artificial borders are one of the leading causes of ethnic conflicts in the Middle East. As it is known, most of the Middle East countries' boundaries were drawn according to the great powers' interests rather than the geographical and ethnic diversity of the region after the First World War (McDowall, 2007). In other words, the borders were drawn regardless of the ethnic and religious diversity in the region. Thus, these artificial borders have created both internal and external security issues nowadays.

Secondly, the region's critical geostrategic and the economic and military interventions of external powers are other factors that cause the ethno-religious conflicts. While Middle Eastern countries obtain the external power's attention with their natural resource, primarily oil and gas, the ethnic and religious diversity facilitates the possible interventions of these external powers (McDowall, 2007). In other words, being present in the region for a century, the foreign powers have been seeking to interrupt the Middle East politics with ethno-religious diversity, which often ended with a civil war. For instance, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are the prominent architecture of the British and French policies.

Thirdly, one of the most important reasons is the suppression of ethnic and religious minority identities by the ruling groups. Historically, the regime's repressive policies established in the region to keep different ethnic and religious communities under control and strengthen their power have caused tensions between them (Stavenhagen, 1996). In Syria, the repressive policies implemented by Alawites on Sunnis and Kurdish ethnic minorities and Sunnis' repressive policies on Shia and Kurdish communities in Iraq until the 2000s are some of the main reasons for today's struggle in both countries.

These are the main reasons why the Kurds have been struggling with regional states. With redrawing borders, Kurdistan was partitioned among several countries with artificial borderlines in the region. While global authorities planned to benefit from this fragile situation and left a big gap for future interventions, the regional states have suffered from this gap left by these powers for more than a century.

Moreover, due to its natural resources and geostrategic location, Kurdistan has always drawn external attention to itself (Mcdowall, 2004). For this reason, neither regional nor international powers have been willing to leave Kurdistan. To reach their goals, the Kurds have benefited from their strategic importance to cooperate with some global authorities, mainly Kurds in Iraq and for a decade in Syria.

Repressive policies are the most significant ones. The dominant groups in Iraq and Syria have repressed ethnic and religious minorities by their suppression policies for decades (Yildiz, 2007). These suppression policies have caused the emergency of ethno-religious struggle in these two countries. In this context, Iraq is the best instance of the dominant group's repression of ethnic minorities.

However, at the root of the Arab-Kurdish conflict in Iraq lies the outstanding uprisings of the Kurdish movements against the regime with the desire for independence or autonomy. The violence implemented by the Sunni authorities to suppress these rebellions and the oppressive policies of the Ba'ath government further increased the violence in the country. Genocidal massacres such as Halabja committed during the Saddam regime period and Arabisation efforts of the regions where Kurds live led to a deepening of ethnic sensitivity (Romano & Gurses, 2014). As a result of the Ba'ath regime's repressive policies, the Kurds have collaborated with external powers to survive. For instance, the Kurds supported the U.S. invasion of 2003, and the Kurdish Peshmerga acted in coordination with the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. Even if the U.S. is blamed for being the primary reason for the ethno-religious/sectarian clashes in Iraq, the central government's repressive policies for decades were the main root of violence, hatred, and contentions.

The invasion of 2003 led to a political and security vacuum in Iraq, which caused a struggle among communities for central power. While Shia and Sunnis have clashed due to religious and historical hatred, the Kurds fight for a regional government. As the most significant opportunity in the modern history of the Kurds (McDowall, 2007), the foreign powers have assisted, directly and indirectly, the Kurds to constitutionally establish their autonomy and become the most powerful and organized group in Iraq.

Consequently, to ensure their interests and influence in Iraq, regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel have cooperated with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). As a global power, the U.S. collaborated with the Kurds to secure Iraqi domestic clashes and observe Iranian actions in the region (Bengio, 2017; Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008; Yildiz, 2007).

Syria is the other instance of pressure policy on ethnic and religious minorities. Although ideologies such as Arab nationalism, which were influential in the political and social sphere in the post-independence years, achieved partial success in establishing national unity in Syria, this success could not prevent political rivalries arose from the needs of minority groups (Romano & Gurses, 2014).

The government's ineffectiveness to recompense the fundamental rights of different minority groups obtained a political institutionalization based on ethnic and religious affiliations and economic inequalities. In the 1970s, an authoritarian government established under Hafez al-Assad's leadership, a member of the Alawite minority, followed a political strategy that avoided other sectarian and ethnic groups, especially Sunnis and Kurds. Still, he could not prevent the struggle based on ethno-religious identity in the country.

The repressive policies have continued during the Bashar El-Assad regime. These repressive policies would have faced a major crisis, which started with civil protests against the Assad administration in March 2011 and quickly turned into a large-scale armed conflict (Dag, 2015). It provided a favourable environment for the emergence of political, economic, and social demands that Syria's authoritarian regime had long suppressed. Unfortunately, it did not go as expected. The crisis has turned into the bloodiest and most destructive conflict in the modern history of the country. With the power struggle between the central government and the opposition groups, from civil demonstrations to armed conflicts involving violent incidents, the repressed ethno-religious groups started expressing their anger and hatred (Sinkaya, 2011).

With the involvement of the Kurds in 2012, then Turkmens, Assyrians, Armenians, etc., the war in Syria transformed from a sectarian clash to ethnic conflicts. As a result of this transformation, the regional and global powers got into the fight to secure their interests in the region. While some of these powers supported opposition ethnic groups to ouster Bashar El-Assad from power, others have backed the Assad regime to stay in control. Moreover, with the involvement of terrorist organizations in 2013, the war evolved into a multidimensional civil war.

After a successful battle against terrorist organizations and becoming a vital force in Syria, the Kurds have established unilateral autonomy in the north with other ethnic communities. Due to controlling strategically significant territories, some regional powers

have not accepted their existence, especially Turkey and Iran. For these reasons, the Kurds have searched for foreign power assistance to survive against these regional powers. The Kurds in Syria have not been supported as sufficient as the Kurds in Iraq.

As it will be mentioned in the overall research puzzle, in the following chapter, I have developed this dissertation based on a research question: ***"What factors and players made it possible or impossible for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria to reach or partially reach their objectives? And to what extent have they achieved these objectives?****" and several hypotheses.*

In order to discuss the matter, this study is structured as follow: It consists of five chapters apart from a general introduction, comparative analysis, and conclusion. In this context, the study starts from a general introduction in which a broad context of the fundamental research is discussed. Additionally, Chapter I introduces the necessary details about the overall research puzzle, such as the problem, the objective, the importance, the scope of the research. It also consists of a research question, hypotheses, and methodology.

Chapter II provides the theoretical framework and literature review of Ethnicity, Nationalism, Language, Religion, and Ethnic Conflicts. The nexus between ethnicity, nationalism, religion, language, and ethnic conflicts are argued and analysed in this chapter. While three fundamental approaches, primordialism, rational choice theory, and constructivism, are discussed, constructivism is intensely detailed as the primary approach used for this study.

Chapter III is divided into two sub-parts; in the first part, a general historical background of Kurdish land, ethnic-national identity, language, and religion is discussed. In the second sub-part, a comparative history of the Kurdish struggle in Iraq and Syria is analysed to see the links between the historical developments and the current situation. The historical frameworks of the case of Iraq and Syria are deeply detailed. Therefore, this chapter also illustrates how the developments throughout history constructed today's events.

Moreover, chapter IV examines the first case study, *" the Kurds in Iraq from 2003 to 2011"*. This chapter provides the first part of the research question. Thus, it is about the factors and players, whose played a significant role in Kurdish objectives. As three main factors, the Kurdish forces (*Peshmerga)*, natural resources, and weak Iraqi central government provided an exclusive opportunity to the Kurds to establish a regional government, the so-called Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Regional and international power players, such as Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the U.S., are discussed as the fundamental players in the Kurdish region and how they played a critical role in Kurdish goals.

Chapter V examines the second case study under the title of *"the Kurds in Syria from 2011 to 2020."* In this context, this chapter provides the answers to the second part of the research question. Chapter IV discusses the factors and players that played a critical role in Kurdish objectives in Syria. While the Kurds have caused the defeat of the terrorist organization ISIS[1], their unilaterally established autonomy has not been recognized by regional and international powers. It also examines how these powers forced and made the environment very difficult for the Kurds in Syria to attain their objectives. Turkey, Iran and the U.S., and Russia are discussed as central players. It also outlines how diplomacy giants have failed to provide a democratic power transition in Syria.

The last chapter of the study examines a comparative analysis of the Kurds in the Second Iraq War in 2003-2011 and the Syrian Civil War in 2011-2020. It is also the section where the hypotheses are tested. Finally, it ends with an overall conclusion.

[1] ISIS is recognized as a terrorist organisation by international community, and it is named by several names as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but officially known as the Islamic State (IS) and also by its Arabic acronym 'Daesh' is a militant Islamist group and a formerly unrecognized proto state that follows a fundamentalist, Salafi jihadist doctrine of Sunni Islam. However, ISIS is used by this dissertation, derives from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, the organization's name through June 2014. For more detail, see (Paasche & Gunter, 2016)

Chapter I: The Overall Research Puzzle

1.1. Introduction

The primary focus of the dissertation is *ethno-religious* conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the role of the Kurdish community in these conflicts. Ethno-religious conflicts are the primary reasons for the modern conflicts since ethnic communities attempted to establish their nation-states within their territories. Since the First World War, the Kurds have been fighting with Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria to achieve autonomy or found their state in Kurdistan. While trying to attain these autonomy or independence objectives, the Kurds in four states act by themselves.

However, in Turkey and Iran, the Kurdish population has been integrated and/or assimilated into Turkish and Persian modern society (Stavenhagen, 1996). Yet, a considerable part of the Kurdish population has not renounced a right of autonomy. In Iraq and Syria, the situation differs from Turkey and Iran. In the past three decades in Iraq and a decade in Syria, the circumstance obtained an exclusive opportunity for the Kurdish population to settle their autonomy in the region.

With the falling apart of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, new states are founded in its territories. By establishing these new states, they created problems among different ethnic and religious groups. The ethno-religious problem in the middle east became the most important and most complicated topic on the agenda. However, the establishment of three new modern states, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria as the successor of the Ottoman Empire and Iran, which divided areas inhabited by the Kurds, created a century of ethnic conflict between the Kurds and these four states. The Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq became the most questionable Kurdish parts in history than the Kurds in Syria. Most academic studies have been about the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, while they are almost forgotten for decades in Syria (Yildiz, 2005).

The most significant achievements have been succeeded by the Kurds in Iraq and Syria so far. In Turkey and Iran, while they were more effective and revolted against Turkish and Iranian governments until the 1930s, they have been silenced and still under pressure. In Syria, although they have been silenced for decades and did not further any objectives neither politically nor economically or militarily, the Civil War started in 2011 brought them an exclusive opportunity to control the north of Syria and found their autonomy. But the regional powers like Turkey and Iran, in which millions of Kurds live, do not desire an autonomous or independent Kurdish entity in Syria due to their domestic affairs. Besides, these powers' fear

may be a unified Kurds in Iraq and Syria in the future and trigger the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iran.

The Kurds frequently claim that their willingness to be existed ethnically, culturally, and linguistically separate from other ethnic communities in the region has been ignored for decades. Although there are small groups of Kurds who reside in the former Soviet Union, most have lived in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. While Persians service the Kurds as a sub-ethnic group that related to the Persians and the Turks and Arabs (in Syria and Iraq) see them as part of the same religion and sect, Sunni-Islam, the Kurds have remained a separate ethnic, cultural, and linguistic community inside all four countries, differ from Persians, Turks, and Arabs by their different tribal structure and such social characteristics as the relative freedom enjoyed by their women (Wenner, 1963, p. 69). These countries' governments have still tried to minimize the Kurds' ethnic-national identity differences from other ethnic groups inside them.

Turkey and Iran are still trying to apply these sorts of assimilation policies nowadays. While the Turks refer to the Kurds as "*mountain Turks,"* and the Iranians perceive them as their ethnic counterpart and sub-ethnic groups, the Iraqi and Syrian governments have made no claim that the Kurds are exactly Arabs (McDowall, 2007). Still, they have tried the religious dimension to suppress their ethnic-national, cultural, and linguistic differences. That is what differentiates the Kurds in Iraq and Syria from the Kurds living in Turkey and Iran.

Denying their ethnic-national identity, linguistic and political rights, and rejecting them as an ethnic minority, Turkey and Iran have not yet provided the Kurds to reach their independence or autonomous objectives compared to Syria and Iraq. That is the most critical point in which the Iraqi and Syrian governments have not claimed the Kurds as their sub-ethnic groups or Arabs. Thus, this allowed the Kurds to claim their ethnic rights, especially in Iraq and for a decade in Syria.

Limited studies have been written on the comparison of the Kurds and their objectives. At this point, this study is critical in terms of the illustration of future studies. A comparative analysis will provide the succeeded objective levels among Syria and Iraq, which also will provide which outside power support or which one did not support the Kurds and for what reasons. In this context, the Second Iraq War and the Syrian Civil War will be illustrated. In a two-level analysis, this study tries to display the connection between the support and achieving of the objectives according to this level of support provided by outside powers.

1.2. Research Goal

The dissertation aims to display the ethno-religious conflicts in Iraq and Syria and illustrate the case of the Kurds in the region. The Kurdish issue in this region exists for a century. For that reason, the illustration of the case will be the two most critical turning points in Kurdish history, which are the Second Iraq War in 2003 and the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

Therefore, this dissertation pursues four goals: First, examine the historical process of the Kurdish issue in Iraq and Syria throughout history, mention critical moments, and discuss their objectives; second, examine the relationship between the Kurds and regional and international powers, and evaluate these relationships' evolution by time; and thirdly, illustrate this relationship and indicate the aid from outside players. Finally, analyze and compare the role of the Kurds in these two wars.

1.3. Importance of the Research

In terms of studying the ethno-religious conflicts in Syria and Iraq, which are the two most complicated and vital issues in International Relations today, this dissertation is critical. Besides, it is essential to study and understand this complexity of the ethno-religious conflicts to provide a necessary background to understand this complexity for the role of the Kurds and their relations with various international powers in the Second Iraq War and the Syrian Civil War.

This study is also crucial because of providing new research for ethno-religious conflicts from a different perspective, which is studied limited in the academic literature. This study is also critical for examining nearly all internal and international actors in these two wars. It is also vital for the Kurdish issues in the Middle East, which provides essential work for Kurdish studies in the future.

1.4. Research Question

For a coherent structure of the dissertation and to facilitate understanding of the study, this study addresses a research question, one main hypothesis, and several sub-hypotheses. The research question that has been dealt with is: ***"What factors and players made it possible or impossible for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria to reach or partially reach their objectives? And to what extent have they achieved these objectives?"***

There will also be sub-questions to answer to understand the context. Sub-questions such as which the regional and international players supported the Kurds to attain their goals

during and after the conflict, or tried to stop them from achieving their goals in the region, and what are the specific factors? In chapters IV and V, the particular factors and players will be examined to answer the main research question and sub-questions.

1.5. Hypotheses

Two case studies, Iraq and Syria, will be examined to support the research question and main hypotheses mentioned at the beginning of the study. Apart from the research question and main hypotheses, I also assume various sub-hypotheses, which help to understand and prove the primary objective of the study. However, the Kurdish community attempted to achieve some goals throughout history. Still, the conditions, the environment, and the external powers' assistance are essential for the Kurds to attain their objectives. Therefore, for the Kurds achieving goals in ethno-religious conflicts is deeply linked to support from outside powers. For this dissertation's critical construction, the link between the research question and hypotheses needs to be related. For this reason, I have built my hypotheses based on the connection between them. Thus, my hypotheses as follow:

H1*: In achieving their objectives, the Kurds in Iraq have been supported more than the Kurds in Syria, militarily and economically, by regional and international powers.*

There are several internal, external, and geopolitical reasons why the external powers have helped the Kurds in Iraq while ignoring and opposing the Kurds in Syria for reaching their goals. The factors and players in Iraq and Syria that influenced the objectives of Kurds are examined separately. Like Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the USA, regional and international players played a significant role in Iraq, which helped the Kurds achieve their objective of becoming an autonomous region. But these players have not indicated the same attitude in Syria.

Sub-H1.1: *I hypothesised that the Kurds in Iraq achieved their objectives thanks to various factors such as possessing regular military force, the Peshmerga, and owning the natural resource have enhanced the opportunity of cooperating with regional and global powers rather than struggling, and the Iraqi weak central government could not hinder the Kurds to pursue their objectives, but the Kurds in Syria lack these opportunities.*

Owning a regular military force and a significant geostrategic land, external players preferred to cooperate rather than be hostile to the Kurdish Regional Government when the Iraqi central government was weak enough to stop the Kurds. In Syria, they did not have these advantages to get international attention.

Sub-H1.2: *I hypothesised that the U.S. presence in the region and its good relations with the Kurds in Iraq was vital in achieving their objectives. It is limited presence in Syria and withdrawing its troops from the country has put the Kurds in a problematic situation.*

The U.S. support has always been vital for the Kurds to protect themselves from regional enemies. Without the U.S. presence in the region, the Kurds might fail in their goals. Thus, while the Kurds in Iraq had the advantage of U.S. assistance, the Kurds in Syria did not receive much help from the U.S., except the collaboration against terrorist organizations.

Sub-H1.3: *The collapse of ISIS made the environment much easier for the Kurds to establish autonomy.*

In the region, the civil war in Syria obtained an opportunity and challenges for ethnic and religious communities, especially for the Kurds. In this context, I presumed that the Kurds in Syria had faced many difficulties in achieving the goals that they have fought for, such as meeting political and economic embargoes from regional and international power. They also found various opportunities, such as defeating terrorist organization ISIS, filling the power vacuum after Assad withdraw his military from the region, and establishing autonomy called 'democratic confederalism' in Northern Syria, or so-called Rojava.

Sub-H1.4: *Turkey and Iran are the two most critical power players in Iraq and Syria, whose influence the Kurdish goals the most.*

I hypothesised that Turkey and Iran have been the two main players in the region that the Kurds must have good relations with to reach their objectives. Turkey and Iran supported the Kurdish groups in Iraq for their interests while becoming a barrier to the Kurds in Syria. In other words, while assisting the Kurdish groups in Iraq for their core interests, Turkey and Iran have opposed the Kurdish entities and created a complex environment for them in the region. While Turkey has recognized the Kurdish-led forces as a terrorist organization, Iran has been fighting to keep the Assad regime alive.

Sub-H1.5: *If the Kurds want to become more vital in Syrian politics, they must develop good relations with Russia*.

Russian presence in Syria is one of the most critical factors that does not desire to see a Kurdish autonomy, putting the Kurdish-led entity in a problematic situation. Because of being

in favour of western powers, Russia does not help the Kurds. For this reason, the Kurds should develop good relations with Russia to pursue their goals.

Sub-H1.6: *The U.N. and the E.U. have failed to find a solution in diplomatic ways for Syria.*

In the multifaced civil war in Syria, the U.N. and E.U were ineffective in finding a resolution for ending this war. While Russia and China have blocked the UN from launching resolutions or military intervention against the Assad regime to end the war in a peaceful way, the EU could not focus on a diplomatic solution due to the refugee crisis. Thus, they could not apply effective diplomacy to reconciliate ethnic and religious/sectarian groups in a peaceful way.

1.6. Research design and methodology

In terms of methodology, this research refers to ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and ethnic conflicts nexus and the role of the Kurds in these ethnic conflicts in Iraq and Syria and their relations with various international and regional powers as an illustrative case. This research uses open sources to refer to the past and present memory, such as official documents, agreements, discursive speeches, devoted books, journals, and news articles as its corpus. This study is based on an empirical analysis of the significance and the evolution of the Kurdish community, their relations with various actors, and objectives they have been trying to reach during the Second Iraq War from 2003 to 2011 and the Syrian civil war in 2011 to 2020.

The dissertation is not derived from a single cohesive study. It is the result of two separate studies that were designed and conducted in two different periods: the 2003-2011 Iraq War and the 2011-2020 (still ongoing) Syrian civil war. Both studies fall within the framework of a standard research line on ethno-religious/sectarian conflicts and the role of the Kurds in these two conflicts and their relations with various regional and international powers.

The choice to focus on these two cases reflects a combination of methodological and pragmatic reasons. Regarding the cases, I chose Iraq and Syria instead of Turkey and Iran or other states that the Kurds live in because of better access to data, the historical similarity of both countries, and the achievement of the Kurdish objectives in the last two decades. In other words, the choice to focus on the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria rather than in Turkey and Iran is the recent events that have developed in these two states and the domestic dynamics that have changed in favour of the Kurds that let them maintain some objectives which they

have been fighting to reach for decades. Finally, the Kurdish autonomy is the only established in Iraq and Syria, which is the most critical objective of the Kurds in all four countries.

The purpose of this dissertation is to focus on the political and war processes. In this context, the dissertation will adhere to the constructivist approach and focus on the factors that have allowed the Kurds to attain or not attain their objectives. However, this dissertation represents international comparative research. Therefore, I chose two states in which their political systems, national identity, languages, ethnic and religious communities, internal dynamics, and historical backgrounds show similarities. I also examine the research question and hypotheses of this dissertation by using a "*qualitative comparative analysis"* method by comparing Syria and Iraq as cases by analysing data to determine the factors that have been effective to attain or not to attain the objectives of the Kurds and the Kurdish political organizations. Thus, the study comprises the agreements, government discourses, reports, international conferences, and meeting among various international and internal actors during these periods. It also includes non-governmental entities, governmental and non-governmental international organizations' descriptions, and explanations. Besides, it contains the Kurdish political organization's reports and agreements with other governmental and non-governmental entities in the region.

Mixed data collection methods have been used for both studies, followed by interviews with senior positions (former or later). As already mentioned above, the data have been collected on the ethno-religious diversity, the role of regional and international powers, the effectiveness of the Kurds in the conflict, and their role in changing the geopolitical balance. For this, I used open-ended questions to ask the respondents to explain the questions to a more considerable extent. Some sub-questions have also been invited based on answers to the main questions. (see the questions in *Appendix B*)

On the other hand, to respond to the aforementioned research question, I adopted a qualitative approach. Due to being popular in cultural and social studies, the qualitative approach is vital to analyze the data and “making interpretations or criticism of society or culture as an influencer of text” (Potter, 1996, p. 62). Therefore, much social scientist prefers to apply a qualitative method for social and cultural studies as I do in this study.

Alongside documents, books, and articles, I have held four interviews, in total, with four different people who know the Syrian civil war and the 2003 Iraq War, and from senior positions (former or later) such as one Ph.D. graduated assistant professor of Political and Social Science (*interview 1*); A former Syrian politician, co-chairperson of Syrian

Constitutional Party[2] (*interview 2*); the chairman of Kurdish Institution of Brussels[3] (*interview 3*); and a Kurdish activist who is currently working as a Psychologist[4] (*interview* 4). The interviews took approximately one hour each. The questions were an open-ended format that the interviewees would explain the questions well. The same questions have been asked to all respondents, and I have asked for permission to record and take notes (see the declaration of acceptance in *Appendix A*). The audios have been deleted once the study has been done.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic, French, English, and Kurdish. Respondents were confident when answering questions in their mother tongue. Being able to speak and write Kurdish, French, and English, I could translate the answers into English. But one interview has done in Arabic in which I need a translator to translate from Arabic to Kurdish. Therefore, the percentage of possible translation errors has been reduced to zero.

1.7. Conclusion

The case of the Second Iraq War and the Syrian Civil War will be illustrated. In a two-level analysis, this study tries to display the connection between the support and achieving of the objectives according to this level of support provided by outside powers. After identifying the problem, the goals and the scope of the research, and the methodological design of the study, we will move to chapter 2, theoretical framework, and literature review, to conceptualize this problem.

[2] For more detail in Arabic see; https://hds-p.org/a/
[3] For more detail see; https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/kurdish-institute-brussels/
[4] For more detail see https://www.collectifdesfemmes.be/tremplin-pour-la-vie-2/

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

After the Second World War, with decolonization and nation-state building, ethnic conflicts have occurred within the nations to gain their independence. However, the subjects of ethnicity/ethnic conflicts and state-building needed to be re-conceptualized in an integrated manner after the Cold War (Rear, 2008). Most theorists have attempted to explain the reasons why ethnic conflicts develop among various ethnic groups. Theoretically, to figure out why and how ethnic conflicts occur, the nature of ethnicity or ethnic roots and identity is firstly needed to be explained.

There are three main groups of approaches to studying the phenomenon of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts among social scientists: the so-called *primordialism* and *constructivism* approaches and *rational choice theory*, which also attempt to explain ethnicity and the reason for the ethnic conflicts. In this study, the Constructivist approach will be the primarily focused theory, but other approaches will also be mentioned in the following parts.

2.2. Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts

Ethnicity refers to an ethnic group's identical characteristics such as a common origin, historical memories, culture, language, religion, and connection to a particular geographical entity (Esman, 2004; Stavenhagen, 1996). Ethnicity and religion are two significant parts of identity, and sensitive and resonant parts of identity separate *us* from *them.* Moreover, these identical characteristics distinguish people and enable them to identify themselves with the same ethnic group (Saleh, 2013).

The *primordialist* approach describes ethnicity as a fixed characteristic that cannot be changed (Salem, 2013). In other words, ethnic identity[5] is deeply rooted human beings' sentiments and is based on genetics (Stavenhagen, 1996, pp. 18-19). Hence, the identification of individuals is referred to by some authors as a kind of kinship, based on blood ties, and they refer to an ethnic group as an extended kin group, passed from generation to generation (*Ibid*, p. 18-19). Primordialists emphasize differences between individuals with different ethnic identities and argue that these differences cause ethnic conflict. If genetics accounts for ethnic identity, then it is easy to accomplish that ethnic conflicts may be genetically determined (*ibid,* p. 19). This genetic-based model cannot account for the dynamics of the formation of *ethnies,*

[5] the term *identity* refers to what defines an individual or a community.

nor it gives us much about the external and internal structure of ethnic identities or ethnicity (*ibid*, p. 19).

The *rational choice theory* asserts that individuals will act rationally to get their valued ends and maximize their benefits (Stavenhagen, 1996). Being a member of an ethnic group depends on benefit-cost consequences. If individuals emphasize their ethnicity, this will further their objectives; in turn, rational individuals will choose to reach their goals (*Ibid*, p. 22). Being of an ethnicity/ethnic group is not something sensitive or constructed, yet it is a choice in which individuals act rationally to maximize their benefits. According to rational choice theory, ethnic groups have collective interests and compete in a rational attitude and calculated cost-benefit for these interests such as resource, economic or political power, prestige, wealth, etc. (*Ibid*, p. 22). Consequently, ethnicity is the outcome of the rational interests of the group members that can be accepted or discarded by choice.

The *constructivist* approach sees ethnicity as a concept that can change through social interactions (Saleh, 2013). Therefore, the dynamics of ethnicity and ethnic groups are socially constructed. In turn, it is easy to be shaped and changed. Symbolic elements like common origin, memories of a shared historical past, culture, language, religion are shaped and constructed in time. Constructivists interpret the conditions that lead to ethnic wars as fear, prejudice, rational problems, change in the demographic situation, and ethnic authority threatening historical and ethnic symbols (Yilmaz & Ismayilov, 2011). According to the theory, ethnic conflict is the elite's product, and the elites who put forward divisive and nationalist ideas try to persuade society to support them. In today's ethnic conflicts, scientists of this school consider legal governments' problems and the rebellion of an ethnic group against other groups as an essential factor (Snyder, 2000). Thus, according to the constructivist approach, ethnicity is a social phenomenon; the identities are intertwined, produced, or transformed into a new form.

Ethnicity is the nature and characteristic of ethnic groups and their members (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 14). In modern ethnicity studies, especially constructivists, it is emphasized that it is crucial to know which ethnic identity people feel they belong to (Demir, 2019). An ethnic group can be defined as groups of people who have a subjective belief that their physical characteristics and traditions have similarities or have common origins. (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). As can be understood from here, it is essential to know that they are widely different. Ethnic group reinforces this perceived difference by referring to the real or produced common history, lineage, religion, tradition, and language (Smith, 2002). Emotions such as settling, longing for the past, religion, war, and ethnic selection help the

formation, crystallization, and continuity of the ethnic texture (Smith, 1993). As these groups define themselves differently and differ from the human communities around them, the perception of social identity begins, and ethnic boundaries are formed. One of the striking points here is that the immutable characteristics of individuals and socio-cultural aspects are intertwined in the perception of the ethnic group. Consequently, what is essential is the 'discourse' on ethnicity, that is, the way people invent or construct their ethnicity (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 22).

Ethnic conflicts are a product of the politicization of ethnicity. Thus, ethnic conflicts can be expressed as "*turning ethnicity into a political leverage force rather than a psychological or cultural or social data in order to change or strengthen structured/ institutionalized inequality systems and across ethnic categories*" (Baumann, 2006, p. 62). For a violent attack to be qualified as ethnic, it is necessary to motivate others with ethnic hostility, determine the targets in the light of ethnic criteria, and attack on behalf of an ethnic group (Fearon, 2008, p. 857). Ethnic identity does not have to be under a real threat to occur. It will be sufficient to perceive the threat in achieving goals such as creating an identity or keeping an established identity alive. When there is a tendency towards violence, ethnicity's politicization continues more strongly (Demir, 2019).

Ethnic conflicts, or more broadly, ethnic issues, can occur in armed conflicts between ethnic groups and state elements. There are instances where these conflicts, in which intense violence is mostly experienced, turn into civil war. However, this does not mean that all ethnic problems will turn into armed conflicts. Many issues between ethnic groups can be resolved before they reach this stage, or they may remain a chronic problem before they turn into armed conflict (Stavenhagen, 1996). Indeed, not all ethnic groups around the world share the same rights as the dominant group. According to a study, 275 ethnic groups living in 116 countries are socially disadvantaged, and this corresponds to about 17% of the world's population; only 4 of the world's top 50 largest countries do not have ethnically disadvantaged groups (Cordell & Wolff, 2011, p. 93). Therefore, ethnic problems manifest themselves in more comprehensive geography than previously thought. Gurr asserts that ethnic conflicts occur when an ethnic community perceives itself as a downside and targets the collective interests of the state (Gurr, 1994). In this context, ethnic conflicts may occur because of the dominant groups' pressure on other ethnic communities within the state.

