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**The Gravest Danger:**  
Kurdish Identity, Local Power Politics and the Future of Iraqi Federalism

**Abstract:** The impending withdraw of American forces from Iraq will leave the country in the hands of what amounts to two separate military forces: Iraq's national armed forces and those of the Kurdish Regional Government. Integral to the Iraqi federalist bargain is the autonomy of the Kurdistan region, which includes independent control over the Kurdish military, the *Peshmerga*. The standing tensions between Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi army along the so called trigger-line attest to the potential dangers the situation poses. This paper explores the reasons why the integration of the Peshmegera into the Iraqi national armed forces has not nor is likely to occur. It examines the hypothesis that a combination of identity politics, territorial disputes and local power structures has effectively prohibited integration for the immediate future.

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## Introduction/Justification for Research:

*“The Kurds will participate in the election as Kurds and, if we fail to come to an agreement with the Iraqi political forces, we will participate as Kurdistanis.” – Massoud Barzani, 2004 (as quoted by Olson, 2007. 223)<sup>1</sup>*

Commander of U.S. Forces Iraq General Ray Odierno has publically stated that he considers the Arab-Kurdish tensions to be the single largest threat to the country’s security and stability (Chon, 2009). This is certainly true at least in terms of the magnitude of the repercussions. In other words, it might be the most dangerous, but that is not to say that it is the most likely. None-the-less, the risk of a full scale Iraqi Kurdish bid for independence is very real and its potential consequences are very serious. The exact ramifications are somewhat speculative, but none-the-less frightening. It can be reasonably speculated that if Iraq should be forced to commit most of its forces to a difficult war in the north it would become a very tempting target for Iran, especially given the Shia majority in the south-east. An almost equally disturbing scenario is that the country could devolve into a venue for proxy warfare by the regional players who might exploit either tribal factionalism or the sectarian divide, pitting the secular/Sunni Kurds against the majority Shia Arabs or even splitting the Kurdish factions as was the case during the Iran-Iraq war. A third possibility is that other states with an interest in the “Kurdish question” might be drawn into the conflict. These are for the moment strictly hypothetical scenarios, but it is clear that a Kurdish war for independence would not be in the best interest of the country, the region or the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Barzani’s choice of words is significant. He refers to “Kurdistanis,” not just to Kurds. This may be an allusion to efforts to forge a unified “Kurdistan” identity inclusive of the other minorities that reside in the region. This tracks with the observations of anthropologist Carole O’Leary who noted frequent use of the term by Kurdish, Assyrian-Chaldean and Turkoman cultural informants (2005. 27). She likens the term’s usage to the way Americans use terms like “New Englander” not just to indicate association with a physical place or geographic origin, but to convey a set of cultural traits regarded as being associated with that place, its culture and history (O’Leary, 2005. 27).

All told the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) alone control as many as 100,000 Peshmerga *each* and given the strength of Kurdish nationalist sentiments could easily increase that number by a considerable margin in the event of a mass mobilization (Mohammed, 2009).<sup>23</sup> This compares with a total Iraqi Army of only 260,000 (Mohammed, 2009). The ratio of troops to area requiring defense is tilted massively in favor of the Kurds, especially given the historically *very* defensible terrain with which the Peshmerga are intimately familiar. Given their considerable military capabilities the Kurds might very possibly hold out for some time and the possibility that they might even win outright cannot be dismissed.

The possibility of a Kurdish bid for independence and the continuing danger posed by Arab-Kurdish ethno-national tension mean that understanding the dynamics underlying these tensions is of paramount importance to the U.S., especially as it prepares to withdraw from the country. The U.S. has to date been relatively successful in keeping the somewhat tenuous peace between the KRG and the Iraqi central government (Chon, 2009). However, America's role as nominal peacekeeper and referee is about to come to an end.

### **Research Question:**

Since the 2003 invasion, merging the Kurdish Peshmerga into the Iraqi national armed forces has been widely recommended as a policy prescription for regional stabilization and remedy for fears of Kurdish secession. This paper will explore the reasons why integration has not occurred. In particular, it will attempt to test the hypothesis that *meaningful integration of the Peshmerga into the Iraqi national armed forces has not nor is likely to occur because a combination of identity politics and local power politics effectively prohibit it*. Kurdish local and

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<sup>2</sup> The combined numbers for the KDP and PUK alone do not necessarily represent the full *total* number of currently active Peshmerga.

