

“Iraqoncilable” Differences? The Political Nature of the Peshmerga

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INTRODUCTION

Since Iraq’s current borders were drawn in the aftermath of World War I, the Kurdish population of this predominately Arab country has consistently endured violent conflict. The Kurdish armed forces, known as the *peshmerga* (literally: “those who face death”), are engrained in Iraqi Kurdistan’s past and will likely be an integral part of its future as well. This paper seeks to document how the *peshmerga* have evolved and what this indicates about the prospects for a long-lasting peace in northern Iraq. The *peshmerga* have been involved primarily in two conflicts: Kurds fighting for their independence against Baghdad and Kurdish political parties fighting against one another. The current *peshmerga* find themselves in a polar opposite position, unified amongst both Kurdish parties and participating in a federal Iraqi defense system. Studying the history of the *peshmerga* provides insight into the interaction of Kurdish political parties as well as Kurdistan’s tepid relationship with Baghdad. How does the *peshmerga*’s unification demonstrate the reconciliation or the continued lack of trust between Kurdish political parties and the federal government in Baghdad? What does the *peshmerga*’s structure reveal about Kurdistan’s political system? The *peshmerga*’s patrimonial history and organization indicates that northern Iraq’s current stability is not sustainable.

REBELLION AND THE ROOTS OF DIVISION

“There is not one rock in these mountains that is not stained with our blood.” – Former *peshmerga* fighter

Historically, the *peshmerga* in Iraqi Kurdistan has operated as a guerilla force that opposed Arab dictatorship in Baghdad. Particularly vocal in the struggle for Kurdish rights has been the Barzani clan, led by the revered Mullah Mustafa Barzani (1903-1974), or “Barzani the Immortal.” Barzani led the Kurdish independence movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s and crafted the first true *peshmerga* in Iraq.ⁱ Guerilla clashes in the cragged mountains of northern Iraq became items of Kurdish folklore.

Barzani established the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1946.ⁱⁱ As a political party, the KDP, which fought for Kurdish autonomy, has tribal roots

that center around the leadership of Mustafa Barzani. Initially, Iraqi Kurds nearly unanimously supported his leadership, but political fissures began to emerge in 1975 as a result of the Algiers Agreement, which temporarily resolved a border dispute between Iran and Iraq. As part of the agreement, Iran halted its arming of Iraqi Kurds in their struggle against Baghdad while Iraq agreed to stop supporting the Kurdish separatist movement in Iran.ⁱⁱⁱ Without foreign aid, the guerilla movement floundered, leaving Barzani with a stark choice: be slaughtered by the Iraqi army or flee.^{iv} While Barzani fled to Iran, *peshmerga* soldiers who remained in Iraq were massacred, and the Iraqi government was able to extend its control deeper into northern Iraq.^v The Algiers Agreement was a heavy setback to the Kurdish liberation movement.

Jalal Talabani, a high-ranking member of the KDP, believed that the Barzani clan had failed the Kurdish independence movement, so he formed a rival political party known as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1975. Like the KDP, the PUK fought for autonomy from Baghdad. Most of their political positions were indistinguishable; even to this day, Kurds cannot explain the central difference between the two parties.^{vi} The tension between these two parties persisted for decades to come. For the first time, the Kurdish independence movement was divided. This difference could be seen militarily: the KDP and the PUK raised their separate *peshmerga* forces.

AUTONOMY AND THE KURDISH CIVIL WAR

“The Kurd has no friend but the mountains.” – Kurdish proverb

In time, Iraqi Kurds received some luck. Following the 1991 invasion of Kuwait, the Iraqi government was forced to withdraw its forces from Kurdish regions in April 1991 due to pressure from the international community. The United States, Great Britain and France established a no-fly zone over the Kurdish Autonomous Region from the 36th parallel northwards.^{vii} The Kurdistan Region became autonomous from Baghdad.

Iraqi Kurds were finally able to build their own government in 1992 when the first democratic elections were held. The *peshmerga* became the official defense forces for the region. The *peshmerga* leadership developed a chain of command and standardized protocol; soldiers became salaried employees and wore official uniforms. Once the region became autonomous, state-building became necessary. However, the relationship between the two main political parties became extremely hostile. Saddam Hussein imposed an economic blockade over the region, severely reducing Kurdistan’s oil and food supplies. In addition, the United Nations embargo on Iraq proved detrimental to the livelihood of its Kurdish population;

though Kurds were not the intended targets, the region was not permitted to trade with its neighbors. The KDP and the PUK competed over control for black market and smuggling routes, which were Iraqi Kurdistan's only contact with the outside world. Violence broke out between the KDP *peshmerga*, led by Mustafa Barzani's son Masoud Barzani, and the PUK *peshmerga*, led by its founder Jalal Talabani, in May 1994.^{viii} The Kurdish Civil War was a particularly violent conflict that threatened the autonomy that the Kurds had achieved.