Past experiences between ethnic groups, in a historical process and constructed, play an essential role in developing conflicts. Ethnic groups can attach importance to the sad events they have experienced in the past to keep the group identity alive and turn them into 'chosen

trauma' (Demir, 2019, pp. 3-4). These feelings, including victimization, hurt, and shame, are passed down from generation to generation as determinants of ethnic identity (*ibid*). Although these feelings are not the sole cause of conflicts, they predispose to forming an environment sensitive to friction.

Brown (2003, p. 82) states that "ethnic conflicts are a dispute about vital political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial matters between two or more ethnic communities." Yet, McPhail and McCarth (2005, p.3) assert that ethnic conflict occurs when people perceive that their identity is targeted or when people view the repressive state as an obstacle in achieving their objectives. Moreover, the conflict can be testified in different ways, such as disputes over territories or over resources or claiming cultural and political rights. Therefore, Ethnic elites aim at creating a collective sense of unity and solidarity amongst their members in achieving their goals (Saleh, 2013). Ethnic elites can also trigger the conflict by using hostility and hatred to justify the use of violence against *others*. This situation triggers conflict.

Sometimes there may be a "security dilemma" between ethnic groups. Besides, fears of ethnic extinction or ethnic domination are at the root of ethnic security dilemmas that motivate ethnic minorities to resort to armed ethnic minority rebellion (Romano & Gurses, 2014, p. 114). Hence, increasing an ethnic group's power can be a religious or sect group and can trigger rebellion and conflict. For instance, Sunnis in Iraq and Alawites in Syria, to ensure its security is perceived as an aggressive act against them in the opposite ethnic group and causes them to prepare for it (Posen, 1993, pp. 27-29). This situation, which occurs predominantly in states' weakness, causes mutual armament of groups that perceive each other as threats. As in Syria and Iraq, the Kurds have been perceived as a threat from the 1920s to nowadays. The security dilemma occurred when intra-state groups saw each other as rivals in Syria and Iraq.

However, an ethnic security dilemma can arise when an ethnic group fears that a rival ethnic group will control the government and use the state's machinery to discriminate, repress, subordinate, or even eliminate rival ethnic groups (Romano & Gurses, 2014). Based on this fear, threatened ethnic groups armed themselves defensively. This mobilization then arouses fears on the part of the group that controls the state (*ibid*). The dominant group then arms itself in response to this perceived threat as well. Finally, one or both groups may resort to violence out of fear that the other will attack first *(ibid*, p. 114*).* Ethnic minorities will feel safer, and therefore less likely to resort to armed conflict if they have standardized access to government policymakers and political institutions; if they can block government policies that threaten their ethnic identity, autonomy, or cultural survival; and if they have the institutional means to veto decisions that could threaten their identity, culture, and group interests (*ibid*, p. 115). For an

ethnic minority to embrace democracy, especially one that has been subject to severe discrimination and repression and has engaged in armed rebellion in the past, the benefits of its participation in a democratic state must outweigh the benefits it could obtain with the best alternative strategy, which is often a return to armed conflict (*ibid*, p. 115).

Several studies have shown that the most conflict-prone configuration is one in which there are a relatively small number of relatively large ethnic groups so that one or more of these groups can assert dominance over the others, and in which there is at least one ethnic minority large enough to effectively resist, with violence, any group's efforts at ethnic domination (Romano & Gurses, 2014, p. 115). The four nations with large Kurdish populations are marked by a small number of ethnic groups. The Kurds are a sufficiently large minority in each of these states, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, to be capable of armed rebellion.

Regardless of the state, the rights of minorities are considered to be protected under international law, which includes agreements and guarantees prohibiting racial, social, ethnic, and religious discrimination among citizens (Bingol, 2013, p. 121). On the other hand, these treaties and guarantees allow minorities to benefit from both the rights that the relevant state citizens should enjoy and the rights arising from their own cultural and historical characteristics (*ibid*). Thus, the conflict occurs when a state does not respect minorities' rights and represses them by force and violence.

2.3. Internationalization of Ethnic Conflicts

Another dimension of ethnic conflicts is to become an international issue. When a significant economic resource is found in an ethnic region, ethnic groups might find it in their interest to try to wrest control over these resources from the central government (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 8). As the case of oil reserves in the Kurdish part of Iraq. The dispute over resources may affect intra-state ethnic political and economic instability that directly influences domestic, regional, and international security. Thus, the regional and external actors may involve intra-state affairs due to the fear of community conflicts that occur violently and cause a potential mass movement of refugees to neighbouring countries that affect the region's political, economic instability and threatens regional and international peace and security. At times ethnic groups may seek foreign powers' support (Saleh, 2013). Foreign powers may support some communities to ensure their interests and prevent other actors from becoming violent and spilling over in the region (Stavenhagen, 1996). The example of the Syrian Civil War is a visible example of how international and regional actors played a significant role in ethno-religious conflicts. As Stavenhagen pointed out that;

"Kurdistan provides a good illustration of how ethnic conflicts are generated, fostered, and manipulated by great powers and geopolitical concerns to the detriment of the real interests of the people concerned. (…) In fact, the Kurdish question today can only be understood as the historical result of the complex international power-plays since the First World War" (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 203).

Ethnic conflicts and ethnic separatism movements within a state can also affect the security of neighbouring countries with the same ethnic composition (Demir, 2019). Pressure on an ethnic group can be reflected in ethnic groups with the same identity across the border, causing nationalist feelings. Similarly, the ethnic group in the neighbouring country owning its state due to the civil war may be a point of attraction for the same ethnic group in other countries (Brown, 1993). Thus, "regional conflicts can arise from a wide variety of causes, including poor governance, external aggression, competing claims, internal revolt, tribal rivalries, and ethnic or religious hatreds" (National Security Strategy of the USA, March 2006, p. 15). The Kurds are the best instance of this statement.

The reasons for the rise of intrastate ethno-religious conflicts can be concluded with a table.

Table 1: Reasons for Intrastate Ethnic Conflicts

FACTORS	EXAMPLES
a. Structural	• Weakening of the Structure of the State
b. Political	• Discriminatory political institutions • Exclusionary National ideologies • Intergroup politics • Elite Policies • Assimilatory policies towards minorities' language and political rights
c. Economic and Social	• Economic problems • Discriminatory economic structures • Economic development and modernization, instability, and conflict • Economic and social problems
d. Cultural	• Cultural discrimination against minorities
e. Other Causes	• Ethnic nationalism and religious radicalism • Balance of power between ethnic groups change • Opportunistic politicians, ethnic and nationalist • It can increase feelings

Source: (Oztop, 2015, p. 59) (Translated by the author)

2.4. Nationalism, Ethnicity and Ethnic Conflicts Nexus

The concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity find an essential place in nationalism. In political theory, ethnicity is defined as a group of people with a common historical background who secretly and consciously share standard views. In this sense, ethnic group does not mean

the mass of people gathered following specific criteria, but naturally, it refers to the group together. Conflicts based on ethnic identity have long led social scientists to investigate the factors that cause ethnic wars. The term "ethnic conflict," which is the subject of studies in many fields such as ethnology, anthropology, psychology, political and social sciences, is studied from different aspects.

Before looking at the connection between nationalism, ethnicity, and ethnic conflicts, nationalism should be defined. Nationalism is a vast concept to define clearly and unequivocally. The assertion that nationalism is what nationalists make of it is, in fact, an escape. Many scholars as sociologists, historians, political scientists, or psychologists define nationalism in the same way.

The word ethnicity is frequently used to explain the concept of 'nation' and is often used in the same meaning by mixing. But the nation differs from ethnic groups in a few points. While nations are on a geographically delimited and politically recognized homeland, ethnic groups are more dispersed and widespread (Smith, 2002). The nation has a central economic structure. It is impossible to talk about the existence of such an organization in ethnic groups. Nations have a mass society culture and the means to spread it. However, ethnic groups share such a culture, and their content occurs naturally (*ibid*). The nations' rights to their members and the duties they demand from them are the same. Ethnic groups, on the other hand, have some unofficial rights and responsibilities due to the traditions they share, but they are not typical and equal as in nations (Smith, 1993).

The concept of nationalism has undergone significant changes in conceptual terms in different periods since its existence in the international relations literature. While in the 19th century, the concept of nationalism was interpreted as a positive concept during the foundation of the nation-state, from the 20th century onwards, the concept was regarded as a disagreement, harmful, and politically dangerous (Smith, 2002). There are different points of view on the definition of the concept of nationalism. The modern theory of nationalism argues that the concept of nationalism emerged in a wide variety of ethnically diverse societies due to historical events (*ibid*). In another approach, nationalism is defined by Smith as a factor that pushes nations to modernity. Smith also defends the thesis that nationalism is in the primordial nature of nations (Smith, 2009). This approach denies the interpretation put forward by scholars dealing with the discipline of international relations that nationalism is a concept that develops with the flow of history (*ibid*).

On the other hand, according to modernists, "nationalism is a modern ideology and movement" (Khon, 1965, p. 10) that has been shaping modern state boundaries and caused so

many wars among nation-states or communities since the 18th century. Throughout history, people have been attributed to their homelands, to the traditions of their families, and established territorial authorities; however, it was not until the end of the 18th century that nationalism began to be a generally recognized sentiment shaping public and private life (*ibid*, p: 9). Due to its dynamic vitality and all-pervading character, nationalism is often considered very old, and sometimes it is erroneously regarded as a permanent factor in political behaviour (*ibid*). According to Smith, nationalism is "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population assumed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential nation" (Smith, 2009, p. 75). Nationalism proved most successful in creating new politics because it was based on emotion (*ibid*). But this emotion did not produce 'a crowd in ecstasy' simply because reason and logic were missing (*ibid*). Mosse argues that "*Rather, the careful efforts of nationalist movements were directed towards disciplining and directing the masses to avoid that chaos which defeats the creation of a meaningful movement*" (Mosse, 1975, p. 16).

Although nationalism is thought to be a modern movement, theoretically, ethnicity, for all its dynamics, provides a more fertile basis for explaining critical elements of nations' distinctive shape and character and nationalism (Smith, 2009). Smith (2009, p. 75) argues that "*ethnicity' as a relatively recent concept was primarily confined to the analysis of different ethnic minority groups within a national state, (…), was therefore conceptually and historically opposed to the idea of the nation*".

Nevertheless, as an ideology and a movement, nationalism might be recent and novel. Nations were seen as forms of extended kinship, which is an extension of ethnicity that was ubiquitous and coeval with the family (*ibid*). Moreover, according to Stavenhagen (1996, p. 25), ethnic identities are often considered to be identical to national identities.

According to the constructivist perspective, nations and nationalism are the creations of various elites who control the state's central political power institutions. Similarly, post-modern constructivists, reacting against the essentialism and naturalism of nationalism and primordialism, consider nationalism to be ultimately a fiction conceived by elites using invented traditions for sustainability and modernity. Ethno-symbolists consider the cultural elements of symbol, myth, memory, norms, values, ritual, and tradition essential to analysing ethnicity, nations, and nationalism (Smith, 2009).

On the other hand, for both modernists and ethno-symbolists, nations are considered historical communities embedded in specific historical and geo-cultural contexts (*ibid*). Nations may not have ethnic "*navels*," but there had to be some elements, including land, to make it

possible to separate and link a particular population from others (*ibid*). We must try to measure the attractiveness of different motives - myths, memories, symbols, values, and the like - to the various strata of the population, and the reasons for this affinity in terms not only of interests and material needs but also of visions and aspirations, familiarity with the concepts used, popular traditions, customs, and the like (Smith, 2009). In turn, the reactions between nationalism, ethnicity, and ethnic communities are not inevitable.

Nineteenth-century Europe and America and in twentieth-century Asia and Africa have the people identified themselves with the nation, a civilization with national civilization, their life, and survival with the life and survival of the nationality (Khon, 1965, p. 11). Nationalism has been dominating the impulses and attitudes of the masses, and at the same time, served as the justification for the authority of the state and the legitimation of its use of force, both against its citizens and against other states (*Ibid*, p: 11). In this context, the increase in the number of ethnic conflicts in the world after the Cold War has intensified the studies towards "ethnic conflicts." Research starting in the 1950s has generally led to the development of an approach that ethnic conflicts are born out of nationalism.

To understand the nexus of ethnicity and nationalism and how it led to the ethnic conflicts, we shall examine it by example. After the Second World War, Syria and Iraq have applied a system that accurate with Arab nationalism and pushes other ethnic communities out of the system. On the one hand, after the Ba'ath Party came to power in Syria, the other ethnic communities have suppressed (Schmidinger, 2018). For example, the Syrian government started collecting Kurdish citizens' identities and did not perceive them as Syrian citizens (Yildiz, 2005). On the other hand, Arab nationalism was the first pillar of the regime's ideological legitimacy in Iraq. The distinction between Kurds and Arabs appeared more insoluble than the division between Sunni and Shiite sectarian groups (Romano & Gurses, 2014, pp. 41-42). This excluding policy was a result of Kurdish movements in Iraq at the end of the Cold War.

Besides, the Sunni minority has promoted Arab nationalism as the main principle of national unity in Iraq. This policy inevitably implied the recognition of Iraqi Shiites - who shared Arab identification with Sunni Arabs - as representing the next rung of the social ladder, thus pushing the Kurds down the hierarchy (*ibid*, p. 42). From the 1920s onwards, this perception paved the way for developing policies of forced displacement and Arabization of northern Iraq that affected the Kurds and other non-Arab inhabitants of the region (*ibid*, p. 45). As a result, the Arabization of the government emerged as a strategy to favour Sunni Arabs as the principal shareholders of the administrative power, which excluded other ethnic minorities

and religious groups from the state's central political and military units (Yildiz, 2007). The strategy that was applied by the British mandate after the First World War to integrate the communities of the new state, Iraq, caused profound societal divisions along ethnic and sectarian lines because of the empowerment of one group, Sunnis, over the other ones, Kurds and Shias (Glavin, 2015). Thus, the dominant Sunni community failed to integrate the Shia community in the south and the Kurds in the north into the state's unities. By the mid-1950s, Arab nationalism emerged victorious from its rivalry with other ideologies and became a vital ideological force uniting Sunnis and Shias.

Although Shiite complaints about Sunni domination of Iraqi politics, by the late 1950s, the Shiites slowly integrated into Iraq's body politics and started to come to terms with Iraqi citizens' functioning until the break down in the Second Iraq War in 2003 (McDowall, 2007). It was the same ideological force that deepened the Arab-Kurdish division that enabled the Iraqi state to strive to break down sectarian barriers (Romano & Gurses, 2014, p. 46). As a group ethnically alienated from the rest of society, the Kurds continued to organize revolts against central authorities under the monarchy, and this strengthened pan-Arabists' perception of the Kurds as an obstacle to their political goals (Stavenhagen, 1996).

As a result, nationalist pressures, and assimilation policies of these four states, in which Kurdistan is divided into four pieces, led to the ethnic uprisings and conflicts from the 20th century until nowadays.

2.5. Religion/Sect and Ethnic Conflicts

In today's world, religions are perceived as one of the main factors that influence the conflicts among ethnic communities globally, especially in the Middle East region, as it was the fountainhead of all cultural and spiritual life in many ages (Khon, 1965, p. 10). Attention to religion's role in ethnic conflicts has been stimulated by both positive and negative developments, including the de-secularization of the world and the rise of religious conflicts (Reychler, 1997, p. 19). Thus, religion has been a critical social factor of ethnic identity (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 27). Overlaps of religion and ethnicity occur in many ethno-religious conflicts with varying levels of strength and salience of the religious and ethnic components (Ruane & Todd, 2011, p. 69).

Today, most violent conflicts still contain religious elements related to the ethno-national, inter-state, economic, territorial, cultural, and religious issues. The conflicts based on religion and sectarian tend to become tenacious, persistent, and brutal warfare types by threatening the meaning of life (Rychler, 1997, p. 21). When conflicts are framed in religious

terms, they become conflicts of values. Therefore, religious belief is a source of conflict, not always but usually within and between communities. However, religion and sects are two of the most influential factors, next to national and ethnic factors, that made the 20th and 21st centuries the bloodiest century in the Middle East and other parts of the world (Reychler, 1997).

Religion is a sort of soft power in ethnic conflicts. In those societies in which religion intervenes in the various areas of public affairs, it might become a critical factor, thus determinant for ethnicity (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 27). The hegemonic powers used religion to preserve their supremacy (Ocalan, 2008). To a large extent, religion can be used or misused by religious and governmental organizations to pursue their interests (Reychler, 1997). Even If the nation-states act as secular organisms, they do not seize using nationalism and religion for their purposes (Ocalan, 2011, p. 17). It is crucial to develop a deeper understanding of the basic assumptions underlying different religions and sects and how those who adhere to them see their interests. In all Kurdish parts, Islam is a religion used by hegemons as a power in controlling the population (Ocalan, 2008, p. 21). In a more specific instance, in an ethnic-sectarian conflict in Iraq in 2003, in which Sunnis were empowered by their government, the majority in power were Sunnis during the conflict to control other communities.

However, after the American invasion of Iraq, the governmental power shifted from Sunnis to Shias, which allowed Shias to take revenge from Sunnis. The same events have occurred in Syria from 2011 to today, where governmental and military power was under the Alawites' control and tried to suppress other sectarian and ethnic communities. Hence, religion and sect were used as an essential source to control the power. However, religionism, sectarianism, ethnicity, and nationalism have played a vital role in shaping Iraq and Syria's administrative structure. The most threatening factors for the internal security of the country were ethnic structures and sects.

On the other hand, it is not only religions and governmental organizations that use religion as a power to pursue their interest. Moreover, there may also be non-governmental political organizations and terrorist organizations that use religion to pursue their interests. The case of ISIS in Iraq and Syria can be given as an example of this situation. Meanwhile, whether in Iraq or Syria, the Kurds are an ethnic minority, and most of them are Sunni Muslims. This does not mean that religious identity is synonymous with ethnic identity, as in many cases, religious identity explicitly implies religious behaviour and belief (Stivachtis, 2019). However, in many cases, the boundary between ethnic and religious identities becomes so blurred that it is difficult to isolate them to blame for violence (*ibid*).

However, besides nationalism, ethnicity, and language, religion is a significant factor in conflict among ethnic and religious communities. Thus, the role of religion in ethnic conflict is highly essential. In the conflict in the Middle East and Africa, the example of Sudan, Syria, and Iraq, the role of religion and sect is one of the most critical factors that induce the conflict and caused it to be deepened and widened.

2.6. Language and Ethnic Conflicts

Language is another factor that flames the conflict among communities within the state. Alongside religion-sectarian, nationalism, and ethnicity, language is a significant reason why ethnic minorities are being pushed by other empowered communities and governmental organizations within the state. The relationship between language and conflict parallels the relationship between ethnicity and conflict (Mabry, 2011, p. 189). Then, there is a nexus between ethnicity and language. Thus, language is a powerful indicator of ethnic and national identity (Stavenhagen, 1996, p. 27).

Language is a significant factor in nation-building strategies. The strategies that are applied by the majority in power may suppress the minority language rights. Thus, the creation and adoption of a national language is a means by which 'a nation imagines itself. Still, its implications for other minority languages spoken within the same political entity can be disastrous (Millar, 2005, p. 200). Serious issues arise when the state attempts to eradicate all linguistic differences to impose the language of the influential group on the minor communities within the state. Language then becomes a divisive rather than a unifying factor (Varennes, 1996, p. 91). When a dominant language spoken by a dominant ethnic group displaces other minority languages, then the struggle over language increases ethnic disputes (Stavenhagen, 1996). Therefore, the minor groups may revolt against the major ethnic group to seek their linguistic rights, causing chaos and conflict. In this case, the Kurds revolt against Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian, and Iranian regimes to pursue their language rights can be given an example. Numerous linguistic minorities worldwide are forbidden from using their mother tongues in public and official state offices or courts and schools (Stavenhagen, 1996).

Language plays a critical role in the process of regaining one's true nature. According to Herder, since each language is unique, he asserts that each community has its way of thinking. That community is the sum of these ways of expression. Herder claimed that language is synonymous and to be learned in a community (Herder, 2002).

To summarize, language has the dual function of unifying and dividing people. Language is unifying the same group members to become a nation within a territory and unify

them to defend their group members against others; however, it can also divide two different groups within a territory due to the majority group's pressure on the minority group(s). Language is a communication way of an ethnic group and a significant factor in creating a nation. Thus, language is a critical factor to conduce a conflict among ethnic communities.

> *"...Language and culture are also a carrier of potential resistance, which can be desiccated by assimilation. Banning the native language and enforcing the use of a foreign language are quite effective tools. People who are no longer able to speak their native language will no longer cherish its characteristics which are rooted in ethnic, geographic and cultural given factors."* (Ocalan, 2008, pp. 19-20)

2.7. Conclusion

This chapter's initiation was to convey the conceptualized theoretical framework and dig into the literature review to explain the roots of ethnic-national identification and the reasons for ethnic conflicts between two or more ethnic groups. Although the theoretical background of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts was the primary focus of this chapter, other essential factors that connect with the ethnicity and ethnic roots and that have the potential in causing ethnic conflicts such as nationalism, religion, sect, and language have also been examined. Moreover, concepts such as ethnicity, ethnic identity, and ethnic group are among the first to come to mind in this context. Primordialism and constructivism about the sources of ethnicity associated with belonging to a group stand out as two basic approaches.

Primordialists claim that ethnicity has inherent and unchangeable characteristics. These are elements such as religion, language, birthplace, and some proponents of this approach also associate genetic traits with ethnic identities. On the other hand, according to the Constructionists, who oppose the Primordialists, ethnicity is a social phenomenon in which the identities are intertwined, produced, or transformed into a new form. Moreover, political elites and intellectuals emphasize nationalism and ethnicity to gain the support of the masses in achieving political goals. Traits related to ethnic identity are rediscovered, built, and strengthened to ensure social cohesion.

Ethnic conflicts can form in the armed conflicts between ethnic groups or between an ethnic group and the state itself. There are instances where these conflicts, which mainly involve intense violence, turn into civil war. The Kurdish conflict in Iraq and Syria can be given as an instance. Ethnicity is not the only reason for ethnic disputes. Nationalism, Religion, and Language are also the elements of ethnic conflicts with a state. However, the word ethnicity is frequently used to explain the concept of 'nation' and is often used in the same meaning by mixing. But the nation differs from ethnic groups in a few points. Nations are on a

geographically delimited and politically recognized homeland. Ethnic groups, on the other hand, are more dispersed and widespread. Nations have a mass society culture and the means to spread it. Although ethnic groups share such a culture, their content occurs naturally. The rights of the nations to their 'members' and the duties they demand from them are the same.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the fragile states which have difficulties in establishing a stable authority over their population can lead to ethnic conflicts. These fragile states in the international arena create the conditions conducive to the emergence of these conflicts. Furthermore, the use of force and pressure used by the state authorities to repress the ethno-religious minorities within their territories may cause and intensify such conflicts. In this context, it is common for states to intervene militarily in ethnic conflicts. If military success cannot be achieved in the early stages of such interventions, the intensity of disputes may increase. The case studies, Iraq and Syria, which are chosen to be illustrated, indicate the ethno-religious conflict characteristics in the 21st century.

Chapter III: The Kurds: The Largest Ethnic Minority in the Middle East

3.1. Introduction

Unlike other ethnic and religious groups and the largest ethnic community without a state in the Middle East, the Kurds have a complex and controversial history. Because of partitioning among various states, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, former Soviet Republics, and living in European states such as Germany and France, the Kurds have mainly assimilated or been forced to change their culture, religion, and way of living (McDowall, 2007). While the Kurds who live in Turkey are assimilated and forced to learn Turkish culture, language, and education according to Turkish standards and mostly become Sunni Muslims, those who live in Iran are forced and assimilated under Persian culture (*ibid*). Moreover, the Kurds in Iraq and Syria are forced and assimilated into Arabic culture, language, and educated according to these standards, just as Turkey and Iran.

Although they have been assimilated and forced to abandon their culture, language, and way of living, the Kurds have stood against these destructive policies and continue fighting for their political and cultural rights for a century (Yildiz, 2007; Yildiz, 2005). In Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and the last two decades in Syria, they have indicated that they have never broken off their objectives. Even further, in Iraq in 1990 and then in 2003, the Kurds have established their autonomy ever since the 1920s. They have established foreign relations with regional and international powers to indicate that they have always existed in these territories. Furthermore, after a long-time of silence, the Kurds in Syria have become at the top of the agenda in 2012 after the breakout of the civil war. This state was the manifestation of waiting for the right time to speak of themselves.

To understand better, we should discuss a general Kurdish history, language, religion, and ethnic-national identity in the following section. In addition to the general history, we should also dig into the last two decades in Iraq and Syria to comprehend the cases.

3.2. A General Overview of the Kurdish History

The world's largest and the fourth largest ethnic community in the Middle East, with an estimated population of 35 million without a state, the Kurdish people have a long history (McDowall, 2007; Gunter, 2008, p. 1). The Kurdish people are an ethnic community whose population and territories form a contiguous geographical area divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, with smaller numbers in the former Soviet Union (Yildiz, 2005).

The origin of the Kurdish people is uncertain and controversial. However, the name *Kurd* or *Kurdistan* goes back to Sumerian times with the word '*kur*' and '*it*,' which meant something like mountain 5000 years ago (Ocalan, 2008). Thus, the term Kurd comes from '*Kurti'* meaning that *mountain people*. Some authors assert that their roots are the descendants of several Indo-European tribes from 4,000 years ago. It is also claimed to be the descendants of the Mede Empire. However, some Kurdish nationalists believe the past in a particular light with ancient symbols and myths that validate Kurdish identity. David McDowall (2007, p. 4) asserts that the Kurds only began to think and act as an ethnic community from the 1920s onwards. Therefore, the Kurdish issue starts from the division of Kurdish land between Turkey, Iraq under British mandate, Syria under the French mandate, and Iran during the First World War. Despite the Kurds' long past, there is no clear information about their history before the nineteenth century. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, no one attached much importance to Kurdistan's frontiers or the number of people who lived there (McDowall, 2007). For the reason of the lack of information, in this part, I will examine the historical background of the Kurdish ethnic and national identity, territorial and language matter by starting from the 1920s onwards.

3.2.1. The land

The term 'Kurdistan' was used for the first time in the twelfth century as a geographical term by the Seljuqs to specify the land where the Kurds lived (McDowall, 2007, p. 6). The geographical extent of this definition has undoubtedly grown by succeeding centuries as Kurds. Thus, the borders of this region have widened over time. Kurdistan is a vast mountainous territory with an area of 500,000 km^2 (The Kurdish Institute at Brussels, 1989, p. 7). Today, Kurdistan is a territory consisting of east and southeast of Turkey, north of Iraq, west of Iran, and north-east of Syria, known as Mesopotamia's strategic heartland, where most Kurds live (see *map 1* below). They also live in some parts of Armenia and Azerbaijan and Khurasan in eastern Iran, or cities like Istanbul, Ankara, Tabriz, and Tehran.

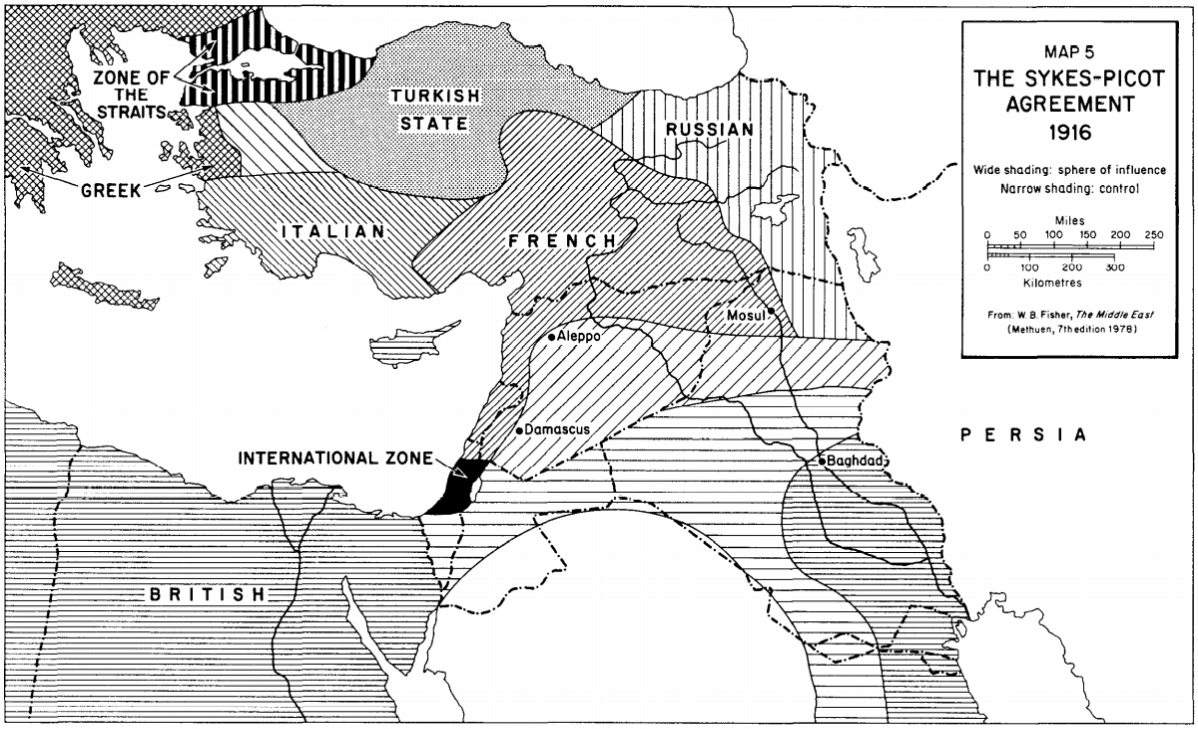
Map 1: **Map of Kurdistan and the areas inhabited by the Kurds.**

Source*:* (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020).