<sup>3</sup> It's not difficult imagine a repeat of 1975, when near to 100,000 Kurds left their jobs to temporarily join the Peshmerga in four day period in March (Stanfield and Resool, 2007. 103).

identity politics are being tested as sufficient *vice* necessary conditions, meaning that while they are hypothesized to in effect bar the merger of the Peshmerga into Iraq's national military, they are *not* necessarily the *only* factor doing so.

**Logic of Measurement:**

If the hypothesis is indeed valid one or more of the following would likely be in evidence:

A.) Indications of widespread primordialist beliefs in the Kurds' understanding of their own identity and origins.

B.) Indications of a culturally imbedded belief that Arabs represent an existential threat. The historical events/trends that might lead to such an embedded belief should be noted and their significance in contemporary culture analyzed. Characterizations of Arabs in Kurdish media, textbooks, etc. are also worth considering

C.) Evidence of a popular perception that Kurdish identity is fundamentally based on *not* being Arab.

D.) Extensive use of the threatening Arab "other" as a tool for political mobilization in domestic Kurdish politics.

E.) Indications of a desire for full independence, as opposed to simple autonomy, at some future date, including the belief that the Peshmerga exist *in order to* bring about an independent Kurdistan.

F.) Indications that the leadership's grip on power hinges on continuing to maintain the popular perception of Kurdistan as a nation under imminent threat. (eg. an attempt to exploit the "rally round the flag" effect.)

G.) Indications that the Peshmerga are an integral part of the power base of individual Kurdish leaders.

H.) A monopoly or near-monopoly on power by current or former Peshmergas.

**An Assumption/Methodological Note:**

This paper is to some degree premised on post-modernist assumptions, at in least in that it treats identity as a *construct* created by historical, social, political and economic forces, *vice* a biological or in some other way fixed imperative. Primordialism or essentialism was rejected from the outset. This raises a minor theoretical problem which will not be resolved here, but which it is none-the-less prudent to bear in mind when considering the topic. In “Communalism and the Future of Iraq” Carole O’Leary raises the very valid criticism that while essentialist explanations have been largely debunked, most post-modernist literature fails to take into account the simple fact that populations may still think of themselves and their neighbors in essentialist/primordialist terms and act accordingly (2007. 170). While the mobilization of identity grievances in the service of greed may serve to at least partially explain the barriers to integration of the Peshmerga into Iraq’s national armed forces, this largely not reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of individual actors. The underlying phenomena at the heart of the barriers to integration are in many cases not immediately manifest at the micro level. Scholarly rejection of essentialist conceptualizations of the conflict *does not necessarily* extend to the Kurds themselves (O’Leary, 2007. 170). While this paper posits a basically post-modernist incentive driven/structural explanation for most of the barriers to integration, it also accepts that simple essentialist based ethnic/religious tensions or at least the belief in them, can and does motivate many individuals.

**Literature Review:**

Surprisingly little has been written focusing on the Peshmerga specifically. Most of what has been written is part of more general works on Kurdistan. Many of the works that do exist have been essentially rendered obsolete by the radical changes in Iraqi society since 2003. Following the 2003 invasion the Peshmerga went from being essentially an insurgent militia to being the official forces of Kurdistan and the second largest armed force in the country. This represents a major redefinition of the Peshmerga's role and a near total reorganization internally. While this paper will deal with the historical context and its impact on the current realities in Iraq, it is principally concerned with the present and near future. The pre-2003 literature will not be ignored, but the paper will draw principally from post-invasion texts.

The issue of the Peshmerga's possible integration into Iraq's national armed forces is inseparable from broader issues of national reconciliation. The possibility of a Kurdish bid for total independence is still a very real possibility. While this paper is focused on the integration issue the broader context of the Iraqi Kurd-Iraqi Arab relations cannot be ignored.