The civil war was characterized by outside intervention. Talabani reached out to the Iranian government in 1996 for tactical support against the KDP.^{ix} The PUK's alliance with Iran was threatening to Barzani. In one of the most shocking military moves in Iraq's history, Barzani retaliated by reaching out to Saddam Hussein to recapture the PUK-controlled city of Erbil. This cold-blooded decision was particularly surprising given Saddam's brutal Anfal campaign, when 182,000 Kurds were slaughtered by the Iraqi army in 1988. Saddam had repressed Iraqi Kurds brutally. Only a few years earlier, Barzani fought Saddam's forces for Kurdish independence. Since the establishment of the no-fly zone, Saddam was eager to re-take northern Iraq. Following Barzani's request, forty thousand Iraqi troops swept through the region.^x Barzani was intent on defeating the PUK to the extent that he placed Kurdish autonomy in jeopardy.

The two Kurdish sides eventually became battle-weary. The US-mediated Washington Agreement, signed on September 1998, formally ended the Kurdish Civil War and stipulated that the parties would share oil revenues and power. Kurdistan enjoyed its first period of peace that would last until the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

However, peace is not synonymous with cooperation. After the conclusion of the civil war, two separate administrations were established in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah, with a separate *peshmerga* army for each. Iraqi Kurdistan remained divided and the two parties were still mutually distrusting. *Peshmerga* soldiers manned numerous checkpoints throughout the region. The KDP and PUK trained their own soldiers and intelligence agents. There were two defense ministers and two interior ministers within the Kurdistan Regional Government, each representing his respective party.^{xi} Governmental services were locally and politically controlled. Though the war had ended, distrust continued.

Today, Iraqi Kurds are hesitant to discuss their participation in this civil war, a conflict often referred to as the Kurdish "brother killing." Rather than being proud, as all are about their revolts against Baghdad, most former *peshmerga* soldiers are embarrassed about their participation in this conflict. Both parties essentially strive for the same goal: autonomy from Baghdad. Instead, this war threatened to destroy the autonomy that the region had obtained.

THE NEW IRAQ: THE BEGINNING OF THE *PESHMERGA*'S TRANSFORMATION

“Quite simply, the presence of militias does not fit into the campaign of building an independent Iraq.” – L. Paul Bremer

The United States and its allies began the invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003. L. Paul Bremer quickly announced that the Iraqi army was disbanded on 23 May 2003 after he was appointed Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). For the rest of Iraq, the elimination of the army resulted in four hundred thousand angry and unemployed former soldiers in the streets as well as the beginning of the insurgency. However, the *peshmerga* did not undergo the same treatment as their Baghdadi counterpart did. For Iraqi Kurdistan, disbanding the Iraqi National Guard (ING) yielded a different result: the *peshmerga*, numbering around 60,000 soldiers in 2003, were effectively promoted and became a more influential entity in the new Iraq. The *peshmerga* became the second largest military force in the country; it was larger than the 46,000 troops in the British army contingent, but smaller than the American military presence of 150,000 troops.^{xii} Though Bremer wanted to abolish all militia groups—those developed on an ethnic or sectarian basis—the American military still coordinated with the *peshmerga*.^{xiii} Because of its pro-American stance, the *peshmerga* were also the only militia legally allowed to operate by the transitional government. This transformation indicated that the Kurdish population would become more influential in shaping the country than they ever had been able to be previously. Abolishing the Iraqi National Guard was also symbolically important to the Kurdish population: the forces that Saddam had used to slaughter them were eliminated. This is the type of Iraq in which Kurds would be willing to participate.

The KDP- and PUK-controlled territories were still splintered in the aftermath of the Kurdish Civil War. These two parties both had a disdain for the Ba’athist party but cooperated separately with American forces during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The *peshmerga* provided tactical support for missions in Diana, Kirkuk, Mosul and Tikrit, all of which host Kurdish populations. The *peshmerga* also disrupted Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish Sunni terrorist group that the Bush administration falsely claimed was backed by Saddam Hussein.^{xiv} The *peshmerga* also operated checkpoints in Baghdad after the ING was disbanded. *Peshmerga* groups were especially helpful to the multinational forces during the early stages of the war and also proved their value as an ally in 2007 when they provided additional troops in Baghdad when the United States employed its “surge” strategy.^{xv} Jafar Mustafa Ali, the current Minister of Peshmerga Affairs in the Kurdistan Regional Govern-

ment, proudly proclaims that the *peshmerga* are the most reliable ally of the United States.^{xvi}