The post-First World War era witnessed the emergence of the new Turkish and Persian states and created the modern Iraq and Syria countries under French and British mandates. The project, which planned to redraw the borders of new states and great powers as Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union in the Middle East, divided Kurdistan into four land pieces. The Sykes-Picot agreement[6] (see *map 2* below) proved this project for redrawing the map of new states by British and French authorities. However, the planned redrawing of the new mad did not go as planned. Kurdistan is a strategic region, and it was essential for the British and French to control Iraq and Syria easily. Thus, the case of an independent Kurdistan in the region would bring difficulties for them.

[6] Sykes-Picot Agreement, in May 1916, secret convention made during the First World War between Great Britain and France, with the assent of imperial Russia, for the partition of the Ottoman Empire's territories. The agreement led to the division of Turkey Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine into several French and British administered areas. The agreement took its name from the chief negotiators Sir Mark Sykes from Britain and François Georges-Picot from France. This agreement also predicted the partition of the Kurdish territories. See (McDowall, 2007). "The agreement carved up the Middle East on the basis of the economic and geo-strategic interests of France and the United Kingdom" (Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008, p. 16).

Map 2: **The Sykes-Picot Agreement.**



Source: (McDowall, 2007, p. 116).

Moreover, the control of Kurdistan land has increasingly become necessary because of its oil, gas, and water resources from the beginning of the twentieth century, its oil fields in the region, Rumaylan in Syria, Batman and Silvan in Turkey, or Kirkuk and Khaniqin in Iraq (McDowall, 2007, p. 7). Since the post-Second World War, the essential role of oil has meant that these states are unwilling to abandon any Kurdish land due to the Arabization, Turkification, and Persianization of Kurdish regions that can be decreased to economic considerations (Yildiz, 2005, p. 7).

On the other hand, with the increasing population in the region and decreasing water resources, water has become an essential resource between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Kurdistan is the place where the water of these three states is mostly being provided. The governments will not willingly hand over control of this water to the Kurds.

Although the Kurdish revolts have occurred in the region from the 1920s onwards, Turkey, Iran, and Syria (from its independence in 1946 to the beginning of the countrywide insurgencies in 2011) have managed to control the Kurds, Iraq has faced a significant revolt of the Kurds in the north of Iraq for the last three decades. Today, these states' efforts to strengthen their borders decreased the cross-border transition between the Kurdish lands. Thus, today, the borders are much less porous. The use of wire mesh fences, minefields and technological air

surveillance, radars, etc., makes it highly difficult for people to passe the frontiers except through authorized crossing-points (McDowall, 2007).

3.2.2. Ethnic-national identity

Indeed, the Kurds had acted as an ethnic-national community after the First World War when their lands were parted among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Based on the language, culture, and constructed history of the Turkish, Persian, or Arab (Iraq and Syria) national and ethnic identities, these new four states monitored similar assimilationist policies toward other ethnic minorities that lived within their new boundaries. Among ethnic communities, the Kurds were remarked as the sole significant ethnic minority to be assimilated in the borders of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria (Romano & Gurses, 2014, p. 4). This assimilation and pressure policies to wipe out the Kurdish language, ethnic and national identity from history caused a revolt against these four states.

While the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran revolted for national, territorial, and language rights, the Kurds in Syria remained silent; first, under the French mandate, then under the Arab Syrian regime from its independence in 1946 to the first Kurdish insurgence in 2004. Despite all the assimilations, the Kurds have revolted against these states for the ethnic-national identity from the 1920s onwards. In Turkey, the revolts have occurred more than others, but the Kurds in Iraq and then in Syria later in 2011 have been more effective than the Kurds in Turkey and Iran in achieving their objectives.

A partial list of essential revolts that has occurred to succeed the Kurdish political, cultural and language rights are: The Kucgiri revolt in 1919, the Dersim uprising in 1937-38 and the PKK's guerrilla insurgency after 1984 in Turkey; the Barzanji revolts of the 1920s, the Barzani-led rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s, the Iraqi Kurdish collaboration with Iran from 1980 to 1988 and the Desert Storm Kurdish uprising in 1991 in Iraq; the Simko rebellion of the 1920s, the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan in 1946, the Iranian Kurdish uneasiness under the Shah in 1960s and the initiations to break away from the new Islamic Republic of Iran from 1979 to 1982, and the post PJAK guerrilla revolt against Iranian forces in Iran; the 2004 Serhildan, and the Syrian Civil War in 2011 in Syria.

However, as it can be understood from the Kurdish revolts that the nationalist policies, Turkification, Persianization, and Arabization, these four states applied to assimilate and integrate the Kurdish population into their societies have not worked. Suppressing the Kurdish identity by force and assimilation policies historically increased the complexity of the issue and

paved the way for today's conflicts in Iraq and Syria (Romano & Gurses, 2014). Syria and Iraq are very similar in the national context due to their historical background and ethnic, religious, and linguistic structure.

As Yildiz asserts that:

> *"Possessing a distinct language, culture, and history, most Kurds retain a strong sense of national identity that extends beyond the borders of the states in which they live, despite attempts to assimilate them into the national identity of individual states"* (Yildiz, 2005, p. 5).

Furthermore, Romano and Gurses (2014, pp. 3-4) argue that "in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, central governments historically pursued mono-nationalist ideologies and a state policy of repressing Kurdish identity." Thus, all four states' official constructed national identities were based on Turkish, Persian, or Arab (Iraqi and Syrian) national ethnicity (*ibid*, p. 4). They all pursued similar assimilationist policies toward other ethnic groups (Kurds, Assyrians, Circassians, and Armenians) and other religious groups that found themselves within their borders after the First World War (Stavenhagen, 1996, pp. 192-193). Moreover, "for Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, the Kurds stood out as the only significant ethnic minority to be assimilated" (*ibid*, p. 193) into Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi nationalist identities. All these assimilation policies caused the Kurdish uprisings in four states in the 20th century. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria witness the refusal of many Kurds to be wiped up from history (Romano & Gurses, 2014). However, the Iraqi monarchy witnessed the rise of Arab nationalism in Baghdad, accompanied by increasing efforts to exercise tighter control over the restive Kurds in the north. The republican regimes that succeeded it offered only forced assimilation and repression, culminating in Anfal's genocidal campaigns and the use of chemical weapons by the Iraqi government on Iraqi Kurds in 1988 (Yildiz, 2005).

3.2.3. Language

Kurdish is the mother tongue of the Kurds, but it has several dialects. Two majors of these dialects are *Kurmanji*, spoken by most Kurds in the north, and *Surani*, spoken by most Kurds in the south, mainly by the Kurds who live in northern Iraq. Grammatically they are different from each other, but while speaking, they can understand each other.

There are also three other dialects spoken by the Kurds. Most of them speak a dialect much closer to modern Persian than *Surani* in the southeast from *Sanandaj* to Kermanshah in the Kurdish part of Iran (McDowall, 2007). The Kurds in Syria speak a dialect of *Kurmanji* like the one spoken in south-eastern Turkey. The other two dialects are *Gurani*, spoken in certain

residential areas of southern Kurdistan, and *Zaza*, spoken by Sunni and Alevi Kurds in northwest Kurdistan.

Language has become one of the most critical factors that the Kurds have been struggling for. The language factor is significant for communication among people from the same communities. Thus, language is essential to ethnic-national identity and nation-building. Language is a factor, not only one, which connects people from four parts of Kurdistan divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Except for Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, the Kurdish language has been forbidden to be taught in school and spoken as an official language in state departments in Turkey, Iran, and Syria. It was even forbidden to talk in Kurdish in the streets from the 1920s to the 2000s. Because of the lack of education and being banned, most Kurds cannot read or write in the Kurdish languages or dialects (Yildiz, 2005). Therefore, it is issued as a fundamental reason for the Kurds to fight for it. Yet, this issue is continuing in today's Turkey and Iran. The circumstances have changed in favour of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria.

3.2.4. Religion

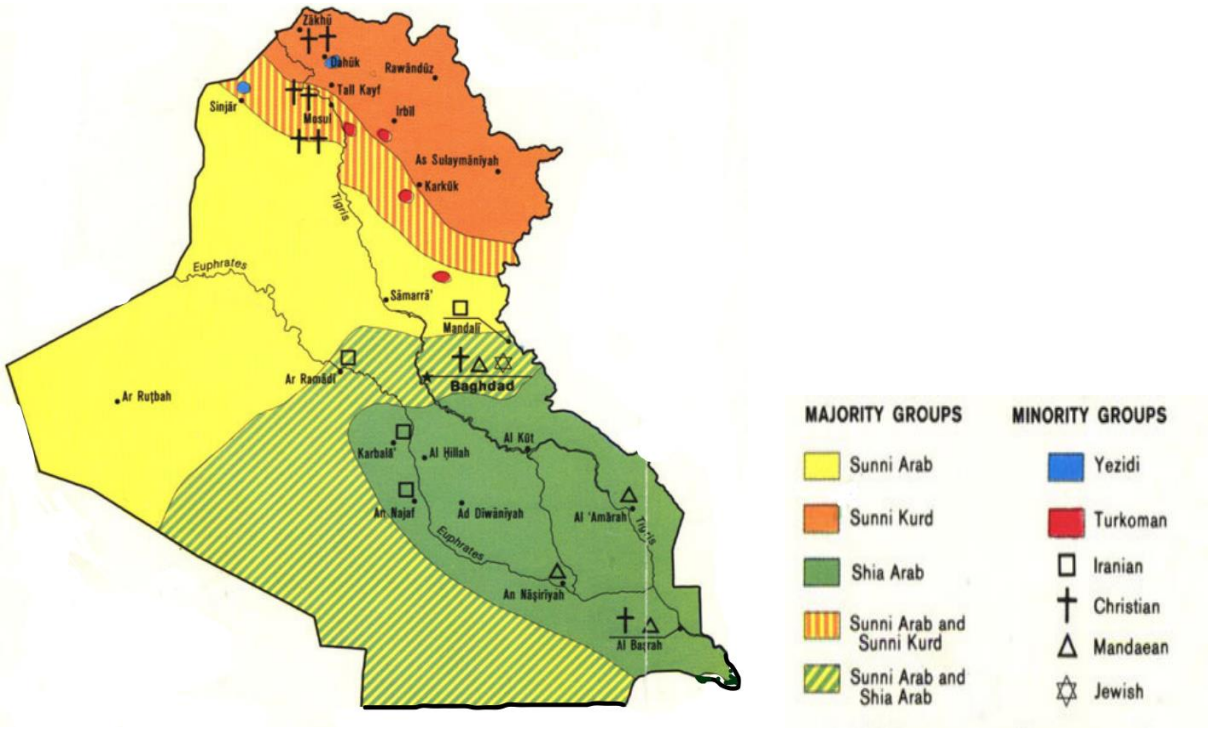
The other important factor in Kurdistan is religion. The majority of the Kurds, approximately 75 percent, practice Sunni Islam (McDowall, 2007, p. 10). While most Turks and Arabs practice the Hanafi sect of Islam, the Kurds primarily practice the Shafi'i sect. Furthermore, the other 25 percent is thought to be from an ancient religion that has survived until nowadays. These are the ancient Hurrian religion of Yazdanism, Zoroastrianism, which are an ancient religion go back to around 500 BC, the Ahl-i Haqq and Alevi beliefs; both are similar sects, Yezidi, Shi'i and other religions that are a mixture of Christians, Jews, Davidians (Kak'ai), Naqshabandi and Gelani Qadiri in Kurdish community (McDowall, 2007; Yildiz, 2005). Neither the Ahl-i Haqq nor the Alawites are merely Kurdish. There are also Ahl-i Haqq and Alevi Turks and Arabs in the region.

The central Christian communities in Kurdish regions are Armenians and Assyrians. Although Armenians and Assyrians are ethnically different from the Kurds, various groups have merged with the Kurdish tribes, with records showing that some Kurdish communities were devoted to Christianity since the mid-twelfth century (Yildiz, 2005).

3.3. The Kurds in Iraq

Iraq is one of the most religious and ethnically diverse societies in the Middle East. Roughly two-thirds of Iraqi people are Arabs, about a quarter are Kurds, and the rest are small minority groups. Iraq's Arab population, in the centre and south, is divided between Sunni and Shia sects (see *Map 3*). About three-fifths of Iraq's population is Shia, and nearly two-fifths are Sunni. In the 20th century, fault lines between communities deepened with the succession of authoritarian regimes ruled by exploiting tribal, sectarian, and ethnic divisions (Stivachtis, 2019).

Map 3: **Distribution of Ethnic and Religious groups in Iraq.**



Source*:* Reliefweb**,** https://reliefweb.int/map/iraq/iraq-distribution-religious-and-ethic-groups

Iraq has a significant Kurdish ethnic minority and Iraqi Kurds roughly adjacent to the Kurds in other countries in the region concentrated in the relatively inaccessible Iraqi Kurdistan mountains. Although most Kurds in Iraq are Sunni Muslims who speak one of the two dialects of the Kurdish language, Sorani, an Indo-European language closely related to Modern Persian, forms a separate and different cultural community (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). They have a solid tribal cultural structure and particular costumes, music, and dances. There is also a significant Assyrian population who identified with the Kurdish movement, had worked within the Kurdish national movement since the 1960s. For instance, one of the most famous

peshmerga commanders was an Assyrian woman, Margaret George Malik, killed in 1966 (McDowall, 2007, p. 381).

The three-way population divided between the Kurdish north, the Sunni centre, and the Shia south has remained one of Iraq's most important features since the forced unification of the three Ottoman provinces, Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Yesiltas, 2014, p. 41). This multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian structure of the newly established Iraqi state after the First World War played a critical role in laying the foundations of authoritarian rule. The administrative systems installed in Iraq from the 1920s to 2003 have never legalized the sharing of government between ethnic and religious groups (Abbas, 2017, p. 81). The Sunni minority, favoured by the mandatory British officials, saw repression as the most effective strategy for maintaining political power over the wider Shiite and Kurdish population. From the earliest days of the Iraqi state, both the ruling Sunni Arab elite and their British patrons recognized Iraqi society's fragmented nature. The authorities' tendency in Baghdad to view any compromise with the Kurds as the beginning of a complicated process that would result in the Kurds' separation has led successive Iraqi governments to perceive the Kurdish question as a constant threat to national security (McDowall, 2007). Hence, promoting an all-encompassing nationalism (*Arabization*) that would narrow the division between Iraq's different communities has become a critical task to ensure stability and effective governance (Yesiltas, 2014). While the sectarian problem in Iraq was mainly a problem of under-representing Shiites within the state's organs, the ethnic problem posed a broader matter because of the Kurds' claims towards a nation-state of their own (Yildiz, 2007).

The initiations to unravel the position of the Kurds in Mosul, the British initially considered establishing autonomous provinces in Kurdish areas that could be loosely attached to the Arab administration (Marr, 1985, p. 40). However, the soon-to-be appointed governor of Sulaymaniyah, Sheikh Mahmud Barzani, a Kurdish tribal leader, was more than willing to accept the British authorities and an Arab administration (Tripp, 2007). He had greater ambitions for the Kurds in the region. Thus, Attempts by Sheikh Mahmud to expand his authority beyond the territorial boundaries established by the British resulted in a Kurdish rebellion in 1919 and in a broader move in 1922, which took the British authorities two years to put down his last insurrection (Harris, 1977, p. 118). This development was only the beginning of the Kurdish ethnic-national identity explosions in Iraq, which will remain a permanent problem for successive Iraqi governments throughout the twentieth century.

The Kurds have sometimes revolted against the Iraqi regime due to their ethnic-national identity and language to gain independence or autonomy. For succeeding in these objectives,

many insurgencies have been held throughout history from the 1920s onwards. The Barzani tribe, therefore, emerged as prominent Kurdish dissenters by 1927. In the years that followed, the Barzanis became famous for their courage and activism to resist the Iraqi central government. In 1929 they demanded establishing a Kurdish province that embraced Iraq's central regions, which they repeated in 1943 (Harris, 1977). Under this encouragement, the notables in 1930-31 petitioned the League of Nations to establish an independent Kurdish government (*ibid*, p: 118). The primary objectives of these attempts were, as Harris states, *"…to gain concessions from the Arabs to permit the establishment of local autonomy and the use of Kurdish as a language of education as well as to demand a greater share of Iraq's revenues for the development of the northern region"* (*ibid*, p. 118).

After 1945, the Iraqi government made various attempts to work on a settlement with the Kurds and tried to cooperate with Kurdish fighters after the fall of the monarchy in 1958. Still, the Iraqi nationalism interests and Kurdish demands for political and language rights led to outbreaks of violence and deepening suspicions on both sides. In other words, the Iraq central government's failure to fulfil its promises to the Kurdish tribes in the 1960s led to new revolts and minor clashes between Kurdish uprisings and the central government (Paul, Clarke, Grill, & Dunigan, 2013). Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the leaders of the Barzani tribe, fled with a group of followers first to Iran and then to the USSR, as known the Kurdish military leader who had backed from the Soviet Union in 1958, responded by mobilizing guerrilla forces, *Peshmerga*, the first political organization of a Kurdish rebel, (it will be detailed in the following parts), launched a full-scale rebellion against the central government. In June 1961, the Barzani rebellion began as a traditional movement to resist the central government and defend tribal rights (Harris, 1977, p. 118). Mulla Mustafa's aims were at most some form of self-government for the Kurds in northern Iraq (*ibid*).

After the Ba'ath Party[7] came to power in 1963, it desired to repress the Kurdish revolts led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani. Acknowledging the difficulty of defeating the uprising militarily, the Iraqi government proposed a ceasefire agreement in 1964 that gave additional political rights to the Kurds (Paul et *al.*, 2013, p. 217). Although the Iraq regime entirely focused on the Kurdish issue in the north, the international events in the 1970s did not let the Iraqi government press the Kurds. On the one hand, the Six-Day War against Israel in 1967 and tension between Iran and Iraq, on the other hand, the pressure for the Soviets on Baghdad to come to terms with Barzani rather than pursue military action (Harris, 1977, p. 120). The Iraqi

[7] A group of young activists who advocated Arab nationalism and socialist movements from the 1960s (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020).

central government concluded a 15-point peace plan with Mulla Mustafa Barzani and other leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1970, which provided more far-reaching autonomy for northern Iraq than ever before (*ibid*, p. 120). Yet, it offered a limited autonomy, and it also included amnesty for all insurgents and assured that the Kurdish language would have equal status with Arabic in Kurdish areas (Paul et *al*., 2013, p. 217).

After the Iraqi government overcame its internal integrity issues with Shias and strengthened its relations with the Soviets, it allowed the central government to repress the Kurds in the north. Thus, for the first time, Mulla Mustafa Barzani faced an entirely determined, well-equipped military operation by the central government. During these operations, the central government also planned to displace the Kurds and replace them with the Arab population in the oil-rich areas, especially Kirkuk (Paul et *al.*, 2013, pp. 216-217), in terms of nationalist policies and Arabization of the northern regions.

In 1973–74 negotiations with Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the KDP for implementing the 1970 agreement failed. Thus, attempts to come to terms with the Kurds in their demands for autonomy have failed, partly due to government pressure and the inability of Kurdish factional groups to maintain a united front against successive Iraqi governments (Stivachtis, 2019). With Iranian military support, from 1961 to 1975, they intermittently revolted against the Iraqi government, as they were going to do during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and were again supported mainly by the United States during the 1990s (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020, pp. 7-8).

The end of the 1980s were the worst years the Kurds in Iraq have experienced since the 1920s. After the rise of Saddam Hussein to power in the Baath party, he tried to expand its control into Kurdish regions through threats, coercion, violence, and the forced transfer of large numbers of Kurds within or to outside the country (*ibid*, p. 8). Moreover, the regime systematically forced large numbers of Kurds and smaller ethnic communities to change their ethnic identities, forcing them to consider themselves Arab. Those who did not consent to this pressure faced deportation, physical abuse, and imprisonment (*ibid*, p. 13). As a result of repression, many Kurdish populations moved to larger towns in the south, such as Mosul and Baghdad, especially during the 1980s conflict. Sunnis who migrated from rural areas moved to Baghdad, with most of their ethnic and religious affiliations. However, the Baath party tried to apply pan-Arab nationalism across the Middle East, which appeared to be denying other ethnic minorities. These nationalist movements were discrimination against all other political parties and identity groups, including the Iraq Communist Party, the Shi'a, and the Kurds (Albert, 2013,

p. 217). As Albert states that “Saddam and the Baath paradigm generally were against the toleration of diversity or of accepting a plethora of ethnic group politics” (*ibid*, p. 223).

When Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979 after President al-Bakr's resignation, the tension between Iraq and Iran climbed once again. Saddam Hussein abrogated the agreement signed in 1975 due to its violation by Iran. Due to the Iranian assistance to the Kurds in the north and the Shias in the south, they were under pressure from the Iraqi central government. The Shias were maybe close to the Iranian government due to their religion, but they were Arabs. Therefore, the Arabization policy did not affect them more than the Kurds. Thus, the attempt to create a singular Iraqi national identity brought the Ba'ath party into conflict with the Kurds (*ibid*, p. 217). Saddam Hussein was unwilling to seek peace or conventional war with the Kurds; his purpose was to fear the Kurds by state terrorism, destructions, and force. During the Iran – Iraq War in 1980-88, he found the chance to actualize his plans over the Kurds. Many Kurds have been displaced during this period, killed, and fled to Turkey and Iran. Saddam Hussein[8] feared that the Kurds might fight alongside Iran against Iraq to break the Iraqi central government and win autonomy (Yildiz, 2007).

Before Saddam Hussein came to power, from the early 1970s, he has broadly appeared as the power behind President al-Bakr, and he had already been involved in previous negotiations and talks with the Kurds from 1968 to 1979 (Albert, 2013). Therefore, he knew what sort of strategy and tactic he could pursue against them. He started a scorching land policy to deter the Kurds, starting in 1987, combined with mass executions and exiles (Mcdowall, 2004).

On 16 March 1988, one of the worst attacks occurred in Halabja, the Kurdish city, where the Baath regime has used chemical weapons. Halabja is a city close to the Iranian border and has been the Peshmerga stronghold for a long time. The campaigns are named Al Anfal, which "was used by the Ba'athist military machinery to refer to a series of eight military offensive Iraqi Kurdistan in the spring and summer of 1988" (Yildiz, 2007, p. 25). The Anfal campaigns included the physical destruction of an estimated 3,000 villages, the displacement of about 1.5 million people, and civilians' mass execution (*ibid*, p. 25). Although the exact figures have not been determined yet, it is thought that as many as 180,000 people were killed as a consequence of this destruction campaign (Albert, 2013, p. 219; Yildiz, 2007, p. 25).

[8] Also see; Albert (2013, pp. 221-222), “Saddam Hussein's vision of an Iraq identity based upon Sunni Muslim characteristic led the leader to attempt to promote those with a Sunni identity above those with a Kurdish identity and sought to force the Kurds to accept, assimilate, and conform to his vision.”

In August 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. After this offensive action, an international coalition is authorized by the UN Security Council to halt Saddam from this aggression. The Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 provided the Kurds with an impetus to seek further independence, with the US could rebel and perhaps overthrow Saddam from power (Albert, 2013). The US President George Bush considered Iraq's aggression a threat to Western interests (Laurent, 2003). Thus, the war against Iraq encouraged the Shia and Kurdish populations to rebel against the central government.

The Iraqi government's initiation to re-control Kurdish regions in the north forced more than one million Kurds to flee to Turkey and Iran (Yildiz, 2007). In April 1991, the US, the UK, and France established a "safe haven" in Kurdish parts of Iraq (Stivachtis, 2019). Therefore, the Kurdish refugees in Turkey and Iran feel safe to return to their homes. In a short time, the Kurds had constituted autonomous rule, and two main Kurdish political parties, the KDP in the north and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the south, competed for controlling the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). The competition encouraged the Iraqi central government to meddle in the affairs of the Kurdish autonomous region. The Iraqi military launched an attack in Erbil in 1996 and engaged in a consistent policy of ethnic cleansing in areas directly under its control, particularly in and around the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, where the Kurds and other minorities predominantly were inhabited (*ibid*, pp. 71-72).

However, the Kurds suffered the central government's brutality, attacks, violence, and military operations. The Persian Gulf War was a turning point for Kurdish people in Iraq, which rescued them from more than seventy years of Arab regime and provided a limited autonomy to be settled in the north. The assistance from the US, the UK, France, and other NATO members was the primary reason to establish their limited autonomy.

The US-led coalition, including the UK, Spain, Poland, Australia, and Turkey, invaded Iraq in March 2003, which has provided the Kurds with the most significant opportunity than ever before to strengthen their autonomy and achieve their further objectives (McDowall, 2007). The Second Iraqi War will be examined deeply in the following sections.

3.4. The Kurds in Syria

Syria, which remained an unstable region of various Islamic states until Yavuz Sultan Selim's[9] expedition in 1516, had a relatively long period of peace until the beginning of the

[9] Yavuz Sultan Selim was the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1512 to 1520.

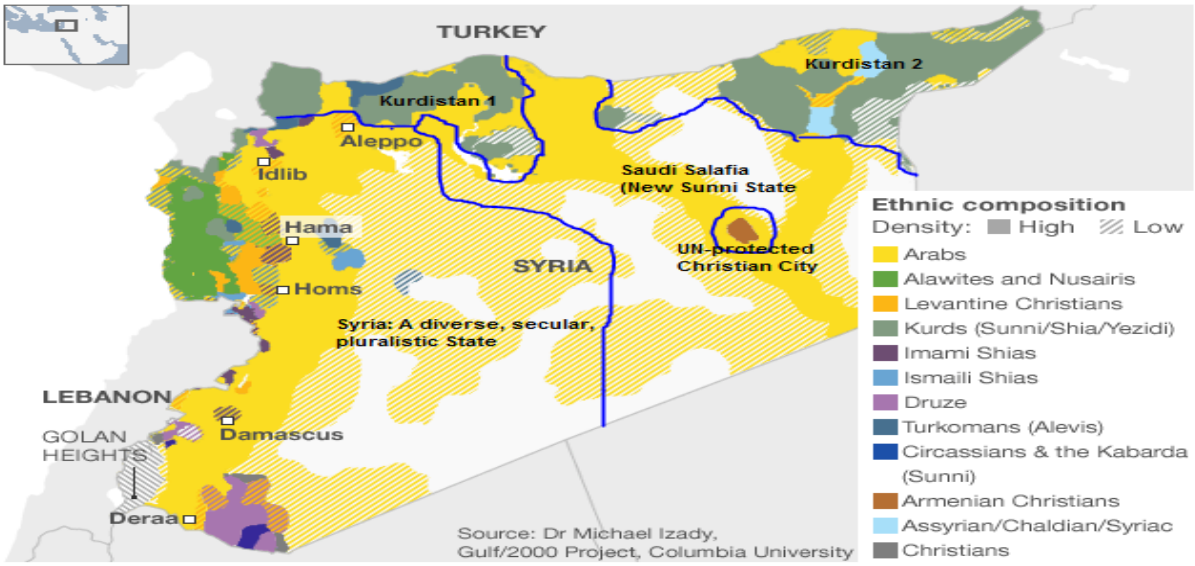
20th century after it came under Ottoman rule—like the short Egyptian control at the beginning of the 19th century opened the door to political instability and social disputes. This instability, however, turned into de facto conflicts between ethnic and sectarian communities in Ottoman Syria at the end of the nineteenth century (McDowall, 2007).

The history of modern Syria, after the Ottoman rule, has been divided into three main periods. First, the short-lived Faisal State period between 1918-20 when policies based on Arab nationalism were tried to be implemented, but many social segments were offended by each other. Secondly, 1920-46, the French mandate era, when the country's social dynamics were turned into enemies and in which the foundations of the distorted political structure in modern Syria were laid. Finally, from 1946 independence to onwards, unstable, and weak successive governments and the Baath party's period controlled by Assad's family.

Syria is an ancient land that remained under the Ottoman Empire regime; however, the modern state based on the French mandate established in 1916 after the Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed between British and French authorities (see *Map 2*). The factor that turned this political background into instability has been the political expression of the dense ethnic and religious accumulation structured by this geography throughout history (Dag, 2015).

Compared to many countries in the Middle East, the ethnic and sectarian roots of the conflicts and tensions in Syria are strong. While the Sunni segment, which constitutes a large part of the country's population, such as 80%, excluded from political entities since the early 1960s, the small Nusayri / Alawite minority of less than 10% is the most influential groups in the country (Dag, 2015, pp. 1-2). In addition to these two groups, Druze (3%), Syriac (2%), and other Christian religious minorities, as well as ethnic groups such as Arab (75%), Kurdish (10%), Turkmen (3-5%), Armenian (0.5%) and Circassian (0.5%) are the main actors of social and political tension while forming the essential elements of the social structure in the country (*ibid*, 2015, p.1). Thus, its ethnic and religious diversity and the host of deep-rooted political movements put Syria in a prime position among the Middle Eastern countries. The Kurds constitute the most significant ethnic minority in the country. Although most of the population lives in the north-eastern regions, there is also a substantial Kurdish population in the capital city, Damascus. To see the distribution of the Syrian population based on ethnic and religious groups, see *map 4* below.

***Map 4*: Distribution of Ethnic and Religious groups in Syria.**



Source: (Nishapuri, 2012).

The Kurdish struggle in Syria started when Kurdistan has separated between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria after the Ottoman Empire collapsed. Yet, the Kurds of those four states lived in the Ottoman Empire since Turkey, Iraq, and Syria were not separated until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War (Gunter, 2014, p. 7). While Turkey gained its independence, Iraq remained under the British mandate, and Syria remained under the French mandate by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. When Kurdish people were divined, these people's struggle for their language and political rights started in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria by the 1920s. However, the Kurds in Syria remained more silent than the Kurds in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. North of Syria, Syrian Kurdistan, or the region where the Kurdish people heavily live, is often called *Rojava*, which refers to the West of Kurdistan. Rojava contains the country's most fruitful areas and is also home to most of its oil reserves in Syria (Gunter, 2014).