Preliminary searches of the Proquest database, which purports to include all doctoral dissertations written since 1980s and all masters theses written since 1988, returned no hits. This would appear to indicate that no dissertations or theses which included any of the common transliterations of the word Peshmerga in the title have been written in recent decades. Through other channels Michael G. Lortz's 2005 thesis, "Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces - the Peshmerga - from the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq" was identified.<sup>4</sup> It provides an excellent survey of the history of the *Peshmerga*, but is not principally focused on post-2003 events. Owing to the rapidly evolving nature of the conflict the text is now somewhat dated. Likewise it does not seek to apply any theoretical models to the group's behavior.

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<sup>4</sup> Why Lortz's thesis did not appear in the Proquest database is not clear.

While its focus is on the history of the Kurds as a scattered ethnic population and not on either the Iraqi Kurds or the Peshmerga specifically, David McDowall's *The Kurds: a Nation Denied* (1992) is a valuable resource. McDowall provides a fairly detailed account of Kurdistan's political history during the Ba'athist period, including the Kurds involvement in the Iran-Iraq war and its impact on them. While a solid and meticulous academic work it is hardly remarkable in this regard. Far more unique is McDowall's analysis of the often ignored subject of tribalism in Kurdish society, a factor that has a considerable impact on the political life of the region and thus on the question of the various groups that comprise the Peshmerga's possible integration into Iraq's national armed forces.

There is also a considerable amount of at least tangentially relevant material to be found in David McDowall's much more comprehensive *A Modern History of the Kurds* (2004). While its focus is on historical, not current, Kurdish politics and its scope includes the entirety of "greater Kurdistan," rather than focusing on the Iraqi case study, it still holds considerable insight into the ethnic, cultural, historical and linguistic fabric of Kurdish culture. For reasons that will be explored later, these issues are a key part of the barriers preventing integration of the Peshmerga into Iraq's national armed forces. McDowall's work is also helpful in placing the Iraqi Kurds in framework of the larger geopolitics and culture of the broader region, which becomes of real and pressing importance in exploring issues of specifically *Iraqi* Kurdish identity within the context of broader Kurdish identity and the historical and political baggage it entails. As both McDowall and Beeman describe, the historic, linguistic and cultural Kurdish connections to Iran continue to play a part in the politics, especially the identity politics, of the north of Iraq. These broader concerns contribute significantly to the barriers to integration of the Peshmerga and Iraqi military.



Some of the best work, most salient and most recent work on Kurdish identity politics is to be found in the anthologies of Mohammed M. A. Ahmed and Michael Gunter who jointly edited *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism* (2007) and *The Kurdish Question and the 2003 Iraqi War* (2005). The texts bring together the editors' evaluations of Iraqi Kurdish identity politics with those of some of the best Kurdologists living including: David McDowall, Carole O'Leary, Robert Olson, Hamit Bozarslan, David Fisher, Hakam Ozoglu, Liam Anderson, Gareth Stanfield and Shorsh Haji Resool. These works explore the past and the present of Kurdish identity politics, but their focus is not principally on the Peshmerga and the integration question is addressed only briefly. None-the-less, much of the commentary found these texts either goes right to the heart of the much broader underlying "Kurdish question" or provides useful background on the Peshmerga issue.

Perhaps one of the best full length works to cover Kurdistan's internal politics in detail is Quil Lawrence's *Invisible Nation* (2008). Lawrence gives the most detailed account of the tense and even violent relationship between the KDP and PUK found in the course of researching this paper. Equally important Lawrence explores the nuances of the complex and at times tenuous relationship between Kurdistan, the Iraq national government and the United States. Lawrence's fairly detailed account of the history of the Kurdish nationalist movement during the last sixty years is itself a very helpful supplement to the more purely historical works of David McDowall and Michael Lortz.

Though now half-a-decade out of date, Katzman and Prados' "The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq" written for the Congressional Research Service in 2005, still provides some useful background on the KDP-PUK rift and on the 1994 war between them. A far more detailed description of the 1994 conflict within Kurdistan and its implications is found in Michael M.