The Kurdish parties made a show of unity, but their war effort was not coordinated. The KDP and PUK *peshmergas* continued to operate separately from one another. For example, the KDP *peshmerga* provided support in the Ninewa governorate when multi-national forces were trying to capture Mosul; the PUK *peshmerga* participated in the same respect but in the Kirkuk province. In neither case did American forces permit the *peshmerga* to enter the cities of Mosul or Kirkuk, out of fear that Kurdish soldiers would inflame ethnic tensions between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs.^{xvii} This pattern continues to this day; whenever Kurdish forces assemble close to the city borders of Kirkuk, the city's Arab population tends to revolt. Iraq has never enjoyed a strong national identity, and as a result, ethnic conflict remains a constant possibility. Arab Iraqis still view the *peshmerga* as an entity that serves Kurdish interests; therefore, their presence in Iraq's disputed territories is inflammatory.

Overall, the Iraqi Kurds were tremendously grateful to the United States for removing Saddam Hussein from power. Though Kurdistan had been autonomous since the establishment of the no-fly zone in 1991, the fear that Saddam would re-invade remained alive until his death. Coalition forces found strong pro-American sentiment in northern Iraq. Since the invasion, not a single American soldier was killed in any of Kurdistan's three provinces. Because of the region's relative safety and stability, particularly compared to central Iraq, the United States never established a military base in Kurdistan and expended the least resources in these northern provinces.

The Kurdistan Region is everything that the United States had promised would arise in Iraq: an overwhelmingly pro-American region with a relatively stable democratic system.^{xviii} However, the United States is not willing to support the Kurdistan Region unconditionally. President Bush's policy in Iraq was to promote a unified federal government. In reference to an independent Kurdistan, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, "Clearly the Kurds wish, in some way, to preserve their historic identity and to link it in some way to geography. But I think it's absolutely clear that part of Iraq must remain part of Iraq."^{xix} The federal government must be strong and stable; therefore, an independent Kurdistan would weaken Baghdad politically. Independence would also lead to more instability internationally. Iraq's neighbors—Turkey, Iran, and Syria—also have Kurdish populations vying for their own self-rule. Thus, Bush objected to Kurdish independence, a goal that was historically the *peshmerga*'s principal objective. Kurdistan would have to participate in a federal Iraq, though the Kurdish voice suddenly became much more pronounced. With this transformation, new questions arise: what type of institution would the *peshmerga* develop into? Could they willingly cooperate with Baghdad?

The current policymakers in the Kurdistan Regional Government proclaim that they do not want to declare independence. Kurdistan will remain a portion of Iraq if Iraq retains a democratic, representative government and allows Kurdistan to guard its autonomy.^{xx} One measure of this autonomy is the region's constitutionally protected right to maintain the *peshmerga*. Remaining a part of Iraq is not a popular idea amongst the majority of its Kurdish population. One former fighter reiterated that the goal of the *peshmerga* was to be liberated from Baghdad's rule; this goal, he argues, will not be met until Kurdistan is completely independent from the rest of Iraq.^{xxi}

UNIFICATION OF THE TWO ADMINISTRATIONS: 2006 – PRESENT

"I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends." – Abraham Lincoln

Unification and Domestic Kurdish Politics

The two main political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan remained the same as the region entered into the twenty-first century, and the leadership of each group was unchanged. The KDP is currently led by Masoud Barzani, Mustafa Barzani's son and current president of the Kurdish Regional Government. The capital of Iraqi Kurdistan and stronghold of the KDP is Erbil. Meanwhile, Jalal Talabani, the current president of Iraq, is still at the head of the PUK, whose leadership resides in Sulaimaniyah, the second largest city in the Kurdistan region. The two most important Kurds in contemporary Iraqi politics have a strong history of animosity during the Kurdish Civil War.

After the end of that war, the two political parties established two separate and non-interacting governments; this divide was in place for eight years. The KDP and PUK officially unified their governments in 2006 with the goal of combining the two administrations under one Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) which would govern the three Kurdish provinces of Iraq. The merger was a gradual process, as some ministries required additional time to coalesce.

True to Kurdish tribal history, *peshmerga* groups have traditionally been organized locally and inspired by charismatic personalities. Unification would require a shift in this mentality. With the formation of the unified Kurdistan Regional Government, theoretically all soldiers would serve their one president, regardless of political orientation, and the *peshmerga* would move from local to central control. The unification process, however, is not complete as far as the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs is concerned because a unified command structure has yet to be introduced. This raises concerns over the viability of harmony in northern Iraq; the unification of the *peshmerga* could test the longevity of the Kurdish peace agree-

ment. If the *peshmerga* could transform from a patrimonial group to an institutional organization with a greater mission than serving an individual leader, then peace in northern Iraq would be sustainable.