The Kurdish population in Syria, like the Kurds in Iraq, has suffered from colonialist powers and non-democratic regimes. First, from the 1500s, the Ottoman Empire occupied Syria until the end of the First World War; second, under French mandate until Syrian independence in 1946; and finally, under the Arab-nationalist Syrian regime until 2011. Under the Ottoman Empire's authority, the Kurds in Syria had no issues with the central government or the *sultan*[10]. Also, underdeveloped, and immature Kurdish national identity was not assumed a threat, such as the more mature Arab nationalism during the French mandate (Yildiz, 2005).

[10] *Sultan* was the highest authority in hierarchy of the Ottoman Empire.

The Kurds benefited from political, language, and cultural rights, as illustrated by the rise of a modern civil society comprising political and social organizations, the legal authorization of Kurdish language speak and publications, and Kurdish recruitments into both the governmental administration and the military. Due to the benefits that several Kurdish tribes and landlords obtained from French authorities, the Kurds mainly were enjoyed and supported French rule because decentralization did not seem to challenge the tribes and landlords' traditional power (Gunter, 2014, pp. 9-10). For this reason, in Syria, the sense of Kurdish national identity improved more slowly than the Kurdish national identity in Turkey and Iraq because of tribes and landlords who were usually not motivated or concerned by national identity.

With its independence in 1946, Syria faced the Cold War balances where it was politically and militarily weak. Its first experience in the international scene is being involved in a war with Israel. Syria, which implemented close policies with the Soviet Union, displayed an unstable political structure until the 1970s, where short-lived governments frequently changed hands (Dag, 2015).

In 1963, the Ba'ath party seized political power in Syria, which was also the turning point of political life in the country. Then, the Assad family's iron fist policy, the authoritarian rule of Hafiz al-Assad, who seized power with the military coup in November 1970, created a society that was suppressed at home until the 2000s (Hourani, 2020). Throughout its history, Syria's political, cultural, and sociological constraints have constructed the tension and conflict dynamics that the country is in today. In Syria, the Kurdish ethnic problem is deepened due to these political, cultural, and sociological constraints from the 1920s onwards. The Kurds never seek guerrilla revolt or insurgency and always stand by solutions at the political level in Syria (Bingol, 2013).

However, nationalist policies put into effect after independence in 1946 envisaged the Arabization of Kurds along with all ethnic elements. While new Kurdish groups emerged opposing this situation, the Syrian Kurdistan Democratic Party (SKDP), established in 1957, was the most important group that stood out in this period. In 1962, one-fifth of the Kurdish population, whose identity documents were obtained, were stripped of their Syrian citizenship (Dag, 2015; Yildiz, 2005). These people, whose assets in the country became illegal since this date, could neither establish a business nor benefit from their education rights. As the Kurds, who also lost their land, were marginalized, their claims became more radical. The Barzani rebellions that started in Iraq in 1963 put the Kurds in Syria on the target board, and thousands

of Kurdish families from the region were exiled to the desert regions with the introduction of new Arab settlers since 1973 (Yildiz, 2005).

On the one hand, while supporting Kurdish separatist groups in Turkey in the 1980s and 90s, Syria has continued to suppress the Kurds within the state (Dag, 2015). This contradictory nationalist politics in the country has revealed new events and groups. However, a critical movement in recent history occurred during a football match in Qamishli in 2004. Dozens of people lost their lives due to the Syrian police using real bullets in the incidents that broke out between the Arab and Kurdish team fans. Hundreds of people were detained after the events that turned into a Kurdish rebellion. After the initiations between the Kurdish leaders and the Syrian government, the events have been smoothed (Bingol, 2013).

The historical turning point for the Kurds was the Arab Spring spread into Syria in 2011. The Kurds remained relatively silent at the beginning. They, who were psychologically sympathetic to regime change, but believed that their physical facilities could not bear such a struggle, have entered the conflict with both the regime and the Free Syrian Army since 2012 to control the northeast regions.

3.5. Conclusion

The world's largest and the fourth largest ethnic community in the Middle East, the Kurds have the most controversial and complex history than any other ethnic community in the world. With being divided into four pieces between Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, the Kurds have been forced to live under Turkish, Persian, and Arabic ethnic-national identity, culture, language, and political structure. As a result of living under different political, cultural structures, the Kurds are exposed to assimilation policies and violence.

While the Kurds religiously have similarities with Turkish, Persian, and Arabic culture, their language and dialects are different. Not all Kurds are Muslim. Also, the origin of the Kurdish religion is not Muslim. However, religion is only one aspect of the culture, not enough to describe ethnic-national identity. The Kurds differ from Turkish, Persian, and Arabic identities ethnically and linguistically.

On the other hand, living in these countries in the Middle East, the Kurds have never accepted their forcefully taught language and culture and assimilating policies and political structure. For resisting these policies, the Kurds have been revolting against these countries to achieve independence or autonomy.

However, the ethnic clashes between the Kurds and these states have destabilized the region, and the nationalist governments' repressive policies on the Kurds hindered the

democratization of the Middle East. The destabilization and repressive policies caused ethnic conflicts in the region for the last two decades in Iraq and Syria.

Chapter IV: the Kurds in Iraq from 2003 to 2011

4.1. The Context

Ethnic and religious strife is one of the main reasons that undermined most Middle Eastern countries' social and political stability, whose gained their independence at the beginning of the 20th century. It is seen that the ethnic and religious communities in these countries are not adequately addressed by political parties and are marginalized within the framework of discriminatory approaches. In this context, Iraq has witnessed discrimination and oppressive policies between different ethnic and religious groups throughout its history. Hence, Ethno-religious/sectarian conflicts and divisions are a common term in life in Iraq. Today, these conflicts are one of the most prominent features of the country. These conflicts affect life in the country to a great extent, such as its political, security, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. These conflicts in Iraq are also among the main factors in the decision-making process of neighbour countries, although they are in mutual interaction with the border (Yildiz, 2007).

Today, it is evident that Iraq is going through a compassionate, dangerous, and complicated process and an effect of ethno-sectarian conflicts. Iraq's division is one of the scenarios that may occur with permanent damage to the political and social fabric. Because, within the framework of the reconciliation democracy of the political process created after 2003, the ethnic and religious segments that share the power in the national partnership governments were first shared among the country's three main parts: Shia, Sunni and Kurds (Tripp, 2007). This division of power brings along endless political crises that cause the division of the social fabric that transcends politics among all ethnic and religious segments of the country, which deeply shake Iraq's stability and security. Since 2003, ethnic and sectarian divisions have been one of the main reasons hindering the country's reconstruction and undermining its stability and security. With the institutionalization of ethnic and sectarian identities in Iraq, sectarian violence profoundly shakes its strength and social structure (Romano & Gurses, 2014).

After 2003, the Kurds stood as the most influential ethnic group driving Iraq's politics and security. Also, keeping the most critical oil and gas areas of the country allows them to benefit from many revenues and strengthen their powers, which led to other ethnic and sectarian groups criticizing and carrying hatred against the Kurds.

Although the 2003 Iraq War was a battle against Saddam Hussein's regime and the proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD), it turns into an ethno-religious struggle after some time (Abbas, 2017). The US's objectives to spread freedom and democracy in the region did not work to calm down this struggle. The rivalry between the Sunnis, Shias and Kurds created chaos in the country. The proxies were struggling for regional and international powers' interests and to gain leverage in domestic politics. While the Sunnis and Shias were fighting because of the historical hostility created by the Saddam regime and for controlling the power in the Iraqi central government, the Kurds were trying to achieve their goals in the north, such as establishing a strong autonomy, which they have been fighting for almost a century (*ibid*).

However, the Kurds have benefited from this power struggle between Shia and Sunni over the central government. While the Sunnis and Shias were battling for central government, the Kurds have strengthened their forces and their relations with some regional players such as Turkey and Israel and international powers such as the US to establish substantial autonomy or independent Kurdistan in the KRI. The Kurds also tried to capture the most critical revenue of Iraq, the natural resources, in Kirkuk, which would have given the Kurds the power to play a significant role in their relations with the Iraqi central government and regional and international players (Albert, 2013).

Before, during, and after the 2003 Iraq War, the Kurdish political parties, the KDP and PUK, had various fundamental objectives to achieve. These basic objectives have become stronger throughout history and finally succeeded after the 2003 US-led coalition invasion in Iraq. Some of these objectives were to become a more assertive regional government rather than living under the "no-fly zone" and maybe found an independent state in the future (the first attempt will be held in 2017 by launching a referendum for independence, which would have failed due to the lack of international support.), reinforcing their military forces, controlling the power over natural resources, which are of vital importance for their economic power and surviving as well as developing better relationships with regional players as Turkey, Iran, and Israel and international players as the EU and the USA to guaranteeing their existence in the future (Albert, 2013). The attainment of these objectives and the factors that have influenced these objectives will be detailed in the following sections.

4.2. Kurdish Political Forces in Iraq: The Peshmerga Factor

The Peshmerga, which is a general term used for Kurdish fighters in Iraq, deriving from *Pêsmerge*, meaning "*those who face death*," but now used for the official paramilitary forces

of the autonomous KRG, trace to the 1950s. It was first established as guerrilla organizations under the self-proclaimed Republic of Mahabad in 1946-1947 and then became the republic's official army under Mulla Mustafa Barzani's leadership. After the fall of the republic and the execution of leader Qazi Mohammed, Peshmerga forces reappeared as guerrilla organizations that would continue to fight Iran and Iraqi governments for the rest of the century. Mulla Mustafa Barzani of the KDP led the Peshmerga in Iraq. Barzani consolidated the Peshmerga and continued to recruit during the early 1970s, raising the group's ranks to 50,000 by 1974 (Paul, Clarke, Grill, & Dunigan, 2013, p. 218). He also gained increasing support from the Shah of Iran, who agreed to provide the Peshmerga with heavy weapons to pressure Baghdad's Baathist regime (*ibid*). The Peshmerga were the dominant Kurdish forces who handled most Kurdish anti-Saddam operations (Albert, 2013). Despite all, the Peshmerga were defeated in the Iraqi-Kurdish conflict in 1975. Jalal Talabani, one of the leaders of the KDP, left the KDP the same year to revive the resistance and founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This incident formed the basis of the political discontent between the PUK and KDP that has divided the Peshmerga forces and most of the Kurdish community in Kurdistan (Yildiz, 2007).

With the division of the Peshmerga, the Kurdish forces have weakened. They did not have the power to face Saddam's forces during the 1980s. Thus, the USA and Israel, for their own interests, before the Gulf War in 1990, have provided significant support, with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) supplying channels to the Kurds with money and weapons to counter Iraq's ties to the Soviet Union. According to Paul et *al*. (pp. 218-219), “Israel agreed to assist the Peshmerga and send commandos to advise and train the guerrilla forces.” Thanks to the outside powers' assistance, the Peshmerga were able to withstand the Iraqi central government’s operations.

In 1979, with Mulla Mustafa Barzani's death, his son Masoud Barzani took his place. As tensions rise between the KDP and the PUK, most of the Peshmerga fought each other to keep an area under their party control and fought against Iraqi Army attacks at the same time. The conflict between them ended in September 1998, an official peace treaty, the Washington Agreement, signed between Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. These parties ended the conflict in 2002, a few months before the US invaded Iraq in March 2003 (Dere, 2010). Tensions remained high in the following years, but in 2003 they both participated in the overthrow of Saddam’s regime as part of the Iraq War. According to two respondents, “the existence of Kurdish force, Peshmerga, in the north of Iraq was very critical for the war against Saddam Hussein, and it was also critical for internal security aftermath” (interview 2 and 4, 2021). Moreover, one respondent stressed that “*the Peshmerga had a significant opportunity*

due to 'no-fly zone'. Because there were no warplanes that can bomb the ground, and they were able to forward and control their territories easily" (interview 4, 2021).

The Peshmerga played a crucial role in the mission of capturing Saddam Hussein in 2003. The West, mainly the USA, believed that the Peshmerga was the best hope for security and the continuity of western interests in Iraq (Fantappie, 2015). Thus, the West support for Peshmerga forces came in various forms, including airstrikes, intelligence support, logistical assistance, special training, military operational consulting, lethal military weapons, and non-lethal military aid, and medical assistance (Corcoran, 2014). With Saddam's overthrow in 2003, the Peshmerga started more responsibility, strengthened their authority, and acted as a real army (Fantappie, 2015). Due to oil reserves, the invasion of the most critical cities, Mosul and Kirkuk, was conducted from the north by the US and the Peshmerga forces. Hence, the Peshmerga are regularly portrayed in the West as a valuable ally (Paasche & Gunter, 2016, p. 11).

The Peshmerga units are equipped with high-quality military equipment that they captured from Saddam Hussein's armed forces. Following the recent disintegration of Iraqi federal military units in areas subsequently recaptured by the peshmerga, Kurdistan also took possession of many armoured trucks, vehicles, and artillery pieces provided by the US (Knights, 2014). The Peshmerga become more vital to protect the Kurdish region in the ethno-religious struggle in the country.

4.3. Strengthen their Autonomy: Weak Central Government as an Opportunity

Although the Kurds have lived under the protection of the Western powers under the "no-fly zone" and a limited autonomy since the First Gulf War, Saddam's regime did not allow them to strengthen their capacity in the north of Iraq. In 2003, when the US and the UK-led coalition invaded Iraq, they provided the Kurds with an exclusive opportunity to become a key player in Iraq. The Kurdish groups seized this opportunity and increased their economic, political, and military power in the area.

> As David McDowall states that *"... the outset of 2003 heralded great possibilities for the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey. With the intended American invasion, the Kurds of Iraq faced the greatest opportunity since 1918 to order their affairs to their satisfaction"* (McDowall, 2007, p. 1).

Following the September 11 attacks of Al Qaeda on the US and the subsequent US-led invasion of Afghanistan, President George W. Bush claimed that Iraq was secretly aiding

terrorists and developing weapons of mass destruction (Corcoran, 2014). He used the high threat perceptions created by the terrible events of 9/11 to go to war against Iraq and the global terror network a necessity (Brigham, 2008, p. 1). The US prepared to invade Iraq in 2003. However, the Kurdish groups in Iraq were getting ready for the upcoming war, as well. Being a natural enemy of Saddam Hussein's regime due to his aggression towards the Kurds in the past decades, the Kurds strongly supported the American invasion in 2003 (Barzani, 2019). They were also aware of the opportunities that the war might bring them. In an interview, the leader of the KDP, Masoud Barzani, stressed the importance of the invasion and the possibility that they have been waiting for a long time (Barzani, 2019), which means the end of Saddam Hussein regime and new chances for other ethnic and sectarian communities to strengthen their hands. In this case, the Kurds and Shias came to the fore.

The Kurds also had concerns that the US may betray them, as they did in the past during the First Gulf War (Barzani, 2019). It was not the only concern; they were also worried about the heavy Turkish troops entering the Kurdistan region for invading Iraq from the north. A state, which denies the existence of the Kurdish ethnic identity within its borders, might have held a threat to the Kurds in Iraq.

The 2003 US invasion brought various significant changes to Iraq. With the USA, Britain, and France putting a no-fly zone in the north, the Kurds, who gained a weak autonomy from Baghdad in 1991 after Iraq invaded Kuwait, have strengthened their autonomy and power (Brigham, 2013) by seizing the weakness of the central government. As a result of this weakness, the 2005 constitution drew Iraq's internal borders establishing a federal Kurdistan region in Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah governorates, so-called the Kurdistan Reginal Government (KRG) (International Crisis Group, 2020). With the establishment of the KRG, two Kurdish parties, the PUK and KDP, acted together to manage the government in Kurdistan. One respondent stated that "*By the 2005 constitution of Iraq, the Kurds has established a government stronger than ever before. Because neither the Iraqi central government nor regional enemies had enough power to prevent that*" (Interview 3, 2021).

In 2006, for the first time in Iraq's modern history, a Kurdish politician, Jalal Talabani, the former leader of the PUK, became the president of the Iraqi central government. This historical moment indicated how much the Kurds have influenced and strengthened their authority and power in Iraqi politics.

4.4. Geopolitical and Geostrategic Importance: Natural Resources Factor

Natural resources are one of the most critical parts of Kurdistan in Iraq. Modern states have been willing to control this region since oil became an indispensable natural resource on earth. The Kurdish region in Iraq is among these cases. As McDowall states, "another reason why controlling Kurdistan has recently become more important is that its oil and water resources have grown in significance since the Second World War" (McDowall, 2007, p. 7). That is why neither regional nor international powers intend to ignore such a strategic region. The Kurdish part of Iraq has the richest oil reserves in Kurdistan land. On the one hand, these oil resources give exclusive geopolitical leverage to the Kurds; on the other hand, these reserves make Kurdistan the area of conflict for outside powers.

Iraq has the world's second-largest proven petroleum reserves[11] (Longley, 2020). It also contains 110 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and is a focal point for regional and international security concerns (*ibid*, p. 1). However, Mosul and Kirkuk are the two most important cities due to their petroleum reserves in Iraq. For being located near to the Kurdish region, their geopolitics gives Kurdistan geostrategic leverage. Thus, the Iraqi central government fears losing its oily affluent areas in case of establishment of a Kurdish state in the region. For this reason, Iraq tried to change Kirkuk's population where the Kurds were predominantly inhabited, favouring Arabs by the 1980s by displacing the Kurds, replacing them with the Arab population in the city (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020).

However, oil has given geopolitical and geostrategic leverage to the Kurdish region in Iraq. These geopolitical and geostrategic leverage have provided the KRG to improve its relations with regional and international powers. Therefore, during the 2003 Iraq War, the US needed the Kurds, who knew the region more than any other actors, to access and protect the oil reserves. In the past and still today, Kurdistan's geostrategic position has been triggering the appetites that made the region a pawn in the struggle for resource distribution by international powers (Ocalan, 2008). This geostrategic position is not solely critical in terms of natural resources, and it is also crucial for the democratization of the Middle East (Ocalan, 2011, p. 20).

[11] For more details see; BP 2006 Energy Statistics Report published on June 14, 2006. The Middle East countries, which have 61% of the world's oil reserves as reserves, also have a very important share in production. When the production totals of the Middle Eastern countries are evaluated, there was a significant decrease in oil production in 1985 compared to 1980, and the Middle Eastern countries have increased their production in the following years, had a share of 28.2% in world oil production with a production of 1.098.4 million tons in 2005. While Iran, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, these six Middle Eastern countries realize 28.2% of the Middle East production share of 31% in world oil production. Iraq ranks second after Iran.

After the Iraqi central government's fall, the Kurdish forces immediately set about strengthening their political and economic control over Kurdish territory. The rule of Mosul and Kirkuk was critical due to oil reserves, which played a significant role in redrawing the Kurdish-controlled areas in Iraq. With the 2005 constitution, the KRG legally founded its oil sectors, which allowed it to develop its structure and institutions and improve its relationship with regional powers. For instance, Turkey, which perceived the status of Kirkuk as a national security threat (Stein, 2017), has played a significant role in this process. The Kurdistan Oil and Gas Law was passed from parliament in August 2007 and founding the KRG's Ministry of Natural Resources and reinforcing it to sign contracts with international oil companies (Ala'Aldeen, Palani, Babunashvili, & Balisdell, 2018, p. 7).

The KRG's natural resources are crucial to maintain a long-term foreign policy and relationship with outside powers. As Ustun and Dudden (2017, p. 9) point out that "*one of the main factors that had helped the stability and relative success of the KRG was its energy resources, mainly oil and natural gas.*" The most significant natural resources in Kurdistan are located in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), which makes the KRI the most critical and essential part of Kurdistan. Therefore, the regional and international powers desire to further their relationships with the KRG to preserve their natural resources interests in Kurdistan. Turkey, Iran, and Israel are the three most critical regional powers willing to develop their relationship with the KRG due to its oil and gas.

4.5. Regional Power Players and the KRG

Global and regional developments and power struggle affect the KRG. The political and economic relationship with the regional powers played a significant role in the KRG's further objectives. Without having a vital relationship with regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, the Kurds in Iraq may not have attained their goals after the war. During the 2003 Iraq War, the KRG's relations with regional powers were not the best but good enough to become a provincial government.

Although Iraqi Kurdistan has *de facto* established after the First Gulf War, the struggle between two major Kurdish political parties, the KDP, and the PUK, in the region and the power struggle and the ambitions for controlling the area by regional powers such as Turkey, Iraq, Israel, and Iran have not allowed the Kurds to enjoy their autonomy. Nevertheless, the KRG became stronger by developing good relations with its neighbours and the Iraqi central government after the 2003 Iraq War, which also removed Iraq's economic embargos and constitutionally recognized the KRG.

Mainly, due to the cooperation to prevail the PKK issue, increase its influence over oil resources, and counterbalancing the Iranian influence over Iraq, Turkey has cooperated with the KDP since it has been established as a regional government and kept the accession of the oil and gas reserves after the war in 2003. Besides, Iran has been willing to cooperate with the Kurdish political party, the PUK, to increase its influence in the Kurdish region of Iraq and the end the US containment strategy and balance Turkey in the area. The exact reasons are also binding for Israel. But sharing the borders with Kurdistan, Turkey, and Iran are the most critical actors who substantially impact the outcome of the KRG's political decisions, purposes, and objectives. As Yerlikaya (2013: 147) wrote that *"for the Kurds, Iran has always been a state that they should take into account…Of course, this information does carry the same meaning for the Turkish-KRG relations.*"

Turkey and Iran are the two major regional powers in Kurdistan that do not desire to see an independent Kurdistan. On the contrary, Israel has helped them to establish substantial autonomy or independence. Yet, developing their relations with the KRG, these three regional giants have helped Kurds directly or indirectly achieve their objectives and goals.

In this part, I will examine the KRG's relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel and how critical these three actors were for the Kurds in achieving their objectives after the 2003 Iraq War.

4.5.1. Turkey Factor

> *"Our relationship with Turkey has reached a strategic level, and it is mutually beneficial."*
> Nechirvan Barzani, Former Prime Minister of the KRG.

When it comes to the Kurdish question, Turkey is the most sensitive country in the region. Due to its large Kurdish population and struggle with the Kurdish question since modern Turkey's independence in 1923, Turkey has tried to reject any issue related to this question within its borders and its neighbour's territories. Thus, Turkey is one of the most critical players on the Kurdish issue in the region.

With the economic embargo from the Iraqi central government, the failure of the UN commitments, and the lack of support from Iran, the Kurdish political parties saw Turkey as the most critical power in the region for the future of Iraqi Kurdistan (McDowall, 2007). Although being sensitive and opposing the questions concerning the Kurdish issue, Turkey has cooperated with some Kurdish political parties to secure its internal Kurdish issue. In this point,

Turkey has cooperated with Iraqi Kurdish political parties, especially the KDP, to weaken the PKK, which has been fighting with Turkey for Kurdish political and language rights for decades and accepted as a terrorist organization, and to hinder them from living in Iraqi Kurdistan (Stein, 2017).

Turkey used the Kurdish leaders' dependency to obtain their participation in a massive operation against the PKK (McDowall, 2007, p. 384). In 1992, Turkey launched an operation, 'Operation Northern Iraq,' to halt the PKK's attacks on Turkey. The KDP and the PUK supported Turkey in this operation (Kurdish Institution of Brussels, 1992; Yildiz, 2007). Thus, while increasing the hostility among Kurdish organizations, Turkey also improved its relations with the KDP and the PUK for weakening the PKK. In response to the collaboration with Turkey, the PKK has blocked the routes of goods' supplies from Turkey to Iraqi Kurdistan (*ibid*). Therefore, Turkey launched a bombing campaign to support the Kurdish groups in Iraq in its battle against the PKK. In the struggle with the PKK, Turkey needed to cooperate with the Iraqi Kurdish political parties. It was also a *de facto* recognition of the Kurdish groups and their authorities in northern Iraq. Moreover, since the establishment of the KRG, Turkey sees its partnership with the KRG to be an integral part of its continued efforts to marginalize and annihilate the PKK and its related groups on the KRI territories (Ustun & Dudden, 2017, p. 11). Turkey was the most prominent opposition to establishing autonomy for the Kurds in Iraq until the capture of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, in the 2000s. Until the mid-2000s, relations between Turkey and the Kurdistan region were complicated due to Turkey's consideration of its Kurdish population (Ustun & Dudden, 2017).

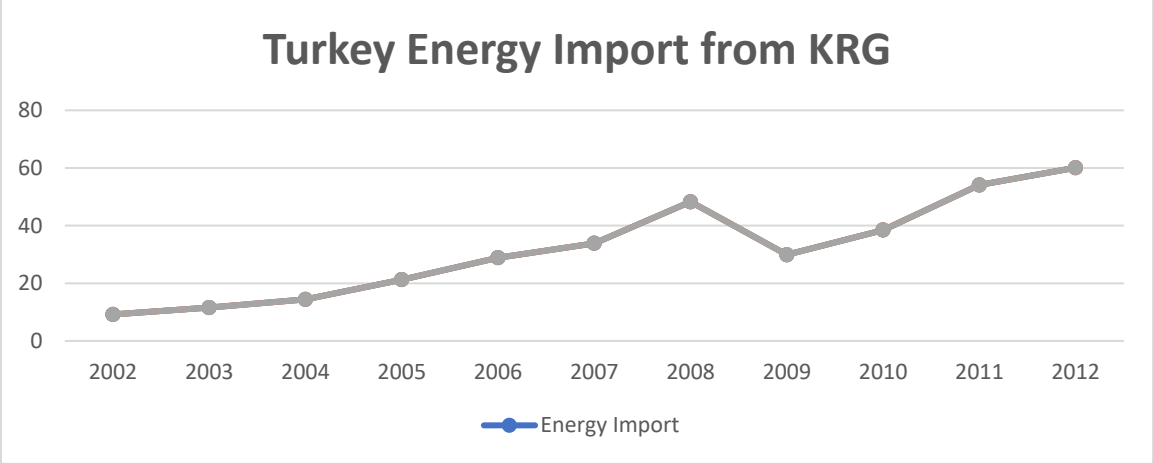
Turkey has softened its strict politics towards the Kurds within its territories and the Kurdish entities within its neighbours. After the government change in Turkey in 2002, Turkey softened its policies and sought solutions for the Kurdish question to become an EU member. This softening of the policies towards the Kurds in Turkey led to developing its relationship with the KRG. After the 2000s, while Turkey desired to solve the Kurdish question in peaceful ways, it expanded its relationship with the KRG. It established close ties with Masoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP. The relationship between Turkey and the KRG has changed significantly in the past decade (Stein, 2017).

The 2003 Iraq War was the turning point in Turkish-Kurdish relationships. According to one respondent, *"after 2003, the Kurds become close to the US. For this reason, Turkey could not resist the creation of the Kurdish government in the north and Turkey soften its attitude to cooperate with them to secure its interests in Iraq after the Sunnis have fallen from power"* (interview 4, 2021). Thus, Turkish security-oriented foreign policy shifted to a new

level, in which Turkey has followed good relations with its neighbours, including the Kurdish entities in Iraq (Sharif & Towfiq, 2015). After the war, Turkey seized the opportunity to support, develop and sustain a good relationship with the KRG. Thus, Turkey developed diplomatic relations and economic ties with the KDP (Gaston & Ollivant, 2020). However, one respondent stressed that "*Turkey has always opposed establishing any Kurdish entity in the Middle East, but when it comes to its interests, it might accept it. Thus, the reason for supporting the Kurdish political parties in Iraq was to halt the PKK from its facilities in Northern Iraq, counterbalancing Iranian influence and benefit from Kurdistan petroleum resources. The same reason goes for Iran, as well*" (Interview 3, 2021).

On the other hand, the KRG's oil and gas resources are vital, which provides Turkey with an exclusive opportunity to decrease its dependence on Russia. These natural resources are the most critical drivers behind the relationship between Turkey and the KRG. Becoming a regional government with the 2005 constitution (*Section 5, Article 113*), the KRG gained a significant geostrategic position for Turkey. The KRG was contributed with protected privileges, the right to hold its military, regional legislation, and natural resources. This situation allowed Turkey to halt direct dealing with Baghdad, and it started engaging with the KRG (Ala'Aldeen, et *al.*, 2018, p. 7). Turkey and the KRG reached a deal to construct one gas and two oil pipelines connecting the KRI directly to Turkey (Middle East Research Institute, 2016, p. 23). Dividing the revenue proportionally from all Iraqi oil exports through Turkey between the Kurdish government and Central government gave direct access to the KRG in which made Turkey de facto guarantor of the KRG oil contracts (Stein, 2017, p. 9), which makes Turkey the largest trading partner of the KRG with an estimated export of $6 billion (Entessar, 2018, p. 78).

Table 2: **Turkey Energy Import from KRG.**



Source: data collected from: http://cres.ch/213/

Turkey is an essential energy bridge between the KRG and the EU. With increasing the Shia community's influence in the Iraqi central government, which also increased Iranian influence in Iraq, this power shifting within the central government after the 2003 Iraq War, Turkey was sort of forced to develop its relationship with the KRG to protect its interests in Iraq. As Ala'Aldeen, et *al*. wrote,

> "*These developments positively impacted on Turkey–KRG relations and grew to include the security, political, trade and economic sectors. Indeed, over the past decade, Turkey has increasingly defined its multi-dimensional relations with the KRI in strategic terms. A number of strategic energy and construction contracts that have been signed between the KRG and Turkey are described by Baghdad as contravening its (i.e., the central government's) policy. In 2013, for example, the KRG independently signed an agreement with Turkey to build new pipelines with the ultimate capability of exporting 2 million barrels of oil per day and 10 bcm of natural gas per year from the KRI to Turkey"* (Ala'Aldeen et *al*., 2018, p. 8).