Gunter's "The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq" published in the *Middle East Journal* in 1996 (224-241). The brief war within Kurdistan contributed significantly to the festering divide between the two main political parties within the region. The divide represents an obstacle to both the integration of the Peshmerga into a unified force and their possible integration into the national armed forces.

Aaron Glantz's *How America Lost Iraq* (2005) provides a useful assessment of immediate post war events and useful insight into the KDP-PUK relationship. While not a work on Kurdistan or the Peshmerga principally, Glantz's book does provide a good overview of the political situation and the attitudes of Kurds toward the rest of the country.

Glantz's description of the prevailing political dynamics of the region is augmented well by Michael Soussan's account of his encounters with both Barzani and Talabani in the course of his duties as a program coordinator for UN's Oil for Food program. These two individuals and their respective tribes have done more to shape the *internal* politics of Kurdistan than any other domestic force in the last twenty years. Soussan's descriptions of his admittedly brief encounters with the two Kurdish leaders provide us with considerable insight into the tense relationship between the two and their respective factions.<sup>5</sup>

Quality *current* assessments of the domestic political situation within Kurdistan are not easily come by. There is a tendency to either ignore Kurdistan's internal politics or to simply and incorrectly regard it as a paragon of stability and liberty in a region gone mad. This is an understandable reaction. Compared to the rest of the country Kurdistan is blissfully quiet and at a glance looks like the model of tranquility especially when given only cursory consideration. The

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<sup>5</sup> Soussan also provides a fairly detailed description of the business of oil theft and trafficking which he was in Kurdistan in part to investigate. Soussan does not describe the theoretical implications of what he observed, but they amount to this: contrary to popular belief oil can in fact be a lootable and traffickable resource. In this context it could represent something more akin to conflict diamonds in regard to its impact on the likelihood of conflict in the region.

reality is somewhat less ideal. There are real divides within the semi-autonomous region and the regime there is hardly the model of a liberal democracy. The KDP-PUK split, systems of state control and the state of civil liberties in Kurdistan and explored by Andrew Lee Butters in his 2006 *Time* article “Trouble in Kurdistan.” Butters’ work offers a window into aspects of Kurdish life and government that tend to be either ignored or glossed over by most observers of the region. A more scholarly and somewhat less dire assessment of the situation is given by David Pollack in his “The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq: an Inside Story” published in 2008. Focusing on many of the same issues explored by Butters many of Pollack’s conclusions are similar though more moderate and less sensationalized. Both authors regard the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) as flawed, but strongly advise against attempting to meddle in Kurdistan’s domestic affairs, a conclusion the author is inclined to accept, albeit with a little reluctance.

In his 2007 *Time* article “Kurdistan: Iraq's Next Battleground?” Butters again delves into often ignored internal problems of the region, this time exploring the growing tension between the Kurds and the ethnic Arab population. Butters addresses many of the same issues broached in greater depth by Soner Cagaptay in “360 from Erbil: The KRG’s Views of its Neighbors” (2008). Both authors address in varying degrees of detail the tense relationships between the KRG and the Iraqi national government and between Kurds and Arabs inside Kurdistan. Like almost all observers of the region they point to Kirkirk as the most probable, and indeed the most dangerous, potential flashpoint. Cagaptay also briefly examines the hotly disputed location of the Kurdish border (2008. 15). The KRG’s claims would place the border well south of what has been the official boundary since 1991, in the process swallowing up Sinjar, Mosul, Makhmur, Kirkurk, major oil fields and a significant portion of the Iraq-Turkey pipeline (Cagaptay, 2008.

15).<sup>6</sup> It's also worth noting the presence of a refinery, something Kurdistan now lacks, immediately to the South of Mosul ("Iraq Navigator: Mapping the Conflict." N.D.). The extent and location of the KRG's claims do help to give us an idea of what areas it might attempt to seize in the event of a military bid for full fledged Kurdish independence.