The *peshmerga* have been one of the last governmental agencies to complete the unification process. Appointed in May 2006, Jafar Mustafa Ali was officially sworn in as the KRG Minister of Peshmerga Affairs on 6 April 2009. To this day, the two *peshmerga* groups, comprised of a combined 80,000 soldiers, have not yet fully integrated their forces. At the end of the unification process, there should be eight brigades in total but as of January 2011, only four brigades were fully unified.^{xxii} The unification of the *peshmerga* requires standardizing procedures, such as training, combining their budgets and altering their chain of command. While the *peshmerga*'s personnel will remain the same, the command structure will necessarily have to change.^{xxiii} As of early 2011, there is not yet a unified chain of command for the *peshmerga*. Considering that the *peshmerga* includes the same individuals that fought against one another a mere ten years ago, does the fact that the *peshmerga* have not fully unified indicate that tensions between the two Kurdish parties still remain?

From the Kurdish perspective, unifying the *peshmerga* would naturally require a fair amount of time. Despite the slow unification, Kurdish politicians emphatically point out that *peshmerga* still succeed in defending the Kurdistan region. Moreover, the leadership of both *peshmerga* groups ultimately report to only one person: their elected leader, the president of the KRG.^{xxiv} Article 60, Item 1 of the Kurdistan Constitution states that “the President of the Kurdistan Region holds the highest office of executive authority. He is the Commander-in-Chief of the Regional Guard, the *peshmerga*.”^{xxv} While the goal of complete unification has not yet been reached, individual *peshmerga* brigades are still operational and they perform their basic responsibilities. There is only one Minister of Peshmerga Affairs for the Kurdistan Region—Jafar Mustafa Ali. Though the Minister is a former PUK *peshmerga* fighter, he serves a KRG president of the opposite party. Despite political differences and setbacks in unification, he maintains that the *peshmerga* is loyal to the President of the Kurdistan Region.

Functionality, however, is not necessarily an indicator of cohesion. Political divisions are still apparent throughout the Kurdistan region. For example, the *peshmerga* continue to operate checkpoints throughout the Kurdistan region, much like it did when there were two separate and non-interacting administrations. One of the largest checkpoints is that which divides the Erbil governorate, the KDP stronghold, from the PUK stronghold in the Sulaimaniyah governorate. When entering Sulaimaniyah, one can see large, framed portraits of party leader Jalal Talabani and flags emblazoned with the PUK logo. Likewise, portraits of Masoud Barzani and emblems of the KDP welcome visitors entering the Erbil governorate.

(Checkpoints also display flags of the Kurdistan region, though the Iraqi national flag is noticeably absent.)

It is easy to understand how lingering hostilities could prevent total unification. The participants in the civil war are the same individuals who must repair the damage and come together. However, it is not sufficient to summarize the *peshmerga*'s inabilities simply and solely as relics of past conflicts. The fact that most non-defense ministries have unified could indicate that there are other notable factors to consider.

Unification and Federal Politics

It is important to understand that Kurdistan's domestic politics do not occur in a vacuum. The federal government in Baghdad has been hugely influential in how the Kurdish administrations have unified, mostly because Baghdad has been unresponsive to the needs of the Kurdistan region. Kurdistan is essentially a state within a state; it is self-governing yet still connected to Baghdad's bureaucracies. While Kurdistan retains the autonomy that the region gained in 1991, the Kurdistan Regional Government cannot pass any laws that contradict the Iraqi federal constitution. Similarly, the Kurdistan Regional Government is dependent on Baghdad for its annual budget. Each year the Kurdistan Region receives 17 percent of Iraq's total revenue; this figure is determined by the most recent census results, as revenue must be distributed to the regions based on their population size.^{xxvi} However, the *peshmerga* and other security and law enforcement agencies in the Kurdistan Region have argued that they should be incorporated into the federal budget rather than the Kurdistan region's budget. Since 2008, the federal government has stalled in integrating the *peshmerga* into the 15th and 16th Divisions of the Iraqi army. This integration, Ali believes, would facilitate unification as well as provide the *peshmerga* with a larger budget and greater access to more advanced weapons systems. He argues that the unification process is not hindered by technical or political difficulties; unifying the *peshmerga* requires an investment of time and financial resources, the latter of which the ministry does not and cannot have without involvement from Baghdad.^{xxvii} This phenomenon indicates that ethnic and regional tensions remain and that political problems in Baghdad preclude it from cooperating with Erbil.

The *peshmerga* are not the only defense entity that have not yet unified since 2006. For example, the police and intelligence divisions continue to be divided. The Zerevani and Bergary are the special forces instruments of the Kurdistan Ministry of Interior. Their major responsibilities include law enforcement, humanitarian assistance, security for diplomatic delegations and protection of government buildings, oil fields and heritage sites.^{xxviii} They perform the same functions

but were created by the different parties. While the Zerevani have their headquarters in Erbil, the Bergary are based in Sulaimaniyah. The rest of the Ministry of Interior in Kurdistan has unified, though these two security arms have yet to complete this process. They do not cooperate on operations; they maneuver regionally.