The KRG was also willing to develop its relationship with Turkey to reach the European market for its oil and gas. Therefore, this puts Turkey in an essential position for the KRG. However, one can say that Turkey had to support the Kurdish region and its legitimacy during the 2003 Iraq War and after the war to consolidate its interests and purposes in Iraq.

Turkey has also supported the KDP to secure its interests in petroleum-rich northern Iraq to counterbalance the other powerful party in Kurdistan, the PUK, backed by Iran. Thus, Turkey's support has helped the Kurds strengthen their autonomy and objectives and increase their influence over Iraq's economic and political structure. Since 2003, the Kurds became very close to Turkey (Litvak, 2018, p. 48). Turkey engages in productive diplomatic and economic relationships with establishing a consulate in Erbil in 2010, but it is afraid of the development of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq (Bishku, 2018, p. 62). The first attempts of independence would occur under Prime Minister Masoud Barzani's leadership in 2017 by launching a referendum, which would cause a significant collapse in Turkish-KRG relations.

4.5.2. Iran Factor

Iran was one of the biggest promotors of the Kurds in the 1960s-80s. Since the 1960s, the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, have been willing to work with Iranians to weaken the central government in Baghdad (Gaston & Ollivant, 2020, p. 9). The rivalry between Iraq and Iran was always heightened due to the border dispute and sectarian clashes. This tension between these two neighbours causes support from Iran to the Kurds in Iraq. The

worsening relationship between Iran and Iraq also led Tehran to increase the flow of assistance markedly to the Kurds (Harris, 1977, p. 120). Like Turkey, Iran has denied the Kurdish ethnic-national identity within its state structure and institutions (Ali, 2016). Although denying the Kurds' ethnic-national identity within its territories, Iran has collaborated with the Kurds and supported them for its interests and purposes in Iraq. Therefore, before the First Gulf War, Iran supported the Kurds to revolt against the Sunni Iraqi government during the 1970s and 1980s. Whenever the tension heightened between two enemies, Iran has used the Kurdish card in the north to weaken its enemy. However, with the fall of the Shah and the rise of the religious section to Iran's power, it has diminished its support for the Kurds in the 1990s.

From the 1990s to 2003, the relationships between Iran and the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq were fragile. Although the relations at the economic level as cross-border transport of goods with the Iraqi central government and the Kurdish region, Iran found it hard to build and maintain a stable policy toward the Kurds (Entessar, 2018). On the other hand, Iran wanted to keep the PUK on its side to end the US containment strategy in the region and end the Iraq support to the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI). Thus, Iran assisted the PUK against the KDP and required help from the PUK against the KDPI (McDowall, 2007).

The 2003 Iraq War was the beginning of the new era in Iraq for Iran. The proxies of influence and their relationships that emerged after the 2003 US invasion are even more remarkable for current political dynamics (Gaston & Ollivant, 2020). On the one hand, Iran has supported the Shia segment as its proxies in Iraq to fight back the Sunni part, which Saudi Arabia has supported; on the other hand, Iran has supported the Kurdish political party, PUK, to counterbalance Turkish influence in Kurdistan and desired to reduce the growing impact of the United States and Israel in the region (Entessar, 2018).

However, Iran did not announce any official talk or direct support to the Kurds before, during, or after the 2003 Iraq War. Yet, it has supported indirect ways. Iran procured political and logistical support to the US-led coalition invasion of Afghanistan and Washington's Hamid Karzai installation as the country's president in 2001 (Jones, 2019). As the US prepared for war in 2003, Iran attempted secret talks with the Americans who were the Kurds' most significant supporters in Iraq. After American troops invaded Baghdad, Tehran itself was in all respects to the United States, including officially recognizing Israel, cutting off all support to Hamas, and forcing Hezbollah to disarm if the U.S. promises to give up regime change (*ibid*). Therefore, Iran has abstained from opposing a Kurdish regional government supported by the USA. The Kurdish groups, the KDP, and the PUK have established a federal entity in northern Iraq, the KRG, which is legally recognized by the 2005 Iraqi constitution and the international

community (Ali, 2016). Iran has not officially announced any recognition due to its internal Kurdish question. Still, it has unofficially cooperated with the Kurds in Iraq to deepen its influence and interests in Iraq against other regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel (Gaston & Ollivant, 2020).

On the other hand, Iran has funded developing networks of political proxies by supporting Shia political parties and leaders to advance to higher positions in the Iraqi central government. While Iran has been using its proxies, mainly the Shia section in the south of Iraq, to fight against Sunni groups backed by Saudi Arabia, it has been supported the Kurdish groups, especially the PUK, under the leadership of Jalal Talabani, to counterbalance Turkish influence in Iraq.

The Kurdish political parties, the KDP, and the PUK control most of Iraq's oil reserves. Therefore, Iran must support the Kurdish groups to increase their influence over natural resource areas. In case of any hostility between Iran and the KRG, the Kurds may fully cooperate with Turkey. Hence, the KRI has a critical geopolitical and geostrategic position for Iran in Iraq. Thanks to these connections with the KRG, alongside relationships with the Shia community, Iran has influenced and shaped Iraqi politics (interview 2, 2021).

With the Iranian influence, Nuri El-Maliki became Prime Minister of Iraq in 2006 (Yerlikaya, 2013, pp. 148-149). He belongs to the Shia community, in which he has tried to suppress the Sunni community in the country. The first sign of aggression between Shia and Sunnis has come from PM El-Maliki, who has started a critical operation against former Baath party members; most of these members were Sunni Arabs (Yerlikaya, 2013). The secret presence of Iran might have provided power to PM El-Maliki, who has also followed a foreign policy similar to Iranian policies. With the beginning of the demonstrations in Syria, El-Maliki has acted as Iran (*ibid*). The Kurds have feared from Sunni- Shia conflict that might drive Iraq into a civil war. On the one hand, the Kurds had not accepted the operations cared out by El-Maliki; on the other hand, they tried to have good relationships with Shia communities.

One of the Iranian strategies was to rotate the re-emerging Iraqi institutions to their side after 2003 (Gaston & Ollivant, 2020). The 2003 Iraq War brought a significant opportunity for Iran to maintain its interests and reshape its foreign policy towards Iraq. After 2003, Iran accelerated its activity and put heavy pressure on various Shiite parties to form a unified bloc in Iraq to preserve the Shiite hegemony (Litvak, 2018, p. 43).

Another difficult challenge for Iran was Turkey after 2003 in Iraq. Turkey's cooperation with the KDP in the KRG has been interrupting Iranian interests. To fully operate its parts, Iran had to cooperate with another Kurdish party, the PUK, in the north. Therefore, after the US-led

coalition invasion, Iran supported Maliki's Shia government and the PUK. Iraq became an economic and political battlefield for Turkish and Iranian interests, which pushed them to collaborate with the Kurds to strengthen their hands in Iraq (interview 2 and 4, 2021).

Although the Iranian objectives towards Iraq and the KRG have usually been political, it also developed economic and diplomatic relations with the Erbil. The opening of Iranian consulates in Karbala, Basra, and Erbil and Iraqi consulates in Mashhad, Ahvaz, and Kermanshah expanded the economic and diplomatic ties between Iran and the KRG (Entessar, 2018, p. 74). After Turkey, Iran became the second-largest trading partner of the KRG from 2003 on with an estimated $4 billion annual export (*ibid*, p. 78). Like Turkey, the economic relations between Iran and the KRG have often been focused on energy, oil, and gas. These relations have continued and grow after 2011 with the withdrawal of the US from Iraq. This economic trade income helped the Kurdish region develop and strengthen their autonomy and power compared to other ethnic and religious groups in Iraq. For example, one-quarter of Iran's trade with Iraq is conducted with the KRG (Lindenstrauss, 2018, p. 54).

However, these corporations at the economic and diplomatic level are sometimes interrupted due to the KRG relations with the US and Israeli intelligence services, despite the KRG officials having denied special ties with Israel (Entessar, 2018, p. 76). The tension between the US, Israel, and Iran over the Kurdish region also put the KRG in a difficult position.

4.5.3. Israel Factor: Invisible Contributor

Israel has been one of the most significant promoters, militarily, politically, and economically, of the Kurdish political organizations in the Middle East. Being a natural enemy of most Arab countries, especially in Iraq, Israel has supported the Kurds for its political interests in the region for decades. By the mid-1960s, Israel became the military assistance of the Kurds in Iraq (Bishku, 2018), when it was supporting the Kurds for gaining independence in Iraq, some authors and politicians even called Iraqi Kurdistan such as "the second Israel" (Bengio, 2017, p. 2). Since the issues rose between Israel and various Arab states, Israel has supported the Kurds to increase its influence and get involved in Middle East states' internal affairs, including Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. By doing that, Israel does not officially announce its support for the Kurds. It often supports them in a muted way. Thus, Israel can be called an "invisible contributor."

Israel has also created a significant opportunity for the Kurds to carry out their further political interests and purposes. Most Kurds believe Israel is the most considerable friend and

contributor of the Kurds. Israel is also one the most powerful state in the region that has been defending the Kurdish ethnic-national and language rights while Arab, Turkish, and Persians have been ignoring it for decades (Bengio, 2017). This situation has reinforced Kurdish relations with Israel for years.

Israel has always seen the Kurdish region as a critical and geostrategic area in achieving its geopolitical goals against Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and other Middle East countries. Due to its domestic Kurdish question, Turkey has not opposed Israel's support of the Kurds in Iraq (Entessar, 2018). As Scott Ritter (2006, p. 21), a UN weapons inspector in Iraq during the 1990s, claimed that Turkey "*would turn a blind eye toward Israel's support of the Kurds in Iraq and Iran in exchange for Israel's assistance in clamping down on the Kurdish rebellion in Turkey*."

Israel has supported the Kurdish political parties, although the KRG has denied such cooperation that operates in the KRI and that have sought to destabilize Iran (Ritter 2006, p. 77). Israel views Iran as an existential enemy and will do whatever necessary to rid the region of the incumbent regime in Tehran (Schmidt, 2020, p. 23). Therefore, "*while Israel defines the Kurdish minority as a buffer against common enemies, Iraqi Kurds see Israel as a potential ally to legitimize their political independence and an economic partner to alleviate internal instability*" (Liga, 2016, p. 3). One respondent also pointed out that *"Israel is even in favour of a Kurdish state in Iraq. Because it has always sought for legitimacy in the Middle East, for this reason, it wants to play a role in creating a new state to legitimize its independence and find a partner in the region"* (interview 1, 2021). After all, the Kurds do not intend to officially mention their collaboration with Israel, not to damage their relationships with Turkey and Iran.

The 2003 Iraq War opened a new period in Kurdish relationships with Israel. It has enhanced cooperation with the Kurds after the Kurdish region became regional government and controlled most oil areas in northern Iraq, which allowed Israel to access oil resources without collaborating with the Iraqi central government. As aforementioned, the KRG has denied Israel's collaboration over oil exportation, making Israel an "invisible collaborator". With the US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, Israel operated intelligence operations in the KRI and provided military assistance and training (Bishku, 2018; Liga, 2016). Moreover, Israel has played a crucial role in Kurdistan, which is bordering Iran and Turkey in a strategic region, to observe Iran. In this context, Israel secretly trained Kurdish *peshmerga* and provided the Kurds with agricultural and technological knowledge (Kirchick, 2010).

After the war, the relations between the Kurds and Israel are deepened. In 2004, the meetings were held between the Israeli Prime Minister, Masoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP,

and Jalal Talabani, the leader of the PUK. Reportedly, the KRG has supplied Israeli-manufactured goods, including military equipment (Bishku, 2018). In 2005, the Kurdish security forces were trained by Israeli commandos and with providing millions of dollars military equipment in the region (Institut kurde de Paris, 2005). In 2006, the Israeli experts trained the Kurds for shooting techniques on the ground, which is refused by the Kurdish officials and Israeli authorities (Abdelhadi, 2006). The collaboration between the Kurds and Israel, which is being perceived as a threat and enemy of the Arab and Muslim world, may increase the tension between the Kurds and Iraqi Arabs. The Kurdish officials did not desire to formalize any cooperation with Israel, but Israel has supported the Kurds more than it looks like. As Bishku (2018, p. 63) argues that "while the Kurds did not want to acknowledge military ties with Israel, political and economic relations were something else, though political ties have never been formalized." Both parties formally denied the existence or scope of Israel's intelligence relationship with Kurdistan.

One of the reasons why Israel has been supporting the KRG that much for the last two decades is the rise of an Islamist government in Turkey. The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power broke Turkey and Israel's relations. Thanks to the AKP Islamist government's provocations, the potential for a strengthened Israeli-Kurdish relationship has never looked this better (Kirchick, 2010).

Israel has always desired to support the Kurds in the Middle East among Muslim countries. The Kurds are the only Muslim community who have never hated Israel. Compared to other Muslim segments, the Kurds have vital political, economic, and military cooperation with Israel. Still, they have never intended to formalize these relations due to relations with Iran and Turkey. Therefore, Israel has always remained an "invisible contributor."

Israel's support has been a significant factor for the Kurds in achieving and maintaining their political, economic, and military objectives and goals in the Middle East. Israel would also support the Peshmerga in 2014 to fight ISIS and be the only supporter of the referendum launched by the KRG for an independent Kurdistan in the KRI in 2017.

4.6. International Players and the KRG

Since the establishment of Iraq, international powers have long been one of the critical actors in Iraq. Besides the regional authorities as Turkey, Iran, and Israel, international actors such as the US, the UK, and other international powers have been involved in ethno-religious conflicts in Iraq with their proxies for securing their interests and power struggle in the Middle East. Many political organizations, forces, proxies, or actors emerged after the US-led

intervention in Iraq in 2003. The Kurdish political parties in Iraq, the KDP, and the PUK have been supported by these global powers to block the Iranian and Syrian governments in the region. To secure their interests and purposes in Iraq, international players, such as the US, cooperated with the Kurdish political organizations. However, the US created a significant environment with a crucial opportunity for the Kurds by the 2003 Iraq War to further their objectives and reach their targets.

4.6.1. The USA

The US foreign policy towards Iraq goes back to the 1960s when the Baath party seized power and developed its relationships with the Soviet Union. The relations with the Kurds started around the 1960s-1970s when the administrations of D.D. Eisenhower and J.F. Kennedy secretly promoted the Kurds, Barzani insurgency, to weaken the Iraqi military regime of Abdel Karim Qassim, who has initiated to develop the relations with Moscow after seizing power in the Iraqi central government in July 1958 (Douglas, 2010). After signing a cooperation and alliance agreement with Moscow, the Nixon administration launched the cynical covert action in Iraqi Kurdistan, with help from Iran and Israel, in April 1972 (*ibid*, p. 64). During the Cold War, direct support to the Kurds in Iraq might have escalated Turkish-American and Iran-American relations due to the Kurdish population in their territories. The US did not desire such an issue to occur.

After the regime changed in Iran, the US relations dramatically escalated with Iran. Thus, Iraq was not the only problematic country in the region that holds a great danger to the US interests. Iran is also added to this problem. The US needed the Kurdish political parties to weaken Saddam's regime and Iran internally. They could collaborate neither with the Sunni groups due to their relations with Saddam and nor the Shia groups because of their ties with Iran. There was one option that was the Kurds. The first illustration of the support would have been seen during the First Gulf War when the US incited the Kurds to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, which would have turned into a nightmare for the Kurds with Saddam's operations in Kurdistan (Douglas, 2010).

However, the Kurds have been obtaining the most critical support from the US from the 1990s on. First, the US has created a 'no-fly zone' in the Kurdish region. This 'safe heaven' was not solely for the Kurds, and it was also a critical area for the US to attain the 'containment policy' and follow its interests in Iraq. Therefore, during the 1990s to 2000, the US used the Kurdish region and emerging the 'no-fly zone' as a springboard for the overthrow of Saddam

Hussein and as a lever in its policy of *'dual containment'* of Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran (McDowall, 2007). As President Clinton stated that

> *"the no-fly zones have been and will remain an important part of our containment policy … because we effectively control the skies over much of Iraq, Saddam has been unable to use air power to repress his own people or to lash out again at his neighbours"* (Yildiz, 2007, p. 90).

The Kurdish political parties, the KDP and PUK, have been assisted enormously by Iran and Iraq during the Kurdish civil to diminish the US containment strategy in the region. The US has launched missiles several times against Iraq in 1993, 1996, and 1998. In late 1994, Robert Baer, a senior CIA Middle East assistant, arrived in northern Iraq, where he assembled in Baghdad with a mixed team of Kurds, Iraqi exiles, and opposition military officers to plan the overthrow of the Baath regime (Douglas, 2010, p. 94). Following the removal of the UN weapons inspectors from Iraq in 1998, the US attacked with *'Operation Desert Fox'* and hit suspicious weapons facilities and targets across the country for four days (Yildiz, 2007, p. 91). After the removal of the UN inspectors, the US concerns about Iraq facilitating WMDs soared. On January 26, 1998, a letter was sent to President Clinton expressing their concerns about uncertainty in Iraq and creating great danger for American interests in the Middle East. This was a dangerous game played by Iraq. Thus, the US and Iraq war started in 1998, and March 2003 was the only proper moment to invade.

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist attack on American territories was one of the most critical moments in US history. One could say the *"second earthquake'* in US history after the Pearl Harbour. It was also the moment that would have changed the political life in the Middle East. This moment is one of the reasons that the US invaded Iraq in 2003. President Bush claimed that Iraq supported terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida and attempted to facilitate the WMDs, which was seen as a danger to the US and its alliance security (CBS News, 2002). The Turkish government refused to let the US military troops to use their bases in Turkey as the main points for '*Operation Iraqi Freedom'* in 2003 (Douglas, 2010). That will create a historical opportunity for the Kurds to fight beside the US and finally defeat Saddam Hussain. But the fear of betrayal remained until the end of the war. Because Washington has always used the Kurds to protect its interests in the Middle East and then cynically abandoned them to their own fate (*ibid*, p. 97).

On the one hand, the invasion created a significant opportunity for the Kurds, and it also brought chaos into Iraq. The Sunni and Shia militias started fighting for the central power. The struggle between these two major sectarian communities allowed the Kurds to control the north

and strengthen its capacity. Thus, the US did not trust either Sunnis due to their historical roots with the Saddam regime or Shias due to the Iranian influence in the region. As a result of Sunni and Shia struggle, the free elections could not be held until 2005. The US committed to "*continue to support the Iraqi people and their historic march from tyranny to effective democracy and work with the freely elected, democratic government of Iraq to consolidate and expand freedom, and to build security and lasting stability*" (National Security Strategy of the USA, March 2006, p. 38). But there was a problem. The Shias were the major group in the country. Thus, in the case of a president from the Shia segment, it could raise another tension with the Sunni community in the country. For these reasons, the Kurds remained the only option. The PUK leader Jalal Talabani elected the President of Iraq in 2005 as the first Iraqi Kurdish President in history.

Given the pro-US position adopted by the Kurds for decades, the critical US role in protecting the nascent KRG and the overthrow of Saddam, as well as the fundamental affinity felt by the fighting American and Kurdish soldiers, the cooperation between the US military and the peshmerga is expected to be perfect (Knights, 2014). Yet, the tensions between Baghdad and the KRG have created a barrier with the US in cooperation. The Iraqi central government's argument for Kurdish forces not to access the heavier military equipment put the US in a difficult position. Until 2011, the US provided the United Security Mechanisms, a series of triple US-Iraq-KRG command centres and checkpoints to prevent conflicts between the federal government and Kurdish forces.

The Kurds have always desired to continue their cooperation with the US. With meaningful shared experiences and mutual sacrifices fighting Saddam Hussein and the post-war insurgents in Iraq, the US and Kurdish forces continue to be natural security partners. Kurdish forces have become the guardians of a significant part of the new territory and non-Kurdish minorities attacked by Sunni militias and ISIS in post-war. Thus, a long-term reconciliation between Kurds and neighbouring ethnic and religious groups is vital to the stability of northern Iraq. These factors require the US to strengthen its military alliance with the Kurds. Such a development would improve the US-KRG relations after several years of bruising differences over various problems (Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008). Due to its crucial security and critical airports, Iraqi Kurdistan is an ideal place for Kurdish forces to safely undertake an extensive military training program and equipment delivered by the US (*ibid*). One respondent pointed out that "*the US helped the Kurds to establish their autonomy and regional government. However, this regional government was beneficial for the US future influence in Iraq because Iran has been trying to dominate Iraqi politics via Shai groups and*

the US sort of needed the Kurdish Regional Government to progress its interest" (Interview 3, 2021).

In terms of the objectives that the Kurds have looked for to succeed throughout history, the US has provided an excellent opportunity for them. The US became a major actor to guarantee the autonomy and existence of the KRG in Iraq. Although they sought an independent Kurdistan in the region, they only achieved a constitutionally recognized autonomous. The creation of Kurdistan might have raised a great tension between the US and its NATO ally Turkey and created a considerable danger for the stability of the region. It would have caused the collapse of Iraq's integrity and raised tension in Turkey, Iran, and Syria due to their Kurdish population. The US did not want to risk such a development. The Kurds have been satisfied with a constitutionally guaranteed and stable regional government. Therefore, without the US, the Iraqi Kurds might not have succeeded and attained any of these objectives. However, the US decided to retreat its troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. It is mentioned in the 2010 National Security Strategy:

> *"First, we are transitioning security to full Iraqi responsibility. We will end the combat mission in Iraq by the end of August 2010. We will continue to train, equip, and advise Iraqi Security Forces; conduct targeted counterterrorism missions, and protect ongoing civilian and military efforts in Iraq. And, consistent with our commitments to the Iraqi Government, including the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement, we will remove all of our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011"* (2010, p. 25).

After a decade of the war, Iraq has socially been divided between Sunni, Shia, and the Kurds. There were no Iraqis anymore; there were the Kurds and the Arabs, who has also divided into two sub-religious communities (Yerlikaya, 2013). The US was the guarantor of the Kurds and the one who has provided the Kurds the most significant opportunity of all time. To conclude, with a respondent argument, *"the Kurds perceived this war and the chaotic situation after the war as the greatest opportunity to pursue their objectives, and the US gave them what they were seeking for"* (interview 1, 2021).

4.7. Conclusion

Iraq has been the centre of war in the Middle East for two decades. With the 2003 US-led coalition invasion, the Saddam regime has ousted from power in a short time. However, the overthrow of the Saddam regime has not ended the violence in the country. After the intervention, the public order has collapsed, and the chaotic environment in the country has deepened because of the deterioration of the functioning of the security organs. The elections

held in 2005 and the new constitution could not end the violence between Shia and Sunni groups and were not sufficient to ensure political stability. Between 2009-2011, the USA completed the withdrawal process from the country, but instability and conflicts did not end. After the Saddam regime's fall, a security vacuum occurred in the central government, which caused to ethno-sectarian struggle in the country.

While the Sunni and Shia communities have struggled for central government power, the Kurds have strengthened their influence in the north of the country. It has also benefited from the power gap in the Iraqi central government to construct its infrastructures. Moreover, consolidating their relations with regional and international powers, the Kurds have reinforced their provincial government and became the most effective community in Iraq politics. As a result of becoming the most powerful group in Iraqi politics, regional and international powers started dealing with the KRG rather than the Iraqi central government.

Moreover, possessing their own military forces, controlling much of state natural resources such as oil and gas, and located in a strategic geopolitical territory, the KRG has seized the opportunity to reinforce its autonomy and strengthen its relations with Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Such ties with Turkey and Iran started going well, two countries that oppose Kurdish autonomy before the war due to their domestic Kurdish question. Also, Israel found the opportunity to cooperate with the Kurds directly instead of dealing with the Iraqi central government.

Furthermore, as a superpower, the US presence in Iraq and its support for the KRG against the regional states such as Turkey and Iran made significant changes in favor of the Kurdish community. As a result of this assistance, the KRG found the most crucial opportunity to strengthen its power and survive against regional powers and domestic struggle among Sunni and Shia. In the context of all these significant reasons, the Kurds in Iraq, compared to other Kurdish parts in Iran, Turkey, and Syria, managed to establish a stabilized autonomy in the region after the 2003 Iraq war. Then, the Kurdish entity in Syria followed in 2012.

Chapter V: the Kurds in Syria from 2011 to 2020

5.1. The Context: The Emergence of Civil War

To understand the reasons and transition of the Syrian Civil War over a decade, I need to dwell on the background. I have already mentioned the historical stage "the Kurds in Syria" for a century. Not going too far, with the death of Hafiz Assad in 2000, his son Bashar Assad started his duty with a very hopeful attitude compared to his father. Assad, who made many promises and said that he would make various reforms, followed his words for a short time, but soon he started to follow his father's path. The people subjected to an oppressive administration and the dire economic situation arose various revolts from time to time. While the problem was critical, the hatred among different ethnic and sectarian communities increased due to its social division. In other words, while the Alawites (10-13%) were keeping all the political, economic and military power and were in a wealthy life, the others such as Sunnis (70-75%), Kurds (10-12%), and some other minorities were suffering from the economic situation and brutal political oppression. Thus, the level of anger among these communities was high (Dag, 2015).

However, the popular movements in the Arab world started in 2010 in Tunisia, and that emerged from the Arab peoples' demands for a better economy and political situation and democracy, freedom, and human rights, spread into many countries in a short time. The worst one would have been Libya and Syria, which turned into armed conflict among various actors. Therefore, the Arab Spring was a turning point for these rebellions in Syria. The demonstrations that started in Deraa in March 2011 spread throughout the country in a short time and turned into a civil war after the administration preferred to suppress these demonstrations violently. The Syrian civil war became one of the bloodiest battles in the 21st century (Dag, 2015).

The main factor that draws attention in the civil war is ethnic and religious groups visible effect. It started from Alawite-Sunni hostility, which emerged from the 1950s, then included other ethnic and religious groups such as Christians and Kurds. With various internal actors, the situation became much complex. The complexity has arisen with the involvement of the terrorist organizations, regional and international power players, which sought to benefit from the complexity and darkness to proceed their interests in Syria. All these reasons display that the Syrian civil war, which has been going on for more than a decade, is not only a part of the popular movement brought by the Arab Spring for democracy and freedom but a combination of various socio-political reasons, external factors, and Syrian history (Gordon, 2015).

In order to prevail the Sunni insurrection in the south, Assad retreated a significant part of his army from the north, where the majority of the population is Kurdish. Thus, this security gap obtained an excellent opportunity for the Kurds to take control of the northern areas, which would be called Rojava, the West Kurdistan. The involvement of the Kurds changed the environment of the war and put Assad in a problematic situation. The Kurdish political movement, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), became the most vital force in the north (Cuvelier, 2017, pp. 19-20). With this opportunity, the Kurds have established their unilateral autonomy and started protecting people in the region. The involvement of the PYD and its dramatic rise has concerned Turkey due to its Kurdish population. On the other hand, the rise of ISIS (also called Islamic State or Deash), the ethno-religious conflict, and the immigration issue has led to regional and international powers involvement. The involvement of these major powers has deepened, extended, and widened the procedure of the war.

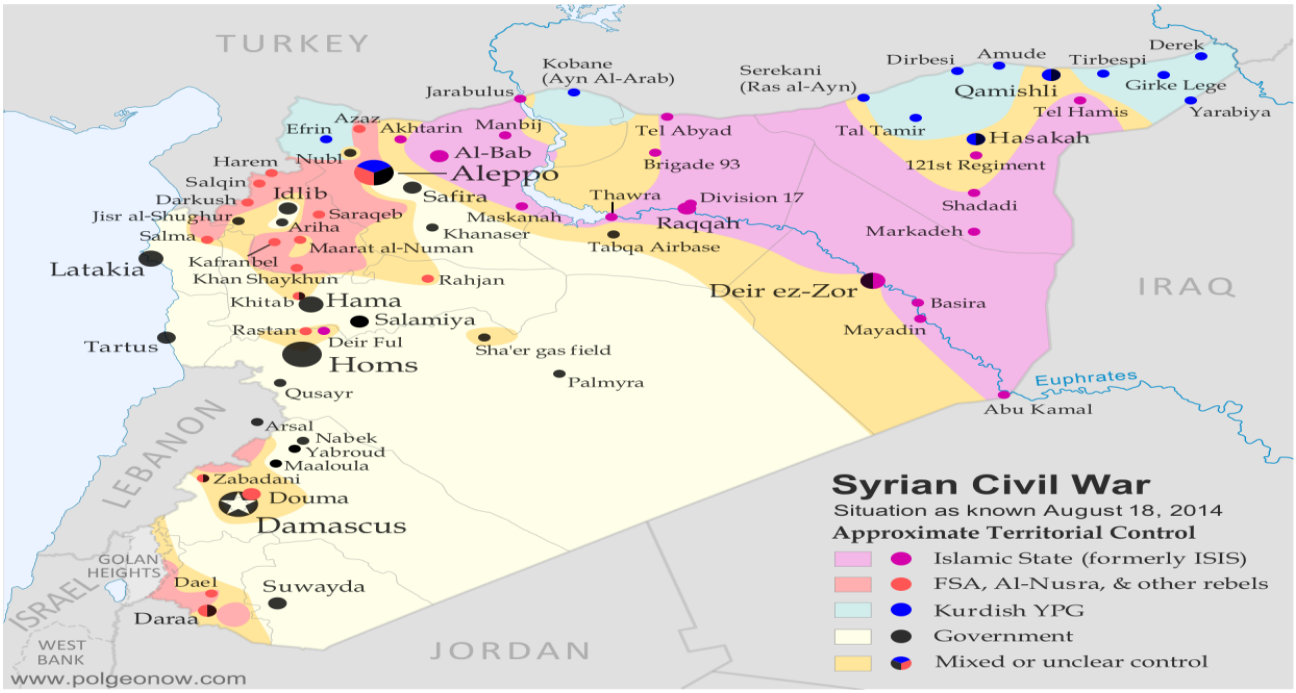
Besides the Alawite and Sunni hostility, there was also hostility between the Kurds and Arab-Alawites throughout history. This hostility has grown over time and exploded during the civil war in 2011. Shortly after the American intervention in Iraq, which allowed the Kurds in Iraq to deepen and strengthen their autonomy, the Kurdish minority in Syria is perceived as a threat by the Syrian government (Dere, 2010, p. 42-43). The Qamishli insurgency in 2004 was the first illustration of this situation.