The implications and problems of Kurdistan's various border disputes and the broader regional factors is explored in some detail by Karen Culcasi in her "Locating Kurdistan: Contextualizing the Region's Ambiguous Boundaries" published in *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation State* (2010). The border question has relevance to the integration of the Peshmerga into the Iraqi national armed forces for two reasons. First, putting the Peshmerga under the central Iraqi command structure would eliminate the possibility of Iraqi Kurds making a bid to establish a "greater Kurdistan" by taking Kurd inhabited land from one of the adjacent countries by force. Second it would largely neutralize the possibility of a secession war. An additional side benefit is that integration would provide the Iraqi Army and National Guard with an influx of professional and well trained veteran personnel.

The Peshmerga have been an important part of the larger development and refinement of the Kurdish national identity. Hence the issue of the Peshmerga's integration into Iraq's national armed forces is not one which can be fully separated from broader questions of Kurdish nationalism, a subject on which there is a considerable body of literature too broad to fully detail here. This paper's limited scope will require that it draw only from a select portion of these writings. The following works were chosen based on their apparent rough relevance to Kurdistan's relationship with the rest of Iraq: Kevin McKiernan's *The Kurds* (2006) and David Romano's *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement* (2006). Both texts explore the historic processes

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<sup>6</sup> See Cagaptay's excellent map on p. 15 of "360 from Erbil: The KRG's Views of its Neighbors" (2008), which details the KRG's territorial claims and their implications in terms of natural resources.

and identity based political mobilization carried out by a series of charismatic political leaders that have given rise to the Kurdish national identity and the Kurdish nationalist movement.

McKiernan and Romano focus on historical and political explanations. Both works tend toward grievance based explanations, a trend which appears fairly common in the literature.

Christopher Houston provides a more technical social science based explanation in his *Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves* (2008). Houston argues that what he calls “Iraqi Kemalism” and the subsequent *conscious* decisions of the central government to manage/manipulate historic Iraqi identity also encouraged the rise of Kurdish nationalism as a distinctly other and othered movement (2008. 111-3). Iraq was originally in essence an amalgamation of convenience assembled by the British more or less artificially and encompassing no less than three historically hostile ethno-sectarian blocs. As Winston Churchill once said of India, Iraq was “a geographic term.” This posed serious problems for the successor governments in Bagdad who were faced with the necessity of building some notion of *secular* “Iraqi” national identity, a condition deemed necessary for the building of a modern nation state under the “Kemalist” model (Houston, 2008. 110-3). The obvious two choices were either a “de-Arabization” of Iraqi heritage in favor of a focus on shared “Mesopotamianess” or a new focus on Arab nationalism and the exclusion of the Kurds (Houston, 2008. 110-3). The Ba’athists opted for the former and extended this “Arabization” to the official histories of the country based on a fictitious reclassification of the ancient civilizations of the Iraq as “Arab” (Houston, 2008. 110-3). This notion was premised on the radical and *historically baseless* assertion that the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, etc. were in fact immigrants to the region having come out of the Arabian peninsula still further back in the mists of time (Houston, 2008. 110-3). No where within in this new “pan-Arabism” did there exist a mechanism for accommodating the Kurdish

identity into the new cultural mythology of the country. The result was that to be Arab was inherently not to be Kurd and visa versa. This appears to have been compounded by the secularization integral to Kemalism (Houston, 2008. 110-3).

Houston's description of how identities can be partially predicated on distinctness from or the outright othering of outsiders or a specific outsider group fits elegantly with Robert Olson's proposition that the strength of Iraqi Kurdish nationalism is in part responsive to the level of Arab nationalism (2007. 223). He links this phenomena and its potential feedback loop to the participation of Peshmerga forces in the American offensive against urban insurgent strongholds in 2004-5 (Olson, 2007. 223).<sup>7</sup> Olson contends that their participation labeled the Kurds and the Peshmerga as collaborators in the eyes of Iraq's Arabs and that this in turn feed the feedback mechanism of rising nationalist sentiments within Kurdistan (Olson, 2007. 223). This has major implications for the problem of integrating the Peshmerga into Iraq's national armed forces.