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According to Zerevani Major General Aziz Weysi, the Zerevani and Bergary will unify when they are integrated into the Ministry of Interior in central Iraq. The Zerevani and Bergary have been trying to integrate themselves into the federal police system since 2008; however, there is no projected date of completion. If and when this unification does occur, these two agencies will no longer be paid by the Kurdistan Regional Government but instead by Baghdad.^{xxx} At face, this situation seems identical to the ongoing process of unifying the *peshmerga*. However, the Zerevani and Bergary were created by their respective political parties in 1997; at this time, the Kurdish Civil War was winding down and leaders of the two political parties were beginning their negotiations. The Zerevani and Bergary do not have a history of mutual opposition in the way that the two *peshmerga* groups did. In any case, the situation in which these special forces find themselves indicates that the political situation in Baghdad affects the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The intelligence services in Kurdistan, formed during the height of the Kurdish Civil War, are also not unified. Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Interior, the Asayish (literally: “security/intelligence”) has both a KDP branch and a PUK branch.^{xxxi} There are two intelligence offices, one for each branch, in each major Kurdish city, including Kirkuk. Masroor Barzani, the head of the KDP intelligence services and son of President Masoud Barzani, argues that the fact that these two agencies have not unified does not mean that they are mutually distrusting or that they are politically operated.^{xxxii} At face value, it is difficult not to see the intelligence forces as politically operated entities; in the entrance to Masroor Barzani’s office, for example, the emblem of KDP on the wall is larger than the adjacent flag of Kurdistan. Masroor Barzani maintains that though they are distinct, the KDP and PUK intelligence agencies work in conjunction with one another; the Kurdistan Region is much more stable than the rest of Iraq, in part due to this cooperation. Masroor Barzani maintains that there is no need for these two branches to unify for this reason. Unlike the *peshmerga* and the Kurdish special forces, however, intelligence services in Kurdistan have made no initiative to integrate with the intelligence services in Baghdad.^{xxxiii} This phenomenon can indicate that distrust still lingers between both the two Kurdish parties and the federal government in Baghdad. Though Masroor Barzani denies that Kurdish intelligence forces spy on each other or on those in Baghdad, it is not insignificant that they maintain distance between them.

The *peshmerga* work in conjunction with the various arms of the Minis-

try of Interior over issues such as defense policy, counter-terrorism and law enforcement. They necessarily need to cooperate and coordinate with one another in order to be effective. While none of these three forces have integrated fully, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs and Zerevani commanders cite political problems in Baghdad as the principal hindrance. The Kurdistan Regional Government only has limited funds; once these defense agencies are incorporated into the federal budget, Kurdish leaders believe that they will have sufficient resources to complete the unification process. Iraqi federal politics influences Kurdish domestic politics; in recent years, the inverse has proven to be true as well.

ROLE OF THE *PESHMERGA* IN IRAQ SINCE THE FALL OF SADDAM HUSSEIN

“Let me tell you, politics is much more difficult than war. In politics, there are many more fronts.” – Masoud Barzani

Federal and Regional Forces

Once the Iraqi defense forces were reinstated, it became necessary for the *peshmerga* to interact with Baghdad. This reveals another way in which the *peshmerga* have evolved from their traditional role. Rather than fighting the Iraqi army, the *peshmerga* must coordinate and cooperate with it. The power dynamics in Iraq had changed. After the American invasion, the *peshmerga* began to play a larger role in the Iraqi defense system. The *peshmerga*'s relationship with the federal armed services is a litmus test of lingering ethnic tensions between Iraqi Kurds and Iraq's Arab population.

It is important to provide clear definitions and distinctions between the *peshmerga* and the Iraqi national armed forces, particularly as they have evolved since 2003. The *peshmerga* are Kurdistan's regional guard; soldiers are not required to be of Kurdish descent to enlist. At the same time, Iraqi Kurds are free to join the national armed forces. Many of these barriers were shattered in the post-Saddam Iraq.

The *peshmerga* hold an elevated status since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Kurdistan scored a major political victory in the Iraqi constitution-writing process by ensuring the region's right to maintain the *peshmerga*. Unlike other militia groups of ethnic origins, the *peshmerga* are a legal entity within Iraq. According to Article 121, Item 5 of the Iraqi federal constitution, “The regional government shall be responsible for all the administrative requirements of the region, particularly the establishment and organization of the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces, and guards of the region.”^{xxxiv} Many be-

lieve that the *peshmerga* are a way to measure Kurdistan's ongoing desire for independence from the rest of Iraq; however, the *peshmerga* are a legal entity under the Iraqi constitution which was approved by popular referendum in 2005. Regional guards are primarily responsible for internal security. Though constitutionally approved, the *peshmerga*'s role in Iraq is still unique; as of early 2011 the *peshmerga* are the only officially recognized regional security force that exist outside of the Iraqi national army. (While several private militias, such as the Badr Organization or the Sons of Iraq, have emerged in Iraq since 2003 they have not been legally recognized by the federal government as a legitimate regional security force.)