The major Kurdish political force, the PYD, was founded in September 2003 and became the most critical actor among the Kurds in Syria. However, with the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War that broke out in March 2011, the Syrian Kurds remained absent initially. Dozens of Kurdish armed groups, large and small, including the PYD, have started to stand against the opposition since the mid of 2012. The fact that the cities, Qamishli and Hesekê, remained under the regime's control prevented the actions that would break the regime's power in the Kurdish regions. The chaos caused by the civil war Jazeera, Kobane, and Afrin zone with the proclamation of an autonomous Syrian Kurdistan, encompassing simultaneously ISIS domination attempts to establish in a group called the Kurdish region in 2014 (see *map 5* below) and intensive conflicts with Turkey caused a new wave of immigration. Other groups criticize that the Kurds in Syria do not cooperate with other opposition groups and adopt an attitude towards independence rather than a holistic democratic Syria (Dag, 2015).

Many international players were involved in this conflict, which made the situation more complicated. Most of the regional and global powers stood against an autonomous region administrated under Kurdish political organizations. With minimal opportunity, the Kurds have managed to settle a self-administrated part in the west Kurdistan, Rojava, although outside

powers, like Turkey, Iran, Russia, etc., had stood against it. Hence, economic, and political embargos have been imposed on Rojava by Turkey, the Syrian regime, and other outside powers, including the KDP, which have caused severe damages to people living there (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017, p. 12). Also, international authorities such as the US, the UN, and the EU have ignored this. Turkey has played a significant role here with exert pressure on the EU with its immigration policies and negotiating with Russia and Iran to exclude the Kurds from the negotiations and talks (*ibid*).

Map 5: **Syrian Civil War Map in 2014**.



Source: Political Geography Now: https://www.polgeonow.com/2014/08/syria-civil-war-map-august-2014-13.html

5.2. The Collapse of ISIS and the Rise of Kurds

One of the most critical and complex questions is the emergence of terrorist organizations in Syria. The emergence of the most violent terrorist organization, ISIS (originally the Islamic State of Iraq – ISI, which evolved from Al-Qaeda led by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq in 2004 and changed its name and become Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIS, in 2013), has occupied a considerable part of Iraqi and Syrian territories (see *Map 5)* for several years and massacred many individuals who belong to different ethnic and religious minorities including Shias, Kurds, Assyrians, Yezidis, Alawites, and Sunnis who did not accept their rules (The Guardian, 2014). Although the initial objective of ISIS was to create a Sunni

enclave in Iraq to counter the growing domination of Shias and Kurds, instability in the country, as well as the dissolution of the Iraqi military and intelligence service and the breakup of the Baath Party and its affiliates, allowed the group to grow and expand (Gunaratna, 2015-16).

On the other hand, the 2003 US invasion in Iraq was one of the significant reasons that ISIS has risen dramatically in Iraq in a few years. The US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to a critical gap in Iraqi security, which provided ISIS a significant advantage to rise. ISIS has expanded in territories where some states have failed to be ruled due to the lack of their military security and governance. This security issue has mainly been the case in Iraq and Syria. Starting from Iraq, ISIS continued rising by recruiting soldiers worldwide and became more robust and maintained its terrible facilities by taking advantage of the complex situation in Syria. The aim was to establish a Sunni Islamic State across Iraqi and Syrian borders (Gunaratna, 2015-16). According to Western security and intelligence estimates, ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq have grown from 30,000 in 2014 to 50,000 in 2015 (*ibid*, p. 7). ISIS, however, has become a transnational actor with around 80,000 fighters at the beginning of 2016, including 30,000 Iraqis and Syrians and 20,000 foreigners fighting in Iraq and Syria and hundreds of thousands of supporters around the world (*ibid*), and started planning massive explosions and suicide bombers in the world metropolises such as Paris, Istanbul, Brussels, and others.

ISIS had looted Mosul and captured a piece of substantial military equipment. It also attacked the town of Sinjar in northern Iraq, which is home to a minority religious group called the Yazidis. In Iraq, it carried out a massacre in early August 2014 among the Yazidi community to ethnically cleansing this ancient religious community (Cuvelier, 2017, p. 22). More than 30,000 Yazidi families are stranded in the mountains of Sinjar, and many men children died as consequences of that barbaric attack (Smith-Spark, 2014). ISIS also kidnaped 140 Kurdish schoolboys in May 2014, forcing them to follow radical Islamic courses and violent military lessons (Abdelaziz, 2014). They also used this large-scale arsenal against Kurdish groups that they looted from Mosul and other cities. After a massive struggle with ISIS, the Peshmerga of the KDP under Masoud Barzani left the battlefield and restricted the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan for refugees from Syria. In Syria, the Kurdish forces, People's Defense Units (YPG) and Women's Defense Units (YPJ), managed to rescue thousands of Yazidis by creating a secure corridor to Rojava (Cuvelier, 2017). Although the YPG and YPJ saved thousands, many women and children held by ISIS were used as sex slaves and suicide bombers (*ibid*, p.22).

Some external powers promoted ISIS for defeating the Kurdish forces, as Salih Muslim[12], in an interview, claimed that "*foreign powers are behind ISIS. We believe that Turkey is one of those powers that helped create the extremist jihadists and used them as an instrument against the Kurds*" (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, p. 86). Turkey even allowed ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups to use its territory to reinforce themselves (Lindenstrauss, 2018, p. 57) to repress the Kurdish forces. At that time, the Kurdish forces have not yet faced any direct threat from outside powers, such as Turkey. Thus, ISIS was the biggest challenge for them. Due to their relations with the US and Israel, ISIS has always hated the Kurds despite being Sunni Muslims. The Kurds knew that if the Kurdish forces fell against ISIS, they would have been massacred. As one respondent pointed out that "*ISIS wanted to destroy our culture and language, destroy our houses and wipe us out from the map*" (interview 4, 2021).

The most crucial battle against ISIS, the turning point for Rojava, was the battle of Kobane in September 2014, which is a border with Turkey and has a strategic location (see *Map 5*). In early October 2014, ISIS militias arrived in the vicinity of Kobane. Weak and poorly armed, the YPG-YPJ and the Free Syrian Army remained in Kobane to defend it until the end. The US-led coalition bombarded ISIS positions. However, the battle was fought inside the city, which was making the bombing ineffective. The arms that were needed were the heavy arms that can be used on the ground, primarily anti-tank weapons, but the US feared that they would be used against Turkey, its NATO ally (Cuvelier, 2017). Despite all the difficulties and the lack of weapons, the US's bombardments were a critical turning point in the battle to save Kobane. By January 2015, the YPG-YPJ has recaptured the city. The inclusion of ISIS in Middle East politics was a new situation for regional Kurdish politics. The fight against ISIS was the most significant development that has primarily affected all Kurds in the region, shaped their political calculations, and transformed their international perceptions (Dalay, 2015).

This struggle not only shaped the present day of regional Kurdish politics but also transfers a vital legacy to the future. After Kobane, the YPG-YPJ continued conquering the rest of the canton, which is now entirely in the hands of the Kurds. However, the destruction remained high, and the city has been destroyed, such as infrastructures, schools, hospitals, houses, etc.

The battle of Kobane was the turning point in which ISIS lost its power and started to collapse. This battle has changed the perceptions towards the Kurdish political organizations, the PYD, YPG, and YPJ, in the west. The Kurds suddenly became a hero for defeating ISIS

[12] Salih Muslim is the co-president of the PYD in Syria.

terrorists who have beheaded and murdered many western journalists, aid workers, soldiers, etc., in 2014, such as the US journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff (CNN, 2020). The Kurds have become the western hope to eradicate ISIS in the Middle East. Therefore, this battle was the most critical for the future of the ethnic and religious groups who live under the roof of Rojava today.

On the other hand, this process led to new discussions about the Kurdish nation-building process and Kurdish nationalism. Kurdish nationalism began to be defined as a nationalism without a common other. Especially on the side facing Turkey's political strategy, Kurds from Turkey have become an essential role in the emergence of the image (Dalay, 2015). At this point, the ISIS threat, which started in Iraq but later included the Syrian Kurds, assumed the common other of Kurdish politics in the regional equation, albeit temporarily. The perception of common other and threat also paved the way for the emergence of a common Kurdish public opinion (*ibid*).

In conclusion, terrorist organizations in Syria, especially ISIS, who hated the Kurds in terms of their critical relations and cooperation with western democracies and trying to establish a democratic system without radical Islamic rules in the region, have created a challenge for the Kurds. Yet, this challenge also made a significant opportunity for the Kurds to grow their support in Western democracies. The Kurdish regional organizations in Syria played a critical role in establishing a safe home for people in the region. However, some regional and international powers, Turkey, Iran, and Russia, who do not accept the Kurdish organizations' presence in Syria, attempted to pressure the Kurds in the region (interview 4, 2021).

5.3. Unilateral Declaration of Autonomy: As a Positive Factor

The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is not the first but most known and the most potent political force of Kurdish people created in 2003 in Syria, also known for its close relations with the PKK. The idea of establishing such a force in Syria came from the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan (Cuvelier, 2017). The PYD has not done any effective performance until 2012. At the start of the war in Syria, the Assad regime withdrew most of its troops from Kurdish areas to use elsewhere. The PYD, which has become the largest party in the Kurdish regions in northern Syria, has taken advantage of the institutional vacuum to shape its Rojava model (*ibid*, pp. 19-20).

The PYD was not in favour of fighting Assad's regime. On the contrary, they wanted to find a solution by negotiations. The objective was to launch a new system called "*democratic*

confederalism,[13]" a non-state social paradigm proposed in 2011 by the PKK leader (Ocalan, 2011, p. 33). This new ideology, on the one hand, was presenting a new system that can be an alternative to the nation-state, on the other hand, highlighting concepts like grassroots democracy, ecology, feminism, anti-capitalism, secularism, and ethnic and religious diversity (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, pp. 70-71). Thus, the PYD tried to establish this new political system that not only to be a Kurdish autonomy or an independent West Kurdistan but also including other ethnic and religious communities in this system where it can be democratic, equal, and justice. Finally, the Rojava model of democratic confederalism and its principles are described in 2014 in a "social contract[14]" that has become constitution, with an update in 2016 (Cuvelier, 2017). The new system, democratic confederalism, has been established in the region controlled by the PYD and renamed as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria in March 2016, including Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Assyrians, Armenians, and other ethnic minorities (Verrier, 2017, pp. 48-49).

When the autonomous region of Rojava was created in November 2013, there were three cantons: Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira. At that moment, there was no territorial connectivity between the three cantons because ISIS occupies the regions between these cantons (see *Map 5*). For enhancing the defense of these three cantons, the YPG were created, which mainly consists of the Kurds and includes Arabs, Assyrians, and other ethnic minorities and foreigner fighters. Alongside these mixed militias with men and women, the female militias, the YPJ, were created. The YPG-YPJ see themselves as a democratic people's army, which forms from ethnically and religiously different groups.

Law enforcement duties are carried out by *Asayesh*[15], which, like everywhere in Rojava, is headed by a co-chairmanship shared between a woman and a man. Rojava is mainly populated by the Kurds and Arabs, Assyrian Christians, Turkmens, Armenians, and Circassians. The PYD, which sees itself as the primary responsible for Rojava, tries to include these ethnically and religiously divided groups in the management (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, pp. 85-86, interview with Salih Muslim).

From a military aspect, the YPG-YPJ open to non-Kurds, and strategic alliances are formed with Arab tribes and Christian militias. In October 2015, the YPG-YPJ decided to

[13] The main idea of this new ideology comes from the North American ecologist, socialist anti-capitalist Murry Bookchin, then tried to be applied by Abdullah Ocalan in Kurdish regions. For further details see; Murray Bookchin, "*Urbanization Without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship",* Montréal, Black Rose Books, 2011; And (Ocalan, *Democratic Confederalism*, 2011).

[14] See the "social contract" from Peace in Kurdistan – Campaign for a political solution to the Kurdish question, www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com

[15] Meaning the security services or police (in Kurdish) who are responsible for internal security.

integrate into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is a military alliance between the YPG-YPJ and several Arab and Assyrian militias. This integration was one of the primary objectives of the creation of Rojava, showing that the outcome of democratic confederalism is beneficial and more equal, just, and democratic. One of the primary goals of the SDF is to fight for a democratic, secular, and federated Syria against terrorist organizations such as ISIS and other jihadist groups (Cuvelier, 2017).

The historical moment for the Kurds and other ethnic and religious groups, who have been crushed and suppressed by the Syrian regime and Assad's dynasty, cheered with the establishment of autonomy for Rojava announced by the PYD officials on 17th March 2016 (BBC NEWS, 2016). On the other hand, the project is based on a territorial basis, not an ethnic or religious one, with representatives of the Arab population and other minorities in these areas. Yet, the autonomy has been rejected by regional and international powers, which has been seen as a danger to Syria's territorial integrity (interview 2, 2021). Even Turkey, Iraq, and Iran perceived this autonomy as a threat to their territorial integrities due to the Kurdish population. The Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition groups also rejected the declaration of autonomy.

To analyze the current situation, it is necessary to consider the effects of regional and global powers in the development of this process. Various states support both poles that have manifested their existence since the beginning of the civil war, and these states play a critical role in the course of civil war. Russia and Iran backed Assad's regime to ensure continuity of their interests. The US and the EU remained silent due to their relations with Turkey, and the EU fears from Turkish immigration policy that Turkey might open its borders for refugees to pass to the EU. These whole series of developments one by one put Rojava in an uneasy situation and face various challenges, which will determine the fate of ethnic and religious minorities in the future (interview 3 and 4, 2021).

5.4. The Involvement of Regional Players in Syria

Syrian civil war is not only a domestic struggle but also a regional and international proxy war. Various external actors have been playing a more significant role in shaping the conflict in the country. Turkey and Iran are the two most influential and active regional powers in shaping the war and negotiations regarding Syria.

This section will offer a frame on Turkey and Iran in the Syrian civil war and how they put the Kurdish-led entity in a challenging situation.

5.4.1. Turkey Factor: Opposition to the Kurdish-led Autonomy

Turkey is one of the most critical powers in the region that has opposed an autonomous or any other proposition that establish a Kurdish authority in Syria. From the beginning of the civil war, Turkey has been silent until the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015. One reason why Turkey has not acted against Kurdish movements in Syria was the *Peace Process*[16] between the Turkish government, the PKK, and the HDP in 2013-2015.

After the Syrian Civil War and the disappearance of central control in the north of the country, the Kurds residing in that region opened a new field, expanding step by step for the Kurdish movement in Turkey who were intertwined with the Kurdish political organization, the PYD. This progress significantly developed the PKK's movement area and its political horizon in the Turkish border. In many ways, Kurdish political imagination with this development, social, political, and even gained momentum from the international maintenance and northeast of Syria with south-eastern of Turkey symbolically had entered into a process of being added (Bayramoglu, 2015, p. 10).

On the other hand, the Turkish state's policy of ''integrating internal Kurds with democratic paths and separate internal and external Kurds, seeing any Kurdish political community in Syria as a red line'' increased the tension between Turkey and the Kurdish political movements in Northern Syria. Turkey has pushed the Kurdish forces (PYD-led SDF) to create a "*safe zone*" (see *Map 6 below)* since 2015, in which the Turkish government planned to establish a line that connects Kurds in Turkey and Syria.

The escalation between Turkey and the Kurdish political organizations has risen from the mid of 2015. The conflict with the PKK in the southeast caused tension between Turkey and the political organizations in the north of Syria, the PYD, YPG, and YPJ. Firstly, Turkey has not directly invaded the north of Syria. It has then intervened through the proxies and supporting jihadist groups, including ISIS, in Syria to prevent the rise of Kurdish political movements and an autonomous region of Rojava (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017, p. 85). As Salih Muslim stated that "*We believe that Turkey is one of those powers that helped create the extremist jihadists and used them as an instrument against the Kurds*" (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, p. 86).

[16] This process was initiated by the Turkish government and the PKK, and the People's Democratic Party (HDP) (as a mediator party) from March 2013 to 2015, to find a lasting solution for Turkey's Kurdish question. The Peace Process was ended because of the changes in Turkey's domestic politics and the Syrian crisis. With the Syrian civil war, the Kurdish part in Syria established unilateral autonomy with a social contract, which feared Turkey that this idea might spread into Turkey. This development caused the emergence of a major crisis in the Peace Process.

From the beginning of the civil war, Turkey has been concerned about expanding the Kurdish militias and administration next to its borders. Turkish officials have initiated to reach a deal with the PYD's leader, Salih Muslim, in secret negotiations to fight against Assad's regime in 2013 (Hale, 2019, p. 29). However, Salih Muslim has turned down the proposal and rejected the cooperation with the Turkish government.

In 2014, the YPG-YPJ captured Kobani by defeating ISIS in the region. With the defeat of ISIS, in which the US formed an effective alliance with the YPG (after it became SDF with joining of some other non-Kurdish militias in 2015), the Turkish government has faced a creation and reinforcement of the Kurdish forces in the region (*ibid*, p. 29). Moreover, following the siege of Kobani, the Kurds have set up an administration in Kobani and other Kurdish cities, including non-Kurdish communities. Turkish government considered the Kurdish forces and this administration a threat to its national security (Kingsley, 2019). One respondent stressed that "*Turkey has recognized the Kurdish forces as terrorist organisations and as a security matter next to its border. That is why it has created a significant problem for the Kurds in Syria"* (interview 4, 2021).

In 2016, the tension between Turkey and Kurdish political organizations was the most critical stage, in which Turkey has attacked the Kurdish forces, the SDF, many times in Afrin.[17] The collapse of the Peace Process between the Turkish government and the PKK by July 2015 led Turkey to build an offensive foreign policy towards the PKK in its borders and Kurdish political organizations in Northern Syria. It has attacked several times in Afrin in 2016 (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017).

Various ethnic communities signed a social contract to establish the community of Rojava under the PYD administration. Turkey perceived this unilateral establishment as a threat to its national security. In 2016, the Council of Manbij, a strategic city next to the Turkish border, including Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmens, gathered to free the town that ISIS has occupied since 2013 (Verrier, 2017). Turkey has threatened the SDF for taking control of the city (*ibid*). Additionally, Turkey has attacked and threatened Northern Syria several times to put the SDF in a difficult position for liberating the city of Raqqa, which ISIS has controlled since 2013 (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, pp. 86-87). As a result, Turkey acted in Syria by launching an offensive attack against ISIS, in which it controlled a 100-kilometer strip of the frontier, west of the SDF controlled area, and up to the eastern borders of the Kurdish controlled enclave of Afrin (Hale, 2019, pp. 29-30).

[17] Afrin is Kurdish province in north-west of Syria. For more details, see Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017, pp. 85-91.

However, Turkey has threatened the Kurdish militia for a long time, which it considers a terrorist group that extends the PKK in the region (BBC News, 2018). Following January 2018, Turkey has launched cross border operation into Kurdish administrated territories and has invaded Afrin on the 20th of January 2018 (*ibid*). The US's presence in the region has stopped Turkey from launching new operations to other cities for a while. Turkey has also blamed the US for protecting the Kurdish forces, which Turkey sees as terrorist groups (BBC News, 2018). The US support has made Kurdish forces stronger, which was not something in favour of Turkey as a NATO ally (interview 2, 2021). American support for the SDF would also trigger Turkey to improve its relations with Russia once again.

In 2019, Turkey planned to invade Northern Syria to create a 30km safe zone between its borders and the PYD-administrated territories. In January 2019, the US President Donald Trump warned Turkey not to attack the SDF in Syria; otherwise, he would "devastate Turkey economically" (BBC News, 2019). The US presence was the only hope for the SDF to stay robust in the region. in October 2019, The Trump administration decided to pull out its troops from Syria, which trigger Turkey to benefit from the power vacuum in the area (BBC News, 2019). Moreover, according to one respondent, *"it was because of Turkey's tough opposition to the rapprochement between the US and the Kurds that the Trump administration decided to limit the support for the Kurds. This act was sort of giving authorization to Turkey for invading in the north of Syria"* (interview 2, 2021).

Turkey launched its offensive "Operation Peace Spring," which conducted Turkish and Turkish-supported Syrian militias against the Kurdish-led forces, SDF (The Guardian, 2019). The first objective was to create a buffer zone, but this aggressive operation displaced thousands of people. The second objective was to resettle Syrian refugees in the area (*ibid*). However, the place that Turkey has planned to resettle Syrian refugees is home to the Kurdish population. Syrian refugees in Turkey are mostly Sunni Arabs. Thus, the resettlement would displace the Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, etc., and replace them with Sunni Arabs, resulting in new political disputes in the future.

Map 6: **Safe Zone planned by Turkey.**

Source: The Guardian, (Oct. 9, 2019). Turkey unleashes airstrikes against Kurds in northeast Syria.

From the diplomatic dimension, Kurdish political parties have been side-lined in negotiations and talks regarding a lasting solution for Syria. While Turkey has been one of the most influential players in the negotiations, the international powers such as the EU and the US remained under Turkey's influence (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017). In May 2016, the UN representative, Staffan de Mistura, held a meeting with the PYD delegation and the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA), led by Salih Muslim. The negotiations have failed due to the Turkish efforts at preventing Kurdish participation in negotiations (*ibid*, p. 77). Although the SDF became the most significant and critical military force in the region for defeating ISIS, it has been eliminated from Genova and Astana negotiations regarding Syrian future. Turkey appeared to be the most opposition player (*ibid*).

Turkey has also imposed economic sanctions on Rojava with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Assad regime. It has closed borders for transportation of goods and humanitarian aids, which has increased the damages in the region, including the rise of hunger and humanitarian crisis (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017). Due to Turkish-KDP economic ties, the KDP led by Masoud Barzani, who has been president of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan since 2005, has also imposed an embargo on Rojava. Salih Muslim stated that;

"*The KDP does not accept the political structures that we have put in Rojava, nor does it accept cooperation with other groups within the SDF. The attitude of the KDP is the result of its ties with Turkey. They have very close and commercial relations, especially in the oil sector, which prompts the KDP to follow Turkey's political agenda as well"* (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, pp. 88-89).

In conclusion, apart from its existential interest in opposing a Kurdish entity in Syria next to its southern border and being a buffer state between Europe and the Middle East, as well as playing a critical role in keeping refugees from passing Europe, these abilities give Turkey flexibility and a solid card to play in the negotiations regarding a lasting solution for the Syrian civil war and successfully pursue its interests, particularly regarding the Kurdish issue in its territories and Kurdish entity in Syria (interview 1, 3 and 4, 2021). Turkey does not desire to see a scenario of any Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria that previously happened in Iraq.

5.4.2. Iran Factor: Syria as a Strategic Interest

The Islamic Republic of Iran decided to support the Assad regime throughout the Syrian Civil War, as it regarded Syria as the strategic depth of the region and the centre of gravity of Iran's regional foreign policy in the Middle East. Another reason for this support is that it knows that the overthrow of Assad will reduce and block Iran's regional influence and isolate Iran in the region (Interview 2, 2021). That is why Iran has been one of the most influential contributors, alongside Russia, to the Assad regime since the beginning of the civil war in 2011. It depends on the survival of the Assad regime and Iran's continued influence in that country to protect and expand Iran's regional influence, to maintain contact with Hezbollah and Palestinian-origin Shiite militia groups, Hamas, to eliminate the regional security threat posed by Israel, to use the impact on the ground for diplomacy and to the continuation of soft power (Goodarzi, 2020). Based on such an analysis, the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Syria lies in national security.

Moreover, by perceiving the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game, Iran and its allies recognize the superior military capability of its enemies - the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel-. It, therefore, uses an asymmetric and defensive security position by linking with fragile states such as Iraq and Syria to protect its interests and maintain its facilities in the Middle East (Schmidt, 2020). Iran and its allies fear that the overthrow of the Assad regime could pave the way for the emergence of a new government in Damascus that would be hostile to Tehran (Goodarzi, 2020, p. 142).

Iran seized the opportunity to broaden its influence in the Middle East by providing technical and security assistance to the Assad's regime to prevail in the 2011 protests in Syria (Goodarzi, 2020). Iran feared that it might be the following country where the western powers, Israel and Saudi Arabia, would involve threatening its regime. For this reason, Syria has played a significant role in the Iranian interests in the region and is related to Iran's conflict with Israel and Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf (Schmidt, 2020). While avoiding a confrontation with its enemies, Iran has promoted some terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah, in Syria to counterbalance Israel and other Iranian regional and international enemies.

Iran has put so much effort into protecting its interests in Syria by spending millions of dollars and troops and defending the Assad regime in the international scene with Russia. Because of this, Iranian troops and officers played a significant role in Damascus's fighting efforts (Phillips, 2020, p. 37). However, Assad's protection by Russia and Iran has led to the conflict being prolonged and strengthened its hands against internal and global threats to his power (interview 2, 2021). The support from Iran has been crucial for the regime to stand up against other ethnic and sect communities.

Syrian geopolitical location is of vital importance for Iran. The geopolitical significance of the country and its strategic role in regional and international relations is indicated. The Syrian Arab Republic is the strategic ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region. What is at stake here is not only the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic of Iran but also the fact that Damascus is a government that plays a decisive role in the future of the Middle East and Iran's national interests (Schmidt, 2020).

Furthermore, the collapse of Iran's presence in Syria also means a break with its allies in Lebanon and Palestine. Hezbollah is recognized as a strategic weapon of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region. Thus, the survival of Bashar Assad is of great importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran, as it is one of the most critical communication bridges between Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, and changing the regime in Syria will mean cutting this communication bridge (Sinkaya, 2011). Thus, the Assad regime has become crucial for Tehran. It has been the communication bridge between Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas, and Islamic Jihad movements in recent years.

The collapse or partition of the Syrian regime will cause the disintegration of the Shia ally and weaken the current balance of power in Iran. To strengthen the Syrian government's position to prevent such a scenario, Iran aims to establish close relations with other states that influence the region and gain the power to settle an authority. It can export the governance model to the transformative countries of the area.

From 2013 on, with Iranian assistance, the Assad's regime also managed to unify and strengthen its various paramilitary and militia formations into a new force called the National Defense Forces (NDF), which started with 50 thousand men and increased to 100 thousand at the end of 2015 (Goodarzi, 2020, p. 143). The unification of the regime's militias and continued growth obtained a disadvantage for opposition communities in northern Syria, primarily Kurdish parties. In other words, Iran's presence in Syria and its logistic and military support to the regime has put the Kurdish-led entity in a challenging situation (interview 4, 2021).

For Iran, keeping the Assad regime alive is also a battle against its enemies. Iran has not paid much attention to the Kurdish entity in northern Syria due to promoting Assad against Western powers and counterbalancing Israel and other regional powers. Alongside regional rivalry, limiting American influence in the region is one of Iran’s essential goals. Because of their close relations with the US and Israel, Iran has been opposing any policy regarding establishing a Kurdish entity in Syria (Özçelik, 2016).

On the other hand, Iran might accept a power transition in Syria only if it has a role and secures its interests in Syria for the future. So long as the power transition in Syria is in favour of Iran and not making any difficulties for establishing Iranian order and not cutting the connection with its allied actors in the region for preventing the collapse of the "axis of Shiite resistance", Iran would accept such a power transition, as it has done the same strategy to keep its order in Iraq (interview 2, 2021).

In cooperation with Russia, Iran has succeeded in its primary objective of keeping the Assad regime in power. After achieving its goal, Iran is looking forward to supporting Syria's integrity in international negotiations and talks. Iran has no interest in a divided Syria among various ethno-religious communities. Yet, establishing other entities, such as the Kurdish entity, would tighten the Iranian manoeuvre in the region. The Kurdish-led entity would cooperate with the western powers to survive, which is a significant threat to the Iranian interests in Syria (interview 4, 2021). In this context, Iran has not helped or plans to help to establish a robust Kurdish-led autonomy.

After the US withdrawal from Iraq, Iran has become the major power player in the country, and it desires to achieve the same goal in Syria. Thus, it will be able to connect its projects and purposes in Iraq and Syria. In addition to both countries, Iran has supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and Hotties in Yemen to surround Saudi Arabia and Israel in the region and to cut Turkey's connection with the Middle East (Dag, 2015). Tehran has supported every group with religious ties with Shia Iran, which is the most effective way

to control the power vacuum in those states. Iran, therefore, does not wish to face another entity in those countries.

However, the creation of a Kurdish autonomy supported by the West and Israel in Syria is not only threatening the Iranian regional dominance for a long time but also threatening Iran due to its internal Kurdish population, as Turkey. Iran will never accept such a scenario (interview 2, 2021). Diminishing hopes from the US, and the EU, the Kurdish entity in Rojava would not be able to survive for a long-time if regional powers do not support it. Iran is one of these powers, which has a strong voice (interview 4, 2021).

In conclusion, Iran, which has shown that it will provide unlimited support to the regime against the opponents from the beginning of the crisis, has insisted on this policy and continues to insist. Iran's approach to the Syrian crisis can be explained by Iran's close historical relations with Syria and sectarian closeness. Nevertheless, the most fundamental point of this policy is that Iran started its national security from Syria and even Lebanon. In other words, Iran's national security is equivalent to the security of Lebanon and Syria, and the supports to be lost in these countries will eventually reach a level that will threaten the regime in Iran (Sinkaya, 2011).

The overthrow of the regime in Syria, which has close relations with Iran, and the coming to power of a group based on the Sunni majority is unacceptable to Iran. It will cause Iran to lose all its influence in Syria and completely cut off its connection with Lebanon. Therefore, Iran has no interest in supporting other entities in Syria. Promoting the Assad regime and keep him in power is the only option for the Islamic Republic of Iran (interview 1, 2021).

5.5. International Players in Syria

At the international level, the US and the European Union have stood together to repress and isolate Damascus to ouster Bashar Al-Assad from power. The US and European powers' disappointing Iraqi and Libyan experiences did not let them get fully involved in an unpredictable civil war. On the one hand, the limited assistance from the West to the opposition groups; on the other hand, the arrival of Russia's assistance, provided Assad a great chance not to fall from power easily.