It's well worth considering how the Kurds themselves think of their identity. Unfortunately, according to Michael Gunter's "Modern Origins of Kurdish Nationalism" the Kurds themselves tend to frame their identity and relationship with the rest of the region primordialist terms (2007. 2-17). This is significant to the problem of integration, which will hinge to a large extent on successfully overcoming fears that Arab Iraq represents an existential threat to Kurdistan. This will be no mean feat in light of the previous regime's policies toward the region and the Anfal campaign in particular.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, evidence suggests that the number of Kurds who participated in the battle of Fallujah alongside American forces exceeded the number of Arabs by a considerable margin (Olson, 2007. 223).

Michael Totten's 2007 "An Army, Not a Militia" provides a brief description of the author's first hand observations of Peshmerga in Suleimaniya.<sup>8</sup> Totten's account describes the apparently considerable professionalism of the Peshmerga officer corps and gives a very favorable impression of their apparent capabilities (Totten, 2007). He provides us with a fairly rare window into the Peshmerga sub-culture (Totten, 2007). However, Totten's observations must be considered in context. His experiences were with PUK controlled Peshmerga in Suleimaniya and it would not be surprising to find that the capabilities and level of professionalism of Peshmerga forces vary considerably. Many aspects of Totten's observations are doubtless general, but others may be particular to the specific Peshmerga command he visited.

The body of literature that deals with the integration issue specifically and exclusively is very small and consists mostly of media reports. There appears to be strong opposition to such a proposition within Kurdistan. In a January 2010 interview PUK affiliated Secretary General of the Peshmerga forces Mahmoud al-Sangawi asserted unequivocally that, "The Peshmerga forces will not be integrated into the Iraqi army" (Mahmoud, 2010). Rather the current trend seems to be integration, not of the Kurdish and national armed forces, but of Peshmerga forces with one another. The Peshmerga are not a unified force, a diverse array of fighters controlled by a number of actors, most prominently and significantly the PUK and KDP. Perhaps the most detailed analysis of the current effort to integrate them into a unified Kurdish regional force is Mujahed Mohammed's "Iraq: a Unified Kurdish Army?" written for Stratfor (2009). In late 2009 Barazani publicly declared his intention of creating a single unified regional force from the KDP

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<sup>8</sup> The writer ordinarily would refrain from citing material from the blogosphere. In the case of Michael Totten's 2007 "An Army, Not a Militia" an exception was made based on two considerations. One, the author is an accredited journalist with extensive professional credentials. Two, the author's purpose was chiefly to relate *his first hand* experience with the Peshmerga and observations thereof.

and PUK forces, while outlawing private militias (Mohammed, 2009). This would eliminate the military capacity of Barzani's longstanding rival the PUK while substantially increasing the size of the force under his own control, a major consolidation of power, especially given that one of Barzani's sons controls the Kurdish Protection and Intelligence Agency. This is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the current head of the Peshmerga Ministry Mahmoud al-Sangawi is affiliated with the PUK. Mohammed goes on to explore the current relationship between the weakening PUK and the KDP, which is now in the unusual position of needing to shore up its longtime rival in order to prevent the creation of a "power vacuum in the North" (2009).

Kirkuk is widely cited as the most probable flashpoint for Arab-Kurdish tensions. Nimrod Raphaeli's 2005 "Kirkuk: Between Kurdish Separatism and Iraqi Federalism" provides a good overview of the tensions within the city and the history that created them. While the text is now half-a-decade old it still sums up the root of these tensions and the still unresolved question of whom will ultimately control the city. Gina Chon's November 2009 *Wall Street Journal* piece describes in detail efforts by American officers on the ground to manage the Arab-Kurdish tensions in the Kirkuk area. The methods employed by U.S. commanders there to keep the peace have thus far been successful in preventing violence and provide many potential lessons for managing tensions along the so called trigger-line and perhaps for the ultimate integration of the two forces. This is no mean feat given that the respective commanders of the Peshmerga and Iraqi army forces have spent the majority of their lives on opposite sides of a shooting war. The Iraqi force in Kirkuk consists chiefly of the 12<sup>th</sup> division, commanded by Major General Abdul Ameer, who also served as a senior officer in Saddam's forces (Chon, 2009). His Peshmerga counterpart is Brigadier General Sherko Fatah Namik who has been with the Peshmerga since age sixteen (Chon, 2009). Namik's initial feelings toward the Iraqi army presence in Kirkuk