Because of the *peshmerga*'s distinct status in Iraq, there are naturally some constitutional issues that need to be reconciled between the KRG and Baghdad. According to Article 110, Item 2 of the Iraqi federal constitution, the federal government has exclusive authority over "formulating and executing national security policy, including establishing and managing armed forces to secure the protection and guarantee the security of Iraq's borders and to defend Iraq."^{xxxv} The main mandate of the national army is to protect Iraq's borders, including those in the Kurdistan region. The national army has the exclusive responsibility of border control. The Kurdistan Region shares borders with Turkey and Iran. Thus, there are two divisions of the Iraqi national army charged with protecting these borders; these divisions report to the Iraqi Minister of Interior rather than to the KRG and are financed by the Iraqi defense budget. However, from the Kurdish perspective, it seems as though the Kurdistan Region is not a priority in Baghdad; the General Secretary of the Peshmerga states emphatically that the border guards of the national army are chronically under-equipped.^{xxxvi} This situation is particularly precarious along the porous border that Kurdistan shares with Iran.

The Iraqi constitution also provides a clear definition of roles that distinguish regional forces from federal forces. However, there are some discrepancies between the Iraqi federal constitution and the Kurdish constitution over the role of the *peshmerga* in Iraq. (Though it is still a draft, the Kurdistan Regional Government's constitution is still followed within the region.) Article 65, Item 13 of the Kurdish constitution explains that the president of the KRG has the authority, with approval of Kurdistan's Parliament, to send the *peshmerga* outside of the Kurdistan region's borders. The language of this provision is unclear as to whether the *peshmerga* can be deployed to other parts of Iraq or even beyond Iraq's borders.^{xxxvii} However, in the Iraqi federal constitution, the prime minister of the federal government has a monopoly on force; he is the ultimate commander-in-chief of the armed forces in Iraq. It is unclear how these constitutional issues could be resolved if the president of the KRG decided to deploy the *peshmerga* beyond the Kurdistan region's borders without consulting the prime minister of Iraq.^{xxxviii} At the moment, the KRG has taken the stance that Kurdistan is a portion of a democratic

and federal Iraq. By this logic, the *peshmerga* would abide by the Iraqi constitution in a time of crisis. Mahmoud al-Sangawi, the Secretary General of the *peshmerga* forces, stated, “We hope that there will be no conflicts or wars with neighboring countries. But in such an event, we cannot fight with any country if we do not receive the [Baghdad] parliament’s approval because we are part of Iraq.”^{xxxix} At the moment, defense policy and rhetoric indicates that the KRG is a willing participant in a federal Iraqi state.

Federal and Regional Defense Cooperation

Cooperation between the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs in Erbil and the Ministry of Defense in Baghdad is necessary to ensure stability. There are also *peshmerga* soldiers who are deployed beyond Kurdistan’s borders, particularly in Iraq’s disputed areas, which include governorates of Iraq where both Kurdish and Arab populations reside. The most notable disputed region is Kirkuk, an oil-rich province south of the Erbil governorate, but some *peshmerga* soldiers are also deployed in Ninewa and Diyala.^{xl} The *peshmerga*’s responsibilities in these regions are primarily to operate checkpoints and to provide law enforcement forces. Therefore, the Minister of Peshmerga Affairs in Erbil needs to coordinate with the Minister of Defense in Baghdad to ensure that ethnic tensions do not become enflamed.

Relations between Kurdistan and Baghdad are not always amicable. There are several issues that the Kurdistan Regional Government needs to reconcile with Baghdad; for example, the government in Kurdistan is still dependent upon Baghdad for its budget each year. Fiscal issues affect how the *peshmerga* can operate. The Minister of Peshmerga Affairs is currently pushing for the *peshmerga* to be integrated into the Iraqi federal budget because since 2006, there has been no official budget for the *peshmerga*.^{xli} According to the Minister of Peshmerga Affairs, the *peshmerga*’s budget has been approved in Baghdad each year but has never been implemented. Without support from Baghdad, this ministry’s budget is currently on loan from the Ministry of Finance in the Kurdistan Regional Government. Jafar Mustafa Ali emphasizes that this loan will be repaid once the Iraqi defense budget is implemented. Even the loans that they currently receive are not adequate; the Ministry can only pay for salaries for its soldiers, so the *peshmerga*’s training and equipment is chronically underfunded.