Besides the West, Russia has been the other most powerful global player in Syria. As a "*game-changer*", Moscow has seen the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to widen and deepen its Middle East policies. Traditionally, as Syria's leading arms supplier and owning a naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartous, Russia continued to send technical assistance and weapons to the Assad's regime (Goodarz, 2020). Russia has also been blocking Western efforts to punish

Syria and preventing any decision that might pursue a military intervention led by the West at the UN Security Council (UNSC). Thus, for its interests in the middle east and to support Assad's regime, Russia has blocked the UNSC from finding diplomatic solutions for Syria.

After the 2015 refugee crisis at the European borders, the EU has become unable to pursue an effective policy towards the Assad regime. The escalation between Turkey and Kurdish-led opposition in Syria and Turkey's complaint about western help to the YPG-YPJ rose the tension between Turkey and the EU. Turkey has often threatened the EU with its *"open the door"* migration policy, which halted the EU from supporting the opposition groups in Syria. As a result of various reasons, the EU and the UN diplomacy efforts have failed in Syria.

5.5.1. The US Factor: Limited support

Since the end of the Cold War, the US is undoubtedly the leading power player in Middle East politics, especially in Iraq and Syria. Because of their special ties with the Soviet Union and then Russia, they have always been two US enemies. Describing both countries as the distributor and safe haven of terrorist organizations, the so-called "axis of evil", the US has always looked forward to overthrowing authoritarian regimes and replacing with Western-oriented democratic regimes. Following this idea and the devastated 9/11 terrorist attack, the US invaded Iraq in 2003 and WMDs are claimed to be the reason (CBS News, 2002). After a decade of struggling in Iraq, notably, Syria and Iran have concerned very much about the American invasion and became the two biggest enemies of the US in the region (Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008).

The US relations with Syria have always been problematic due to several reasons: (1) Alongside Iraq, Syria was considered the most important ally of the Soviet Union and now with Russia in the Middle East; (2) the US has always been supporting Israel in the Middle East against Syria, Iraq, Iran; (3) the Iranian Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq War, Syria was described as Iran's closest Arab ally, which is considered the biggest enemy of the US in the region; (4) Syria has been providing logistic assistance to terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida, Hamas, and Hezbollah in the region (The Middle East Institute, 2021). For these reasons, US President George Bush defined Syria as one of the "axis of evil" countries, threatened with military intervention. Syria also opposed the 2003 US-led coalition invasion in Iraq. That is why Syria is always concerned about the US presence in the Middle East that it might be the next after Iraq. But the US has struggled in Iraq a lot, and it would not get involved in the affairs of another state in the region (The Middle East Institute, 2021).

However, the 2010 Arab Spring shook authoritarian regimes from Tunisia to Bahrain. It was stated that the next one would be the Syrian regime. It happened as it was expected. The rebellion process started in Syria in March 2011. In a short time, it turned into a civil war among ethnic and sectarian communities. Historically, being hostile with the Syrian regime, the US has supported the protests in Syria and desired the removal of Bashar Al-Assad from power. Also, the US worried about the Iran-Syria political partnership that may threaten the American interests in the region. The political partnership to be formed by these two states also poses a risk to the security of Israel, whose presence in the region has always been troubled (interview 1, 2021). For this reason, the USA has increased its political and economic pressure with the support of the UK, France, and Germany to lose the legitimacy of the Assad government to be removed from power (Dag, 2015).

Despite the US concerned about its interests in the Middle East, the Syrian civil war is not a prioritized issue for the US to be resolved. Because the main issues for the USA in the region are Iran, the rise of terrorism, and the security of Israel, it is also uneasy about the idea that Russia can dominate the region over Syria (interview 1 and 2, 2021). Thus, it is active in Syria because it wants to make its presence felt in the region. Still, Russia and Iran have dominated the political situation and strengthen the Assad regime power. Thus, the domination of Russia has led a significant transformation of the power and a dramatic decline of American power in the region (Hale, 2019).

There were several reasons why the USA did not want to be involved directly in the Syrian civil war and at the forefront in resolving the Syrian problem. In other words, the US administration did not attach great strategic importance to Syria and saw it as a country where an ordinary civil war occurred. Unlike the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is not vitally important for entering a new war (Özçelik, 2016). The economic difficulties the US has faced in the last couple of years, the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq and the bad image that the US left behind in these two countries in the previous decade, the pressure of the public, and the opposition of Russia and China in the UNSC can be these several main reasons.

From the economic aspect, after the Obama administration took over the administration in the US, he has prioritized financial stability. To minimize the economic burden caused by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, most of the military staff were returned home. In this context, the Obama administration has been stood off from the military intervention from the very beginning not to pose a burden to the US economy. Even the use of chemical weapons by the Assad administration in 2013 brought up the option of a limited military intervention in Syria

under the Obama administration, in which the US uttered the use of chemical weapons as a red line, the US hesitated to intervene (Krishnan, 2017).

Furthermore, the US first did not desire a direct involvement in the war. Then, the rise of the terrorist organization, ISIS, in Iraq and Syria at the beginning of 2014 has damaged the American interests in the region. For this reason, the US has seen only the ISIS terrorist organization as the primary target in Syria. It has collaborated with the opposition groups in Syria, mainly with Free Syrian Army (FSA), and then the Kurdish forces, YPG-YPJ. The US shifted its support from FSA, which its main objective was fighting the Assad regime, to the Kurdish groups, which were utterly focused on battling ISIS to control Kurdish cantons in the North of Syria (CNN, 2020).

However, in the first period of the conflict, there were hardly any Kurdish-American relations. When it suddenly became clear that the Kurds were able to stop the progress of the Islamic State on the ground, the US suddenly became interested in establishing relations with the Kurds (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, p. 87). After that, the Kurds became the US's most vital partner in the country. The first instance of the US- Kurdish collaboration against ISIS was the Kobani battle in 2014. After cooperation with the Kurdish-led forces on the ground, the US managed to wipe out the ISIS terrorist organization in Syria at the end of 2018 (Gordon, 2015). While putting the responsibility and risks on the regional actors, the US has effectively collaborated with Kurdish-led groups in the fight against ISIS. Thus, the USA avoided getting under military and political costs in Syria. Instead of involving directly in the war, the US provided all kinds of weapons and logistical support to the YPG-YPJ to combat ISIS. This collaboration was also beneficial for the Kurdish militias and provided Kurdish groups an excellent opportunity to reinforce their autonomy in the region (interview 3, 2021).

However, unpredictable the US Syrian foreign policy got even more complicated after the administration changed in the USA in 2016. The collaboration with the US became unreliable. As the PYD co-founder Salih Muslim states that "*the problem with Washington is that they are unreliable, and they can go back on deals they've made. We must not forget that the United States, while it is listening to us, is also listening to others (Turkey)…"* (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, p. 87). As it was expected, with the arrival of the Trump administration, he prioritized the removal of Assad from power and the withdrawal from the country as soon as possible. In October 2019, President Trump decided to withdraw much of the US's troops from Syria, which created a security vacuum in the region and allowed Turkey to invade the Kurdish-administration territories. The decision of President Trump was seen as a betrayal to its partner in fighting terrorism in Syria. This situation demonstrated that the Kurdish-led

regional autonomy, Rojava, cannot survive without American support in the region. After that, Turkey, Iran, Russia, the Syrian regime, and even Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq have sought ways to demolish the Kurds in Northern Syria. One respondent state that "*from a political dimension, the West powers have not supported the Kurds very much since they did not want to damage their relations with Turkey. For the West, Turkey is more important than the Kurdish autonomy in Syria, and the West does not want to lose Turkey because of protecting the Kurds* (interview 4, 2021). The decision to withdraw from Syria caused severe damage for the Kurdish-led forces, SDF. This decision gave an exclusive opportunity to Turkey to further its offensive actions towards the Kurdish-administrated territories. As a result of withdrawal, which is perceived as a betrayal decision by the Kurdish community, Turkey found a security vacuum to invade Rojava (*ibid*).

Before exterminating the roots of terror in Syria, the withdrawal seems a strategic and diplomatic failure of the US in the region. Although the ISIS terrorist organization seems erased from the map, its roots still exist in Syria and Iraq. For this reason, the U.S. has a strong interest in maintaining to fight ISIS in Syria and preventing the re-emergence of the group. To pursue these interests contributes to maintaining a meaningful zone of relative stability, where the survival of a credible SDF formation provides noticeable leverage to address more comprehensive Syrian policy questions (The Middle East Institute, 2021, p. 43).

In conclusion, although the ties of the US presence in the Middle East rooted until the Cold War, the American power has been declined in the last decade. After a decade of war in Iraq and the loss of millions of dollars and American credibility in the region, the US has hesitated to get involved in the Syrian civil war. The emergency of civil war in Syria and the hesitation of fully engaged in the war from the US caused the rise of other powers in the region, such as Russia and Iran (Borshchevskaya, 2020). Today, the US still has an opportunity to repair its role in Syria. By protecting and establishing special ties with the Kurdish entity, the US can set the tone in Syria.

5.5.2. Russia Factor: Game Changer

After decades of absence, since the end of the Cold War, Russia has found a significant opportunity to revive its interests in the Middle East by involving in the Syrian civil war in 2015. Before fully engaging in the conflict, Russia has stood by the Assad regime and provided military and technical assistance. As Syria's primary arms supplier and owning a naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartous, since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Russia has continued

to send technical assistance and weapons to Assad's regime to reinforce his hand against Western-supported opposition groups (Schmidt, 2020). After 2015, Assad was strongly backed by Russia, which put Moscow in a dominant position in Syria; thus, Assad was able to carry on the civil war for years to come (Hale, 2019, p. 26). Therefore, the Syrian civil war has become the most significant opportunity that Russia took advantage of a more favourable geopolitical and economic climate to strengthen its ties to the Middle East after a long-time absence (Phillips, 2020).

For a decade, Russia has increased its regional and international influence in various disputed territories and caused wars. The 2008 Russian invasion in Georgia, for Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the separation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, Russia has dramatically increased its power on the Black Sea. Russia desires to strengthen its hands in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea as well. That is why Russia sees Syria and Libya as the fundamental base of its influence in the Mediterranean. It should be stated that the issue is not to sustain the Baath regime in Syria but to protect and expand Russia's military presence in the region (Phillips, 2020).

The collapse of the Assad regime in favour of the West would be the collapse of the Russian interests, like Iran, in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia intervened in the civil war because if the regime in Damascus collapse, it would lose its influence over the region. By evaluating Western countries' unresponsiveness, especially the USA, Russia significantly increased the capacity of its military presence in Syria (Hale, 2019).

One of the most critical issues determining Moscow's Syria policy is Tartus naval base in Syria. While expanding the naval base in Tartus, it established a crucial airbase in Hmeymim near Latakia. Tartus naval base, which has been on the Mediterranean coast since the Soviet era, has geostrategic importance (Hale, 2019). The collapse of the Damascus regime means Russia is losing its only base in the region. Apart from these permanent bases, there are also smaller military bases in different parts of the country. Thus, this capacity increase has allowed Moscow to gain influence in the Eastern Mediterranean in an area that extends far beyond Syria. It is necessary to evaluate Russia's increasing activities in North Africa as a reflection of its increasing self-confidence due to its success in Syria (Dag, 2015).

Although Russia is not a country in the region, it is trying not to fall behind the great powers among international power players (Turkoglu, 2016). Also, it indicates its presence in regional and global issues. While its air operations under the heading of 'combating ISIS', its military support to Syria has helped protect Moscow's national and regional security interests (interview 2, 2021). By doing so, Russia has been strengthening the Assad regime's power and

makes external military interventions impossible in Syria. Russia's stance is considered a "game-changer" move in the international and global arena (Turkoglu, 2016). One respondent pointed out that *"Russia changed the game and saved the Assad regime"* (interview 1, 2021).

Russian veto right in UNSC has protected the Assad regime against international interventions and advocated Assad in international negotiations and talks, such as Genova and Astana talks, for Syria's future. These negotiations over Syria increase Russia's prestige in international relations. The collapse of the Assad regime because of external intervention would also contuse Russia's reputation. Using its veto power, from economic to security, Russia endeavours to indicate to international authorities that it is impossible to take any decision without its consent for the solution of global problems in which it has its interests (Tellal, 2015). In this context, Russia has become a more decisive leader in the Middle East as the USA loses its power. It should be accepted that "the Syrian issue cannot be solved without Russia" on the international platform.

As the most powerful actor in Syria and its aid to the Assad regime, Russia left other opposition groups and Kurdish-led entities in a problematic situation. With the increased number of Russian expert personnel in Syria, the shipment of strategic weapons to the region is not only for fighting terrorist organizations, such as ISIS but also to strengthen the regime against opposition groups. Thus, Moscow is developing its strategy on the grounds, which enhancing Damascus' military superiority over the opposition groups. On the other hand, it is expected that Russia might veto cross-border humanitarian assistance in the SDF-controlled eastern Syria in July 2021, in which approximately 5 million people would be left without urgently needed aid (The Middle East Institute, 2021, p. 42).

While Russia continues to deepen its influence in the Middle East, it does not desire to see Kurdish autonomy in Syria. To prevent the creation of such an entity, Russia has been trying to keep the connection between the Syrian regime and Kurdish-led groups (Borshchevskaya, 2020). One respondent state that "*Russia wants the Kurdish-led forces to fight alongside the Assad regime, but the Kurds refused to have such a collaboration. After this refusal, Russia withdrew its forces from Kurdish city, Afrin, and ignored Turkish invasion in Afrin*" (interview 4, 2021).

Russia's primary objective is to cut the connection between the US and Kurds in Syria. For keeping the Kurds on their side, Russia has warned them not to rely on US policies (Borshchevskaya, 2020). President Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria justified this statement. This decision also allowed Moscow to strengthen its ties with the Kurds and establish a new military force in the northeast. Although Russia desires to keep good relations with the

Kurdish-led entity, it is undecided about the Kurds' right to self-determination or autonomy. In other words, Moscow is mainly in favour of Syrian integrity. Moscow promotes itself as a mediator between Assad and the Kurds and persists in including the legal rights of the Kurds in the Syrian constitution (*ibid*). Russia's primary objective is to stand by Assad in the war, who stated that he would not accept any Kurdish entity that aims to partition Syria (*ibid*).

However, staying silent after Turkey's offensive operations towards the Kurds in northern Syria, it was clear that the Kurds could not count on Russia. As a result of Turkey's attacks in Afrin in 2016 and 2017, Russia turned a blind eye (Kurdish Institute of Brussels, 2017). In early 2018 during Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in Afrin, hundreds of Kurdish civilians have been killed (Borshchevskaya, 2020). Russia did not do anything to hinder Turkey from its aggression attacks. One respondent pointed out that *"Russia might accept the Kurds to be destroyed by Turkey if they do not accept what Russia wants"* (interview 4, 2021). Therefore, the Kurds understood that the only external support they can rely on is the West.

In conclusion, Russian cooperation with the Kurds in Syria has been only one side winning cooperation. While Russia has become the leading power player in the region, it is also willing to keep the Kurds on its side. By engaging the Assad regime and the Kurds in negotiations, Russia seeks to achieve two objectives: (1) to keep Syria as one piece of territory for its interests and prevent the Kurds from establishing autonomy or independence. Because a partitioned Syria would diminish Russia's influence, (2) to cut the Western, the US, connection in Syria, in which the Kurds is the only leverage for the US in the country.

5.5.3. Ineffectiveness of the UN and the EU: Has Diplomacy failed in Syria?

After a decade of the civil war, Syria has become the place of deaths, displacement, violence, and poverty. The Syrian civil war has become complex and irresolvable. Millions of people displaced, near 12 million internally and became refugees in neighbouring and European countries, thousands of people, approximately 400.000 children, women, and men have died, and almost all Syrian population in need of humanitarian assistance (EEAS, 2021).

Alongside humanitarian crises, the conflict among various groups has been ongoing, and no political solution has been indicated to stop the violence and war by parties. However, the UN launched the negotiations several times in Geneva peace talks for several years have made no progress.

The UNSC has focused on Syria for negotiations and to end the violence. The Council initiated the first action in January and February 2012. While the US, UK, and France desired

to endorse an effective plan adopted by the Arab League, Russia and China opposed any international intervention and support for the regime change in Syria (Lundgren, 2016, p. 3). As a result of opposing any harsh plan against the regime, Russia and China vetoed the resolution. This first veto on Syria also led to positions that would resonate through debates on Syria for the coming years.

Consequently, in the UN Security Council (UNSC), Russia and China consistently prevented the US and the EU efforts to punish Syria and blocked any move that could occur for foreign military intervention in support of the Syrian opposition (Goodarzi, 2020, p. 141). Russia and China have also avoided any resolutions that might put the Assad regime under pressure and his removal from power. While these parties have blocked the diplomatic solution at the UNSC, the EU has also failed in progressing any diplomatic solution for the civil war.

The UN hoped to find a solution through the mediation roles, also called Geneva Communiqué. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, appointed Kofi Annan[18] as the UN mediator in Syria in early 2012. With an intensive talk with regional powers and communication between international actors in Syria, Anna has announced a "six-point plan", which aimed to start a political process for Syria. However, the willingness of global and regional powers caused the failure of the plan, and Anna resigned because of its failed mission in August 2012 (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016, p. 1).

After the failure of the Anna Plan, Lakhdar Brahimi[19] became the second person for carrying a mediation role in Syria. He has also failed in his mission after seeking the leverage of the regional and international power players. This situation turned out to be complicated in which Brahimi, as independently, lost the trust of both sides of the war (Lundgren, 2016, p. 3). Under such hospitable conditions, it has taken a long time for the negotiators to be brought back to the negotiating table in January 2014, in a process known as Geneva II. The rapprochement between the United States and Russia became more pragmatic after the rise of ISIS and the immediate aftermath of the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta near Damascus in August 2013 (BBC NEWS, 2014).

Except for limited humanitarian agreements, Geneva II has not made much progress. Both sides insisted on not being flexible on critical issues, such as agreeing on a ceasefire. While the regime continued to emphasize the fight against terrorism, the opposition conditioned further talks on guarantees that Assad would not play a role in Syria's future. Neither side moved from their positions, and the UN process was failed to obtain any solution.

[18] The former UN Secretary General.
[19] Lakhdar Brahimi is a senior Algerian diplomat with experience from Lebanon, Afghanistan, and other conflicts.

With Brahimi's failure, Staffan de Mistura[20] has taken up the UN mediation role in early 2015. With de Mistura taking the role, he has endeavoured to find a middle ground for a ceasefire like his predecessors. The parties from both sides suffering from increased war fatigue appeared more demanding for negotiations since 2011.

However, several significant developments on the battlefield would have made the ceasefire impossible. Above all, the period 2014-2015 saw the strengthening of ISIS as a key actor, refocusing international attention on the Syrian civil war and making the fight against terrorism a priority for many leading powers (Lundgren, 2016). This change in priorities coincided with the conclusion of a nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015, which would lead Iran to attend the international conference in Geneva regarding the peace process in Syrian. Also, in 2015, Russia's direct military intervention in Syria has strengthened the Assad regime's power. These reasons have led to the failure of the negotiations and ceasefire once again.

There were peace negotiations in Geneva I and II, and all that followed. These negotiations have failed in which the people of North of Syria, Rojava, were excluded from these negotiations. By excluding them, the negotiating parties have shown that they are not very serious about finding a political solution to the Syrian crisis. In other words, the UN has no direct contact with Rojava, which appears to be problematic (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017, p. 87; interview with Salih Muslim). While the Syrian regime and all other regional powers such as Turkey have been represented in Geneva negotiations, the people of Rojava were first excluded from these negotiations and then from Astana talks between Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Geneva III, IV, and V have also failed to make progress for the peace talks. While Iran and Russia have strongly backed the Syrian opposition, Kurdish groups have been excluded from these talks. The Western, the US, and EU desires of removing Assad from power are strictly opposed by Russia, China, and their counterpart Iran. Therefore, this triangle partner will not accept any solution excluding Assad from the negotiations.

Alongside the UN, the EU has also indicated a high-level effort for international humanitarian assistance and lasting peace in Syria. With the five Brussels conferences since 2015, the EU has continued to support the Syrian people and mobilize the international community to support a comprehensive and credible political solution to the Syrian conflict in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2254 (EEAS, 2021). However, these efforts appeared to fail without a political solution in Syria.

[20] Staffan de Mistura is an Italian-Swedish diplomat and also headed the UN mission in Iraq.

On the other hand, the EU has improved several strategies such as *"Towards a comprehensive EU approach to the Syrian crisis in 2013",* "*EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh (ISIS) threat in 2015*" and *"Elements for an EU strategy for Syria in 2017",* in order to define "*how the EU can play a bigger role in contributing to a lasting political solution in Syria under the existing UN-agreed framework and help build stability and support post-agreement reconstruction once a credible political transition is underway"* (European Commission, 2017, p. 2). Even if the EU has put so much effort into finding a lasting solution in Syria by adopting new strategies and economic and individual sanctions on the Syrian regime, these efforts remained ineffective.

In conclusion, after a decade of UN and the EU efforts to stop violence and war in Syria have failed. These two diplomacy giants have not been able to provide any adequate peace progress except humanitarian aid. Despite successive UN-led peace talks with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and the EU diplomatic efforts and the actions of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and working groups, no agreement has been reached between the conflicting parties to end the war. In other words, the diplomatic attempts have failed to resolve the Syrian crisis and to end the war.

5.6. Conclusion

The Syrian civil war is a conflict that emerges due to various inside and outside factors. Thus, trying to understand the Syrian civil war based on several factors to reach a definite conclusion, the crisis is needed to be analysed from various dimensions.

Its characteristics, such as ethnic and religious diversity, hosting deep-rooted political disputes put Syria in a unique position among the Middle Eastern countries in terms of conflict potential. Compared to many Middle East countries, the ethnic and sectarian roots of the conflicts and tensions in Syria are quite strong. While the Sunni group, which constitutes a large part of the country's population, such as 70-75%, have been excluded from the state's political and economic structure since the early 1960s, the Nusayri / Alevi minority of 12-13% has been controlling basic state structures and institutions in the country (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2015). It is not only Sunni Arabs who have been excluded from this structure but also other ethnic and religious communities such as Assyrians, Christian religious minorities, Kurds, Turkmens, Armenians, and Circassians. These ethnic and religious groups have been the main actors of social and political tension while forming the country's essential elements of social structure.

Being well-organized in Northern Syria, the Kurdish groups have succeeded in protecting their inhabited areas more than other groups. By defeating the terrorist organization ISIS, the Kurdish forces have expanded their territories and became more assertive in Syria. Alongside other ethnic groups, the Kurdish-led parties established a unilateral entity in the north, the so-called Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Some of major powers, such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia, opposed this entity (BBC NEWS, 2016).

The country's domestic social structure is not the only cause of the crisis. Even if the crisis started because of unequal social structure, political disputes with some neighbouring countries and global powers led to the deepening of the crisis in Syria. Syria has suffered from hostility with regional powers such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey and global powers such as the US and the EU (Dag, 2015). These powers have always sought to intervene in Syrian domestic affairs to carry out their interests. Thus, ideological, ethnic, and religious diversity has been seen as an opportunity to intervene. These powers desired to carry out their interests, thus, every power player supported a proxy, which put Syria in a complex situation.

On the other hand, states such as Iran and Russia have since the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to counterbalance the Western powers in the Middle East. While Iran has always seen the Syrian regime as a partner to hinder the threats from the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, Russia seized the chance to raise its influence in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean (Turkoglu, 2016).

Chapter VI: Comparative Analysis and Testing Hypotheses

6.1. Introduction

In the present study, the role of the Kurds in ethno-religious conflicts and Kurdish relations with regional and international powers in Syria and Iraq are examined. This examination was based on one research question and various sub-hypotheses and one main hypothesis that were assumed to be corroborated. These hypotheses are re-examined in this chapter based on comparative analysis and the result of the study. In the following discussion, the hypotheses will be tested by comparing Iraq and Syria to see the results from both cases.

6.2. Sub-Hypothesis 1

I hypothesized that the Kurds in Iraq achieved their objectives thanks to various factor such a possessing regular military force, the Peshmerga, and owning the natural resource have enhanced the opportunity of cooperating with regional and global power rather than struggling, and the Iraqi weak central government could not hinder the Kurds from pursuing their objectives. But the Kurds in Syria are lack of these opportunities.

Firstly, owning a regular military force is a great advantage after all. The West's support for Peshmerga forces came in various forms, including airstrikes, intelligence support, logistical assistance, special training, military operational consulting, lethal military weapons, and non-lethal military and medical aid (Corcoran, 2014). With Saddam's overthrow in 2003, the Peshmerga started more responsibility, strengthened their authority, and acted as a real army (Fantappie, 2015). The Peshmerga are regularly portrayed in the West as a valuable ally (Paasche & Gunter, 2016, p. 11). The Peshmerga units are equipped with high-quality military equipment that they captured from Saddam Hussein's armed forces. Following the recent disintegration of Iraqi federal military units in areas subsequently recaptured by the peshmerga, it also took possession of many armoured trucks, vehicles, and artillery pieces provided by the US (Knights, 2014). The Peshmerga become more vital to protect the Kurdish region in the ethno-religious struggle in the country.

Secondly, controlling a significant geostrategic land, external players preferred to cooperate rather than become hostile to the Kurdish Regional Government. As McDowall (2007, p. 7) states that “another reason why controlling Kurdistan has recently become more important is that its oil and water resources have grown in significance since the Second World War”. That is why neither regional nor international powers intend to ignore such a strategic

region. The Kurdish part of Iraq has the richest oil reserves in Kurdistan land. On the one hand, these oil resources give exclusive geopolitical leverage to the Kurds in Iraq; on the other hand, these reserves make the Kurdish region in Iraq struggle for outside powers to pursue their interests. To increase their influence in Iraq, some regional and international players, such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, the US, have cooperated with the Kurds. As a result of cooperation, the Kurds have used this advantage to consolidate their autonomy. The Kurds in Syria do not have such leverage to cooperate with these regional and international players.

Thirdly, after the US invasion, the Iraqi central government has become very weak that it could not withstand the Kurds from demanding a regional government. The 2003 US invasion brought a significant change to Iraq. With the USA, Britain, and France putting a no-fly zone in the north, the Kurds, who gained a weak autonomy from Baghdad in 1991, have strengthened their autonomy and power (Brigham, 2013) by seizing the weakness of the central government. The 2005 constitution drew Iraq's internal borders establishing a federal Kurdistan region.

In conclusion, after several years of conflict, we can say that the Kurds have achieved their objectives in Iraq. The factors mentioned in the hypothesis have played a very critical role in this process. On the other hand, the Kurds in Syria have struggled in establishing relations with regional and global power to achieve their objectives due to the lack of opportunities and advantages unlike the Kurds in Iraq. Thus, we can say that this hypothesis is corroborated.

6.3. Sub-Hypothesis 2

I hypothesized that the U.S. presence in the region and its good relations with the Kurds in Iraq was vital in achieving their objectives. On the other side, it is limited presence in Syria and withdrawing its troops from the country has put the Kurds in a problematic situation.

The U.S. support has always been vital for the Kurds to protect themselves from regional enemies. Without the U.S. presence in the region, the Kurds might fail their goals. Thus, while the Kurds in Iraq had this advantage of U.S. assistance, the Kurds in Syria did not receive much help from the U.S., except collaboration against terrorist organizations. Given the pro-US position adopted by the Kurds for decades, the critical US role in protecting the nascent KRG and the overthrow of Saddam, as well as the fundamental affinity felt by the fighting American and Kurdish soldiers, the cooperation between the US military and the peshmerga is expected to be perfect (Knights, 2014). In terms of the objectives that the Kurds in Iraq have struggled for to succeed throughout history, the US has provided an excellent opportunity for them. The US became a major actor to guarantee the autonomy and existence of the KRG in

Iraq (Douglas, 2010). Although they sought an independent Kurdistan in the region, they only achieved a constitutionally recognized autonomous. The creation of Kurdistan might have raised a great tension between the US and its NATO ally Turkey and created a considerable danger for the stability of the region. It would have caused the collapse of Iraq's integrity and raised tension in Turkey, Iran, and Syria due to its Kurdish population. The US did not want to risk such a development. The Kurds have been satisfied with a constitutionally guaranteed and stable regional government. Therefore, without the US, the Iraqi Kurds might not have succeeded and attained any of these objectives.

On the other hand, the US power and reputation declined in the Middle East, and it has not entirely been involved in the conflict in Syria. It only supported opposition groups to remove Assad from power at the very beginning. With the emergence of terrorist organizations, the US promoted the Kurdish groups for combating on the ground. That support was limited, and it ended with withdrawal (BBC News, 2019).

On the other hand, while putting the responsibility and risks on the regional actors, the US has effectively collaborated with Kurdish-led groups in the fight against ISIS. Thus, the US avoided getting directly under military and political costs in Syria. Instead of involving directly in the war, the US provided weapons and logistical support to the YPG-YPJ to combat ISIS. As one respondent stated that, *"the existence of the Kurds in Syria was of vital importance for defeating ISIS, but after the collapse of ISIS, the US avoided promoting the Kurds because of Turkey's strict position"* (interview 1, 2021). This collaboration was also beneficial for the Kurdish militias and provided Kurdish groups an opportunity to reinforce their autonomy to some extent.

Unpredictable the US Syrian foreign policy got even more complicated after the administration changed in the USA in 2016. The collaboration with the US became unreliable. In October 2019, President Trump decided to withdraw much of the US's troops from Syria, which created a security vacuum in the region and allowed Turkey to invade the Kurdish-administration territories.