were made explicitly clear when he informed his American counterparts that quote, “I will kill them all” (Chon, 2009). American forces have since used carefully managed biweekly meetings between the Kurdish and Iraqi army commands, joint patrols and information sharing to promote a mutual tolerance between the two sides (Chon, 2009). Perhaps most importantly of all, American commanders have pushed the concept of military professionalism and with it the concept that soldiers must be a-political (Chon, 2009). While the Kirkurk question is far from solved, for the moment at least, tensions are being managed with some success. If the Peshmerga are to be successfully integrated into Iraq’s national armed forces then the question of how to separate individuals from the greater power politics of country is a highly relevant one. Kirkurk may in some ways be able to serve as a test case for how to instill the professional soldier’s detachment from politics into the combined Iraqi forces.

The United Nations’ Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs’ Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit (IAU) has prepared a fairly detailed breakdown of conditions in Iraq by governorate. The IAU reports are very useful for comparing conditions in “the –three-northern governorates” that comprise Kurdistan to those prevailing in the rest of the country in terms of employment, urbanization, displacement of civilians, security, sanitation, etc. This is a powerful tool for exploring the greed vs. grievance aspects of the issue of Peshmerga integration into Iraq’s national armed forces. The IAU reports are particularly useful in this regard when paired with maps showing Iraq’s oil reserves and infrastructure, of which the BBC’s “Iraq Navigator” is arguably one of the best despite now being several years out of date.

### **The Term:**

The word **پەشمەرگە**, generally transliterated variously as Peshmerga, Pesh Merga or Peshmerge, is generally translated from Kurdish as roughly, “those who face death,” though

Aaron Glantz gives the literal translation as, “after-death men” (2005. 40). One Kurdish Colonel described the term as being, “a holy word among Kurds” (Totten, 2007). The use of the term appears to date to the short lived Mahabad Republic of the immediate post-World War Two period, though there were nationalist Kurdish forces in existence long before then (Lortz, 2005. 26).

The term is a general one. It does not refer to a single organization or force. Rather it is a label applied somewhat vaguely to Kurdish fighters, to include members of the formal Armed Forces of Kurdistan.<sup>9</sup> This may account for the fact that the estimates of the total number of Peshmerga in Kurdistan vary by a margin of several hundred thousand. The question of whether the Peshmerga can be integrated into Iraq’s national armed forces is complicated seriously by the fact that they aren’t under a unified command structure and are in large part controlled by parties historically hostile to one another.

In “Willing to Face Death: A History of Kurdish Military Forces - the Peshmerga - from the Ottoman Empire to Present-Day Iraq” Michael Lortz draws a distinction between Peshmerga, who fight for Kurdish nationalism, and Mujihideen, a term typically applied to *religiously* motivated fighters (2005. 15). However, Lortz is quick to point out that both categories of fighters had and often have the commonality of “recruitment remained based on tribal or shaykh allegiances” (2005. 14). None-the-less, Lortz contends and the writer concurs that religion has never been a major key to Kurdish mobilization (2005. 14-5).

### **Historical Background:**

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<sup>9</sup> In this paper the term “Kurdistan” is understood to refer to *Iraqi Kurdistan*, consisting roughly of Suleymania, Erbil and Dohak, *not* to so called “greater Kurdistan.”

*“The Peshmerga is a tree that has borne fruit by the blood and tears of a people. It was not established by order of a state, a political party or an individual. Without it, the Kurds would have no existence.” - Massoud Barzani, date unknown (as quoted by Raphaeli, 2005)*