Officials in the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs do not speculate openly as to why Baghdad would hesitate to incorporate the *peshmerga* within the national defense forces. There are roughly 80,000 professional fighters in the modern *peshmerga*. Kurds account for roughly eight percent of the federal defense forces, though they are meant to include around 22 percent.^{xlii} It is apparent that Kurds are proportionally under-represented in Iraq’s defense sector. The Iraqi constitution

clearly states in Article 9, Item 1 that the federal army must be comprised of all sects and ethnicities living in Iraq. This is in contrast to the national army that Saddam Hussein had developed, which was overwhelmingly Sunni with a leadership comprised of exclusively of Ba'ath party members.^{xliii} Inversely, current leadership of the Iraqi army is predominately Shi'ite, revealing the shift in power dynamics since Saddam Hussein's disposal.^{xliiv} Many officials in the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs believe that Baghdad is unhappy even with this low number of Kurds; there is a fear that the federal government wants to discourage Kurds from joining the national armed forces.^{xliiv} Ethnic tensions hinder the development of a cohesive defense apparatus.

The *peshmerga's* equipment is not advanced and also suffers from a lack of support from Baghdad. Jafar Mustafa Ali noted that the *peshmerga* use former Iraqi equipment, which was often captured in past battles. Once again, if the *peshmerga* were integrated into the Iraqi defense budget, many of these equipment shortages could be rectified. In addition, once this integration is completed, the *peshmerga* will also be eligible to receive equipment and training directly from the United States and NATO allies.^{xlivi} At the moment, the *peshmerga* can only receive this support with Baghdad's approval. Integration into the federal defense budget would unquestionably strengthen the *peshmerga's* resources and capabilities. According to Jafar Mustafa Ali, the *peshmerga* have been trying to incorporate itself into the defense budget since 2006. He believes that this change could be implemented later this year, but unfortunately there is no projected date of completion from Baghdad.

If the *peshmerga* were integrated into the federal system, it would undoubtedly become a stronger organization with more resources at its disposal. It would also become more closely linked with the federal government; Kurdistan's successes would be Baghdad's successes as well. Without support from Baghdad, however, the *peshmerga* look towards external sources. Three plane loads of small arms and ammunition from Bulgaria arrived in the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah in 2008. This arrival was alarming to American forces that worry about armed conflict between the *peshmerga* and the central Iraqi army, particularly over the status of Kirkuk.^{xlvii} If a move like this triggered an Iraqi arms race between the *peshmerga* and the predominately Arab federal army, the stability of a united Iraqi state would be severely undermined. This acquisition was a violation of Iraqi law because only the Ministries of Interior and Defense in Baghdad are authorized to import weapons from abroad. The Minister of Peshmerga Affairs denies that his troops receive any foreign aid.^{xlviii} Illegally importing weapons from foreign allies is emblematic of possible tensions between Kurdistan and Baghdad. The fissures between Kurdistan and Baghdad still remain in place, weakening the overall stability of the federal system.

In light of past violence between the Kurdish and Arab populations in

Iraq, it should not be surprising that some tension would remain. The ethnic fault lines, especially over the issue of Iraq's disputed territories, are particularly dangerous in the current political climate. With Kirkuk's status in question and the slow implementation of the Iraqi constitution, the risk of a violent confrontation has grown.

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE?

"A peace is of the nature of a conquest; For then both parties nobly are subdued, And neither party loser." —William Shakespeare

In the end, why does the unification of the *peshmerga* matter when Iraq faces a plethora of other pressing issues? The Autonomous Kurdistan Region is currently the most secure portion of Iraq, enduring fewer acts of terrorism than other regions of the country. However, Iraq has a long and bloody history of violence and ethnic relations remain antagonistic. How can one predict if Kurdistan's current stability is sustainable?

The stability of a country can often be measured by how well its defensive apparatuses are institutionalized.^{xlix} The *peshmerga* could follow one of two paths: they could develop into an institution or remain a patrimonial group. If the Iraqi defense system develops as an institution, they would be dedicated to a broader national commitment that supersedes an individual leader, rather than simply serving an ethnic or political interest. Equally important, an institutionalized defense system is likely to survive political changes and reforms, as it serves a greater mission than just one leader. Theoretically, if the *peshmerga* were able to develop into an institution, they would loyally serve President Barzani as well as his successor. Barzani is 65 years old, and a member of the Barzani family has commanded the *peshmerga* since their inception in 1961. As a result, it is unclear how the *peshmerga* will function when the KRG leadership changes, but that is a question that the *peshmerga* will inevitably be forced to address. According to Eva Bellin, a professor of political science at Brandeis University, "An institutionalized coercive apparatus is one that is rule-governed, predictable, and meritocratic" whereas a patrimonial system is "ruled by cronyism."¹ The *peshmerga* have traditionally been patrimonial, but because of the difficulties in unification, they are not yet an institution. They still operate locally and do not cooperate well with their Arab counterparts.