Consequently, the US fully supported the Kurds and promoted the Peshmerga to strengthen its power to secure its interests in Iraq. The presence of Sunni sect-based terrorist organisations and pro-Iranian Shia groups were a threat to the US interests in Iraq. Thus, the Kurds were the best option for the US. The Kurds also benefited from this opportunity and strengthen their power. On the other side, even if the Kurds in Syria have been supported by the US at the beginning, with the collapse of ISIS the US withdrawn much of its support due

to its ally Turkey and other reasons. Thus, we can say that this hypothesis is partially corroborated since the US is still protecting the Kurdish-led entity in Syria.

6.4. Sub-Hypothesis 3

The collapse of ISIS made the environment much easier for the Kurds to establish autonomy in Syria.

In the region, the civil war in Syria obtained an opportunity and challenges for ethnic and religious communities, especially for the Kurds. In this context, I hypothesized that the Kurds in Syria had faced many difficulties in achieving the goals that they have fought for, such as meeting political and economic embargoes from regional and international power. They also found various opportunities, such as defeating terrorist organization, ISIS, filling the power vacuum after Assad withdraw his military from the region, and establishing autonomy called 'democratic confederalism' in Northern Syria, or so-called Rojava.

The inclusion of ISIS in Middle East politics was a new situation for regional Kurdish politics. The fight against ISIS is the most significant development that has primarily affected all Kurds in the region, shaped their political calculations, and transformed their international perceptions (Dalay, 2015). This struggle not only shaped the present day of regional Kurdish politics but also transfers a vital legacy to the future. After Kobane battle in 2014, the YPG-YPJ continued conquering the rest of the canton, which is now entirely in the hands of the Kurds. One respondent pointed out that *"it was the Kurdish-led forces who defeated ISIS and caused its collapse. At the end, they got what they want*" (interview 2, 2021). However, the destruction remained high, and the city has been destroyed, such as infrastructures, schools, hospitals, houses, etc.

The battle of Kobane was the turning point in which ISIS lost its power and started to collapse. This battle has changed the perceptions towards the Kurdish political organizations in the west. The Kurds suddenly became a hero for defeating ISIS terrorists who have beheaded and murdered many western journalists, aid workers, soldiers, etc., in 2014 (CNN, 2020). The Kurds have become the hope of the west to eradicate ISIS in the Middle East. Therefore, defeating ISIS was the most critical factor for the future of the ethnic and religious groups who live under the roof of Rojava today.

Consequently, with the collapse of ISIS, the power vacuum occurred in some parts of Syria, where ISIS has controlled. The Kurdish-led forces took this occasion to control the areas

left by ISIS, which brought them an opportunity to expand their land and power. Therefore, it is not false to say that this hypothesis is fully corroborated.

6.5. Sub-Hypothesis 4

Turkey and Iran are the two most critical power players in Iraq and Syria, whose influence the Kurdish goals the most.

I hypothesized that Turkey and Iran have been the two main actors who are the two most significant players in the region that the Kurds must have good relations with to reach their objectives. Turkey and Iran supported the Kurdish groups in Iraq for their interests while becoming a barrier to the Kurds in Syria. In other words, while assisting the Kurdish groups in Iraq for their core interests, Turkey and Iran have opposed the Kurdish entity in Syria and created a complex environment for them in the region. While Turkey has recognized the Kurdish-led forces as a terrorist organization, Iran has been fighting to keep the Assad regime alive (Hourani, 2020).

In the context of the Kurdish question and the establishment of Kurdish entities beyond its borders, Turkey appears to be the most critical power in the region. The reason for opposing the Kurdish-related developments beyond the borders is primarily because of its Kurdish population and the presence of the PKK. Despite being contrary to this policy, Turkey somehow consented to establish the Kurdish autonomy for its interest in Iraq after the central government power shifted from Sunnis to Shias. Turkey supported this autonomy for two reasons: First, to secure the accessibility to natural resources in Iraq and no need to deal with the Iraqi central government; second, to counterbalance Iranian presence, which has gained a historic opportunity to pursue its Iraqi foreign policy after power shifting from Sunnis to Shias.

On the contrary, Turkey has vigorously opposed the Kurdish forces and the idea of establishing autonomy in Syria. Turkey recognizes the Kurdish forces in Syria as terrorist organizations, and it perceived unilaterally established Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) as a national security matter. Ankara will never accept a Kurdish entity in Syria. It has supported other organizations to combat the Kurds, including terrorist organization ISIS, and launched offensive attacks in Northern Syria many times to weaken Kurdish-led entity.

Iran is also in the same line as Turkey. According to two respondents, “Iran’s policy regarding the Kurds in Syria is just as Turkey’s policy. Iran will never accept any Kurdish autonomy or state in the north of Syria” (interview 1 and 2, 2021). Thus, Iran has no interest in supporting the Kurdish entity in Syria. Supporting the Assad regime and keeping his power

alive has been the primary objective of Iran. Iran also perceives the Kurdish entity as the Western puppet in Syria. Thus, the creation of such as establishment is a security matter for Iran due to its interests and influence in Syria and its internal Kurdish issue. Then, why did Iran consent to the establishment of the Kurdish regional government in Iraq? Because during the 2003 war and aftermath, Iran had either the power or international back up to withstand this decision to create the Kurdish autonomy constitutionally. Also, the US was the main actor in Iraq, and its relations with the Kurds were good. After establishing the KRG, on the one side, Iran has paid much attention to the north to limit Turkey's influence in Iraq; on the other side, it focused on Iraqi Shias to increase its influence on the Iraqi central government.

In conclusion, Turkey and Iran are the most critical regional powers in Kurdish politics. If the Kurds want to achieve a goal, they must first deal with Turkey and Iran. However, dealing with these regional players is not easy due to their Kurdish question in their domestic affairs. Moreover, the Kurds have been excluded from international conferences regarding the Syrian future because of Turkey's request. It is not incorrect to say that Turkey and Iran the two most critical actors regarding the Kurdish issue in the Middle East. Thus, this hypothesis is completely corroborated.

6.6. Sub-Hypothesis 5

If the Kurds want to become more vital in Syrian politics, they must develop good relations with Russia.

Russian presence in Syria is one of the most critical factors that does not desire to see a Kurdish autonomy, putting the Kurdish-led entity in a problematic situation. Because of being in favour of western powers, Russia does not help the Kurds. Russia's primary objective is to cut the connection between the US and Kurds in Syria. For keeping the Kurds on their side, Russia has warned them not to rely on US policies (Borshchevskaya, 2020). The US decision of withdrawal allowed Moscow to strengthen its ties with the Kurds and establish a new military force in the northeast. One respondent pointed out that "*Russia is the most important player in Syria. Thus, if you want to achieve an objective here, you must cooperate with Russia. If not, then you must have another source to survive*" (interview 2, 2021).

Although Russia desires to keep good relations with the Kurdish-led entity, it is undecided about the Kurds' right to self-determination or autonomy. In other words, Moscow is mainly in favour of Syrian integrity. Moscow promotes itself as a mediator between Assad and the Kurds and persists in including the legal rights of the Kurds in the Syrian constitution

(Borshchevskaya, 2020). Russia's primary objective is to stand by Assad in the war, who stated that he would not accept any Kurdish entity that aims to partition Syria (*ibid*).

Consequently, being the most powerful player in Syrian politics and its future decisions, Russia is very critical that the Kurdish-led entity must establish better relations with it. The US might protect the Kurdish entity for the moment, but it is important to establish better relations with Russia for the future. There is no better option than constitute better relations with Russia. However, it is not possible to claim that this hypothesis corroborated 100%.

6.7. Sub-Hypothesis 6

The U.N. and the E.U. have failed to find a solution in diplomatic ways for Syria.

The UNSC has focused on Syria for negotiations and to end the violence. The Council initiated the first action in January and February 2012. While the US, UK, and France desired to endorse an effective plan adopted by the Arab League, Russia and China opposed any international intervention and support for the regime change in Syria (Lundgren, 2016, p. 3). As a result of opposing any harsh plan against the regime, Russia and China vetoed the resolution. This first veto on Syria also led to positions that would resonate through debates on Syria for the coming years.

Consequently, in the UN Security Council (UNSC), Russia and China consistently prevented the US and the EU efforts to punish Syria and blocked any move that could occur for foreign military intervention supporting the Syrian opposition (Goodarzi, 2020, p. 141). Russia and China have also avoided any resolutions that might put the Assad regime under pressure and his removal from power. While these parties have blocked the diplomatic solution at the UNSC, the EU has also failed in progressing any diplomatic solution for the civil war (interview 2, 2021). The EU strategy regarding Syria has mainly focused on refugee-related issues rather than a comprehensive strategy for a lasting solution.

There is no doubt that the UN and EU have failed to find a lasting solution for Syria. Otherwise, the war would have not been continued for ten years. Therefore, this hypothesis is completely corroborated.

6.8. Main Hypothesis

In achieving their objectives, the Kurds in Iraq have been supported more than the Kurds in Syria, militarily and economically, by regional and international powers.

In both Iraq and Syria, the government's repressive policies towards the Kurds have increased the hatred between the Kurds and Arabs, which caused anger and opposition to the government and increased the willingness to become independent. For achieving these objectives, the Kurds have always been in relations with some external powers. As a result of having external power's support, they were undoubtedly the most influential groups in achieving their objectives in both wars, the 2003 Iraq war, and the 2011 Syrian civil war. Yet, the Kurdish entity in Syria has not received as sufficient assistance from external players as the Kurds in Iraq.

After September 11, 2001, the USA started a global war on terror. One of these wars occurred in Iraq, which took place in March 2003 and caused a struggle between ethnic and religious/sectarian communities. The primary objective of the war in Iraq was to halt Iraq from its supposed WMD facilities, remove Saddam Hussein from power and destroy terrorist organizations' shelters within the country. However, the plan did not go as planned. The US-led coalition ousted Saddam Hussein from power. Still, the lack of strategy for rebuilding the democratic institutions in a divided country resulted in an ethno-religious conflict among various communities. Therefore, Iraq is today more a subject of outside players influence on the country's development than an autonomous power centre with the ability to influence regional outcomes (Schmidt, 2020, p. 29).

As an ethnic minority (15-20%) in Iraq, the Kurds benefited from various opportunities, such as power vacuum in the central government, their geopolitical importance, to strengthen their relations with different regional and international powers to reinforce their provincial government. The regional (Turkey, Iran, and Israel) and international powers (the US) found the Kurdish region a vital opportunity to maintain their long-term interests in Iraq. In this context, external support has been very critical for the Kurds in achieving their objectives. Without external power's assistance, Kurdish groups would be able to pursue their facilities neither in Iraq nor in Syria. For this reason, the support from regional and international powers was very critical. Some regional and global powers, such as Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the US, played a significant role in the process of establishing Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. Turkey and Iran somehow accepted the 2005 Iraqi constitution, which recognized the KRG as regional autonomy. Israel also played a significant role in this process. One respondent stated that "*Israel is even in favour of an independent Kurdistan in Iraq because the creation of the Kurdish government in Iraq provided Israel to observe Iran's activities in the region"* (interview 1, 2021).

Furthermore, the US was the main actor in the process. As one respondent pointed out that, "*without the US intervention in Iraq and its help, the Kurds in Iraq could never become today's level"* (interview 1, 2021). While these regional and global powers somehow supported the Kurds in Iraq to achieve their objectives, they have not indicated the same attitude for the Kurds in Syria.

Although the civil war brought a significant opportunity to the Kurds to establish an entity within Syria, the regional and global powers have not supported them as they did in Iraq. However, with the emergency of the Arab Spring, which affected Syria very harshly and caused a civil war in the country, Syria has become a playground for various regional and international powers. With some other ethnic and religious communities, the Kurdish parties have benefited from this complicated situation and established a regional autonomy. Although they found this opportunity to develop regional autonomy, the regional and international powers have not accepted the Kurdish-led autonomy in order to protect the integrity of Syria. The regional powers such as Turkey, Iran have applied various embargoes on this regional autonomy. The US and the EU have also done almost any effective strategy to protect this regional autonomy (Bouquin, Court, & Hond, 2017). The US saw them as only a temporary collaborator for fighting ISIS on the ground. Also, Israel has not supported the Kurds in Syria as sufficient as they did in Iraq because the western power's role is limited in Syria. On the contrary, Israel could pursue its interests in Iraq due to its great friendship with the US, but we cannot say the same for Syria, where the American power is limited (Gordon, 2015).

Based on these arguments, one can say that the Kurds in Syria have been abandoned by the global powers, while the Kurds in Iraq were supported by some major power players during the 2003 Iraq war. Thus, according to information gathered from interviews and literature, this hypothesis is corroborated.

6.9. Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, two tables (table 3 and 4), which indicate the comparison of Iraq and Syria, have provided to show ethnic and religious diversity in both countries. While *table 3* present ethnic, religion, sect and language similarities in both countries, *table 4* provides a general information about the external power's support to the Kurds in Iraq and Syria.

Table 3: Comparative Table of Iraq and Syria.[21]

	Iraq	**Syria**
Ethnic Groups (%)	Arab 75%-80%, Kurds 15%-20%, Turkoman, Assyrian, and other 5%	Arab (75%), Kurd (10%), Turkish (3-5%), Armenian (0.5%) and Circassian (0.5%)
Religions (%)	Muslim 97% Christian, Yezidis, Jews and other 3%	Muslim (87%), Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian) (10%), Druze (3%), Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo)
Sects (%)	Shia (60%-65%), Sunni (32%-37%),	Sunni (74%), Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia (13%)
Languages	Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen (a Turkish dialect), Assyrian, Armenian	Arabic, Kurdish, Circassian, Assyrian (Aramaic), Armenian

Syria and Iraq have very similar historical background, ethnic and religious structure, political system, and social and cultural structure, which is rare to find in other societies in the world. The population of Iraq constitutes approximately 75-80% of Arabs; 15-20% of Kurds, and 5% of Turkmen, Yezidis, Assyrians, and Circassians (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2015, p. 1992). From a religious point of view, almost all the country is Muslim. Approximately 60-65% of the Muslims are Shia, and 32-37% are Sunni (*ibid*, p. 1992). Apart from Muslims, there are also Christians, Jews, and members of other religions in the region.

Ethnically and religiously, Syria has a similar population structure as Iraq. Ethnically, around 90% of the population is Arabs, 10% is Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrians, Turkmen, and other minority groups (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2015, p. 3885). Religiously the most dominant group is Muslims. Approximately 75% of Muslims are Sunni; 13% are Nusayri/Alawite, Ismaili, and Shia, and 3% are Druze (*ibid*). The Christian community, which is divided into Orthodox, Nestorian, and Catholic, constitutes about 10% of the population (*ibid*).

Possessing such a similar social, political, and cultural structure, the issues in one country can easily affect the other one. Thus, conceptualizing the ethno-religious/sectarian conflicts because of political, economic, cultural, social, and individual structure, which occur in a historical process, not always exist, the ethno-religious conflicts can be read from the

[21] All data was collected from (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2015; Dag, 2015; McDowall, 2007; Yildiz, 2007; Yildiz, 2005) but the table is created by author.

constructivist approach lenses rather than other approaches, such as primordialism, or rational choice theory.

The absence of keeping the different ethnic and religious/sectarian groups together and the lack of a common denominator has been a significant problem in Iraq and Syria. The division of these ethnic and religious groups deepened after the US invasion in March 2003 in Iraq and after the 2011 Syrian civil war (Abbas, 2017; Dag, 2015). In Iraq, While Sunni Arabs resisted intervention to preserve their power, Shias and Kurds perceived the intervention as a historic opportunity to obtain more power. As a result of this invasion, on the one hand, Shias gained control in the central government; on the other hand, the Kurds established the KRG and achieved one of their most significant objectives. Even if the emergence of the conflict was different in Syria, it turned into an ethno-religious/sectarian conflict as Iraq. While the minority group Arab-Alawites wanted to keep their political power, Sunnis demanded more political, social, and economic rights to share power. The Kurds also saw the sectarian struggle as an opportunity to establish their own administration.

Table 4: Factors and Players that influenced Kurdish goals.[22]

Factors/Players	**Kurds in Iraq**	**Kurds in Syria**
Natural Resources (oil, gas)	It has a significant role in relations with regional and global players.	The resources in Kurdish areas are limited. Thus, it does not have a critical role in relations with external players.
Military	They have a regular and well-armed military force (Peshmerga). It is supported by various external powers for security in Iraq.	They also have several military forces, militias but poorly armed. (YPG-YPJ, SDF). They have received limited support from the West.
Economic situation	Much better since they have good relations with major regional powers.	Very poor. Mostly in need of humanitarian assistance.
Impact on state domestic politics	They are very effective in Iraqi domestic politics. After the 2005 Iraqi constitution, the first President was Kurdish (Jalal Talabani).	They are not very effective in Syrian domestic politics since their unilateral established autonomy has not been accepted by major players.
Regional Powers Factor	Since 2003, relations with regional powers have been developed.	They do not have good relations with regional powers since 2012.
Turkey	Since 2003, the economic and political relations with Turkey have significantly enhanced. The KRG is selling much of its oil	The relations with Turkey are worsen. They have faced many military attacks and economic embargoes from Turkey.

[22] This comparative table is created by the author.

	and gas to Turkey. Turkish investments have risen dramatically.	
Iran	Iran has also been enhanced cooperation with the regional government to increase its influence in the region.	Iran does not have any relations with the Kurds in Syria since its first priority is to support the Assad regime.
Israel	The relations with Israel have always been better. As an "invisible contributor," Israel always promoted the Kurds in Iraq to pursue its interests in Iraq.	Since the Western influence is limited in Syria, Israel ensures its own security rather than supporting opposition groups in Syria.
Global Power Players,	Except for the USA, other global powers did not have a role in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.	Russia is the most influential player in Syria.
The USA	The US was the leading power player in Iraq since 2003. It was the leading player in the establishment of the Kurdish regional government in 2005. The US has significantly supported the Kurds in Iraq to secure its interests for the future, rather than supporting other ethnic and religious/sect groups.	The US power has been limited in Syria. It has not pursued a stable foreign policy in Syria, and it is unpredictable. It has only supported the Kurds in the north to a limited extend for fighting ISIS on the ground.
Russia	Limited role in Iraq since the post-Cold War.	The most powerful and influential player in Syria since 2015. It has exclusively promoted the Assad regime to control and secure its military base in Syria and its interests in the East Med.

As it can be seen in *table 4*, some factors, such as natural resources, have played a significant role in Kurdish relations with regional and international power players during and after the 2003 Iraq war. Also, the creation of the Kurdish Regional Government obtained a great opportunity for some players, such as Israel, the US, and Turkey (after Sunnis lost their power), to drive their interests in Iraq.

On the other hand, the Kurds in Syria have become very critical for defeating ISIS. Yet, the rise of the Kurds has been perceived as a threat to regional powers, such as Turkey and Iran. Therefore, these players have not accepted any Kurdish entity in Syria. Without the acquiescence of Turkey and Iran, which have a very critical role regarding Syria's future, the Kurdish entity, Rojava, might not survive in the future. It is necessary for the Kurds in Syria to maintain a balanced relationship between Washington and Moscow.

Overall Conclusion

In this study, which deals with the ethnic and religious dimensions of the war in Syria and Iraq, different results have been reached. Ethnic and religious/sect struggle in Iraq did not only occurred because of the American invasion, or the Syrian civil war is not only a part of the popular movement brought by the Arab Spring. Rather, these two wars occurred due to a combination of various socio-political reasons or domestic factors, external factors, and history. Considering the current conjuncture, it would not be wrong to say that political pressures, ethnic and sectarian differences, and economic difficulties among socio-political reasons, have been quite effective. These political pressures, which are the result of autocratic governments in the history of both countries, have led to the formation of an invisible opposition. Thus, the American invasion of Iraq and the social movements (Arab Spring) in Syria was only an occasion to awaken this invisible opposition, which led to the division among ethnic and sectarian communities within the state.

Iraq and Syria have been continuing to experience the reflections of their history, which has been governed for many years by autocratic regimes. The political pressures throughout history have caused ethnic, and religious/sectarian hatred. Hence, it is not possible to say that the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria is only a result of the domestic political conjuncture. In this sense, the reasons for these conflicts should be evaluated from the origin of both countries to the present day.

Foreign policy developments and the relations established with regional and global actors have also been effective. Whenever a conflict occurred among ethnic and sectarian groups, each group has sought foreign assistance to pursue its power over other groups. For having a very diverse population within their territories, in which many ethnic and religious/sectarian groups exist, Iraq and Syria are the two best instances of ethno-religious/sectarian conflicts. As a result of ethno-religious conflicts, international players have found the occasion to pursue their interests in both countries. While fighting each other internally, these communities seek help from external players to pursue their political purposes. These external players see this situation as an occasion to drive their interests in the country. Iraq and Syria are the best two instances of this situation. While some groups have obtained their goals, others lost their power. For this reason, it became too difficult to find a lasting solution in the country. For instance, while the Kurds in Iraq sought foreign assistance, they usually collaborated with the US and Israel, and other western players to pursue their goals.

Shias also seek for help from Iran to become powerful in the Iraqi central government. Sunnis seek help from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Firstly, Iraq has been experiencing ethno-religious conflicts in particularly among Shias, Sunnis, and the Kurds since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Although Iraqi governments, which usually formed by Sunnis, managed to repress other groups by political and military pressure, they could not prevent foreign interventions and other communities' relations with external powers. For instance, while the Kurds in Iraq have collaborated with Iran, the US, and Israel to prevail in Iraqi governments' pressures, these foreign powers saw it as an occasion to intervene in Iraqi internal affairs. Shias also collaborated with Iran to prevent Sunni's political pressure.

In 2003, when the US-led coalition prepared to invade Iraq, the Kurds have seen this invasion as a historical opportunity to oust Saddam Hussein from power. Thus, the Kurds cooperated with the USA for invasion as they first did it during the First Gulf War in 1990-91. This collaboration was not because the Kurds liked to do, but that was because of the Iraqi governments' policies towards them throughout history, especially during the 1980s. Thus, collaborating with external players was an opportunity to get rid of political pressures and ethnic repression.

However, ethno-religious hatred fully exposed when the US-led coalition overthrew the Saddam regime. The invasion created a vacuum of authority and a security gap in the country, in which every group found this situation as an occasion to pursue their interests. Thus, this gap led to chaos and ethno-religious conflicts. All external players sought for proxies to pursue their interests and increase their influence in the country. For instance, while Iran has promoted Shais to hamper Sunnis, which promoted by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, in the central government, they also collaborated with the Kurds to limit Turkey's influence in the north of Iraq. Moreover, the USA and Israel, being the natural enemies of Iran, did not want the Shai community to become stronger in Iraq due to their cooperation with Iran. For this reason, the US and Israel supported the establishment of the KRG and assisted the Kurds to reinforce their military and economy. As a result of this support, Jalal Talabani became the first Kurdish president of Iraq in 2005 until 2014.

In conclusion, the political pressure over ethnic and religious minorities throughout history feed a strong invisible ethnic and religious hatred and brought Iraq into chaos. The US-led invasion was only an occasion to expose this opposition and hatred.

Due to historical, ethnical, and religious/sectarian similarities, the same reasons - political pressures, ethnic and sectarian differences, and economic difficulties - are applicable

to Syria. Although the peaceful protests in Syria have risen due to economic and political reasons and to end the dynasty of Assad, the political pressure and ethno-religious hostility caused by the Syrian governments throughout history appeared to be fundamental reasons for the conflict. Thus, the situation has evolved from protests to ethnic and religious/sectarian conflict. As a result of this evolution, each group sought external assistance to survive the war. Some groups, who had militia forces to defend themselves, such as the Kurds, saw this conflict as an occasion to pursue their objectives.

However, as result of regional and international player's involvement and support, the number and power of the opponents have reached considerable levels. The fact that the global and regional powers, which have had a certain influence in Syria for many years, increased their role in the country with the civil war. In particular, the West has promoted the opposition groups to overthrow Bashar Al-Assad from power on the one hand; to defeat terrorist organisations on the other. Being the most powerful opposition group, the Kurdish militias are promoted by the West, the US the EU and Israel, to defeat ISIS and keep western interests alive in Syria.

The support of the West to the opposition was not sufficient to oust the Assad regime. Besides, as a western ally and a critical player in Syria, Turkey opposed the Kurds and shifted its “anti-Assad” Syrian policy to “anti-Kurds” policy, which forced the western states to limit their supports to the Kurds. At the same time, Assad has developed its relations with Russia and Iran to stay alive. Although the origins and developments of these relations are important, especially Russia and Iran's support for the regime in many aspects, including military power, has kept the Assad regime alive to this day.

The very limited support from western countries and embargoes from the regional players, such as Turkey and Iran, put the Kurdish-led entity in a difficult situation. After defeating Islamic State in Syria, US President Trump’s decision of withdrawing from Syria indicated that the Kurds can no longer keep hoping for western support and they should look for other options. The Kurdish-led entity can survive if a strong global power backs them. In this context, Russia is an option, but they are an alliance of the Assad regime, which does not accept any Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Turkey and Iran might crush the Kurdish entity if the US let them. In short, it is impossible to survive without an international contributor. Even if the US has betrayed the Kurds several times in history, they are still the ones who can only protect the Kurdish entity in Syria. The Kurds should develop strong diplomatic relations and political dialogue with the US and, as a powerful state in the Middle East, with Israel.

The study provided a broader aspect of the ethno-religious conflict and Kurdish relations with regional and global powers in Syria and Iraq. There were some limitations during this study. First, the level of complexity of ethno-religious conflicts in the two countries is very high. It was, therefore, difficult to separate these conflicts, be they ethnic or religious and sectarian. There are many studies that exist about ethno-religious conflicts, but the studies about whether the conflicts in Iraq and Syria are purely ethno-religious conflicts, or they are the international struggle of pursuing self-interests in the Middle East. Thus, the conflicts in Iraq and Syria are way broader than only studying them as an ethnic and sectarian clash.

The other complex situation is that different communities of the region are integrated into the same norms and values. For instance, the Kurds and Arabs are different ethnic groups but on the other hand, they are both Muslims and have similar cultural norms. In another instance, Alawites, Sunnis, and Shias are Arabs and Muslims, but they are different sects. Therefore, it is difficult to categorize them in a specific term. For this reason, the concepts of "Ethno-religious or Ethno-sectarian" do not correspond to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Unlike the religious conflict between Israel and Palestinian or sectarian conflict in Yemen, the conflict in Iraq and Syria is much more complicated. These conflicts need to be reconceptualised, which is an ideal research area for future studies. Also, internationalisation of ethnic and religious/sectarian conflict is needed to be furthered in future studies. As a result, studying Kurdish question only as an ethnic or linguistic issue is not broader enough and it cannot be analysed well. It is not only a matter of ethnicity and language, rather it is a matter of historical process and political pressure applied by regional states in this process.

On the other hand, a lot of studies about the Kurdish question in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are all about the facts and past developments. Studies regarding Kurdistan's future and ethnic differences from other communities in the region are limited. Moreover, limited studies have deeply analysed Kurdish ethnic, language, religion, and cultural dimensions. McDowall (2004 and 2007) is one of the best instances of these studies. The Kurdish institutions need to conduct more research about Kurdistan's future and discuss it as a whole, not as "Iraqi Kurdistan, Syrian Kurdistan or Turkish Kurdistan". These terms are not quite right to use for an ethnically diverse community, which sounds as Kurdistan belongs to these states.

However, the second limitation was due to information regarding the trade relations of external powers with the Kurds and their official military support. Due to unofficial and secret deals and trade, I have at times struggled to find information and data on economic relations with regional and global powers. To reach this kind of information, one needs to reach premier

resources and data of economic and military trade of the Kurdish autonomous. Also, Kurdish authorities need to open their archives for researchers.

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Appendix A: Declaration of Acceptance

My name is Seyhan Sonmez. I am currently studying for a master's degree in political science and international relations at the Catholic University of Louvain. I held this interview with you to gather information for my master's thesis. Thus, I will record you for listening to it again and not making mistakes in taking notes if you do not accept the registration. I will take some notes.

- I accept that I have voluntarily done this interview and that the information I have given to the interviewer would be used in this study.
- I accepted that I would not make any claim against the author due to the information I have provided.

Je m'appelle Seyhan Sonmez. J'étudie actuellement pour un master en sciences politiques et relations internationales à l'Université catholique de Louvain. J'ai tenu cet entretien avec vous pour recueillir des informations pour ma thèse de maîtrise. Ainsi, je vous enregistrerai pour l'avoir réécoutée et pour ne pas faire d'erreur en prenant des notes. Si vous n'acceptez pas l'enregistrement, je vais prendre des notes.

- J'ai volontairement accepté cet entretien et j'accepte que les informations données à l'intervieweur puissent être utilisées dans cette étude.
- J'accepte de ne faire aucune réclamation contre l'auteur en raison des informations que j'ai fournies.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Questions for Iraq.

1. Do you know why the war occurred in Iraq in 2003?
2. Do you think that ethnic and religious division is problematic in Iraq? Why or why not?
3. What are the roles of Ethno-religious communities in the war?
4. What do you know about Kurdish political movements in Iraq?
5. What is the role of regional powers such as Turkey, Israel and Iran in Iraq?
6. Do you think these regional powers collaborated with the Kurds in the war? If yes, for what reasons?
7. What is the role of international powers like the United States?
8. Do you think the United States has helped the Kurds in Iraq become stronger than other communities such as Sunnis and Shiites?
9. Do you want to add anything you think you have not mentioned?

Questions for Syria.

1. Do you know why the war occurred in Syria in 2011?
2. Do you think the ethnic and religious division is problematic in Syria as well? If yes, why do you think so?
3. What do you know about Kurdish movements in Syria?
4. What is the role of other ethnic and religious groups in the war?
5. What is the role of regional powers like Turkey and Iran in Syria?
6. Why do the regional powers not want to see a Kurdish entity in northern Syria?
7. What is the role of international powers like Russia, the US and the EU?
8. Do you think Russia is the most critical Bashar al-Assad alliance that led the war to be prolonged?
9. Do you know why the US has withdrawn from Syria?
10. Do you think that other ethnic and religious communities such as Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, and Sunni Arabs want to live in a separate territory from the Syrian regime? If so, do you think this will solve the ethno-religious problem in Syria?

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