Historically Iraq has had a patrimonial defense system. In Baghdad, Saddam Hussein promoted individuals in the military to higher positions based on their loyalty to him. Similarly, the *peshmerga* have historically centered on the leadership of tribal chiefs. When the leadership changes, a patrimonial system's loyalties to the new order are not as strong; this system leads to instability if a leader is

ever removed from office. The *peshmerga* appear to be more patrimonial than institutional. Considering that the leadership of the two Kurdish political parties has not changed for the past forty years and that the *peshmerga* have had little success in integration, the Kurdistan region's peace does not appear durable if the political climate ever evolves.

The Second Gulf War has been characterized as a conflict between the Sunni and Shia populations of Iraq. Military and government officials are beginning to worry that the axis of the war is shifting to the Arab-Kurd divide.^{li} Colin Kahl of the Center for a New American Security, a think-tank specializing in American national security issues, relayed his concerns in 2008 when he stated, "As Nuri al-Maliki has become more capable and more confident, he's actually become less inclined to reach out to those he most needs to reconcile with."^{lii} The federal government remains deadlocked with the KRG over the status of disputed territories and oil, in addition to that of the *peshmerga*. Lingering ethnic tensions and Iraq's political stalemate indicate that the Kurdistan region's current peace is short-lived. The *peshmerga* innately serve Kurdish interests rather than national interests. Therefore, given tepid Kurd-Arab relations, the status of the *peshmerga* could easily emerge as one of the central issues of Iraq's stability.

CONCLUSION

The lingering distrust between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi government in Baghdad shows that the coalition government in Iraq is weak. Unfortunately, for a coalition government in Iraq to succeed, the federal system in Baghdad must be strong. It is clear to see how incorporating the *peshmerga* into the federal system would once again strengthen their position. However, this integration would also strengthen ties between the KRG and Baghdad; if the federal government in central Iraq worries that Kurdistan is vying for its independence, providing Kurds with a stake in the system could be an effective mitigation tool.

Kurdistan's problems are political in nature. The Iraqi constitution, passed by popular referendum in 2005, has not been fully implemented. As a result, the political institutions that have been developed are not legitimate. Ethnic and political divides continue to be barriers to Iraq's stability. As a result, it is unclear whether the *peshmerga* will continue to operate in the same fashion if the Kurdistan Regional Government's leadership changes or if the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil degenerates. Thus, northern Iraq may not as stable and peaceful as is commonly presupposed.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Quil Lawrence. *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*. (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), p. 27.
- ^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 37.
- ^v Kevin McKiernan. *The Kurds: A People in Search of their Homeland* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p. 98.
- ^{vi} Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman. In discussion with the author. 10 January 2011.
- ^{vii} David Romano. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 189.
- ^{viii} Lawrence, p. 87.
- ^{ix} Gunter, p. 237.
- ^x *Ibid*, p. 240.
- ^{xi} Michael Kelly. "The Kurdish Regional Constitution within the Framework of the Iraqi Federal Constitution." (*Penn State Law Review*. Volume 114:3. April 2010), p. 72.
- ^{xii} Lawrence, p. 7.
- ^{xiii} George Packer. *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 297.
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- ^{xviii} *Ibid*, p. 14.
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- ^{xxviii} Aziz Weysi. In discussion with the author. 12 January 2011.
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- ^{xxxi} Mahmoud.
- ^{xxxii} Dana Asaad. "The peshmerga: militia or regular army?" Niqash. 21 May 2008.
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- ^{xxxviii} *Ibid*, p. 56.
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- ^{xl} Asaad.
- ^{xli} Muhammad Sardar. "Kurds debate military struggle." Niqash. 13 May 2009.
- ^{xlii} Asaad.
- ^{xliii} Samir Al-Khalil. *Republic of Fear: The Inside Story of Saddam's Iraq*. (New York: Diane Publishing Co., 1991), p. 17.
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- ^{xlv} Jafar Mustafa Ali.
- ^{xlvi} *Ibid*.

^{xlvii} Ernesto Londono, “Kurds in N. Iraq Receive Arms from Bulgaria.” (*The Washington Post*, 23 November 2008).

^{xlviii} Jafar Mustafa Ali.

^{xlix} Eva Bellin. “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective.” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 36, no. 2 (January 2004), p. 145.

¹ Bellin, p. 144.

^{li} Thomas E. Ricks. *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), p. 296.

^{lii} Colin Kahl. “Press Briefing with Colin Kahl.” Center for a New American Security, 13 August 2008.