The KDP and the Peshmerga both originated in the wake of the brief Barzanji rebellion. In 1919, Shaykh Mahmud Barzanji celebrated his re-appointment as governor of Suleymania by the British, a post which he had previously held under the Ottoman regime, by launching a rebellion (McDowall, 1992. 81-6). The among the followers attracted by the self proclaimed “King of Kurdistan” was the Barzani clan, at that time lead by Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his brother Shaykh Ahmad Barzani, then head of the Barzan tribe (McDowall, 1992. 81-6).<sup>10</sup> On his brother’s orders the sixteen-year-old Mustafa Barzani was dispatched with reinforcements to assist Barzanji, but arrived too late to participate in the initial uprising (Lortz, 2005. 11). After his capture and exile to India Barzanji utilized his authority as a religious figure to call for a *jihad* against the British, though the revolt also capitalized on secular issues (Lortz, 2005. 11). The “inter-tribal force” that responded to Barzanji’s call succeeded in gaining autonomy, though not independence, from British colonial administration (Lortz, 2005. 11).<sup>11</sup> Over the next forty years Mustafa Barzani would be involved with a string of Kurdish revolts with interludes of exile until his death in 1979. In 1946, following the failed “Barzani Revolt of 1943-5,” Mustafa Barzani established the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) with a somewhat vague mandate, largely in response to the formation of the Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party (IKDP) (Gunter,

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<sup>10</sup> He inherited the leadership of the Barzani tribe following the execution of Shaykh Abd al Salam in 1914 by the Ottoman authorities (Lortz, 2005. 19).

<sup>11</sup> Mustafa Barazani also met with the leaders of the Shakyh Said rebellion in Iran (Lortz, 2005. 11).

1996. 226-7).<sup>12</sup> The new organization began a variety of activities, most of them fairly innocuous, but which would later progress to outright rebellion (Gunter, 1996. 226-7).

Jalal Talabani was born in 1933, joined the KDP in his early teens and was elected to its central committee when he was just eighteen (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). The future rebel leader completed law school and for a time commanded an Iraqi army tank unit (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). He would later become a top general in the KDP Peshmerga under Mustafa Barzani (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). Michael Soussan characterizes the rift between him and Masoud Barzani as simply a succession feud between the Kurdish leader's favored son and his leading general (2008. 91). This reading of the feud's origins is technically accurate, but ignores both the existing tensions between the elder Barzani and Talabani that were present long before his death. With regard to the roots of the KDP-PUK feud Michael Gunter points to the Talabani's flirtations with leftist thought and the occasional violence between the two factions, which dates back well into the 1960s (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). Talabani's final return to the fold in the late 1960s was doubtless heavily stained by his previous series of defections and even cooperation with the Ba'athists against Barzani (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). The PUK's formation took place in 1975 following the shattering of the original KDP by the Ba'athists in March of 1975 and differed from its predecessor chiefly in its advocacy of Marxist principals (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). Tensions were immediately apparent upon the return of the PUK and reformed KDP to Iraq in 1976-7 (Gunter, 1996. 226-7). The two came into open conflict as proxies during the Iran-Iraq war, before re-unifying as the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF) to oppose the Ba'athists in 1988 (Gunter, 1996. 231-2). Tensions between the two began rising again after the 1991 Gulf War and the establishment of the no-fly zone, before exploding into an outright war in May of 1994, supposedly triggered

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<sup>12</sup> At the time the president of Soviet Azerbaijan was specifically discouraging the Iranian I-KPD from having dealing with Barzani, whom he accused on working with the British (Lortz, 2005. 27).

by a petty land dispute (Gunter, 1996.. 233).<sup>13</sup> In the resulting internecine conflict the KDP cut a deal with the Ba'athists to secure their help in retaking the regional seat of Irbil (Katzman, 2009. 2). The bitter feud was finally concluded by the American brokered 1998 "Washington Declaration," but residual tensions between the two linger (Katzman, 2009. 2).

### **The Present Situation (External):**

In 2003 Kurdish forces moved down out of the mountains from the so called "green line" established in 1991 and retook a portion of the territory they had lost to Saddam ("Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble along the Trigger-Line," 2009). At the time of writing Kurdish and Iraqi national forces remain dug in on opposite sides of the so called "trigger line" cutting across northern Iraq well south of "official" Kurdish territory from west of Sinjar to east of Khanaqin ("Iraq's Dangerous Trigger Line: Too Late to Keep the Peace?" 2010). The final disposition of the so called "disputed territories," with their considerable oil deposits, between the green and trigger lines, remains unresolved and a continuing source of extreme tension ("Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble along the Trigger-Line," 2009). Some segments of the line have been mined or even fortified ("Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble along the Trigger-Line," 2009). Several incidents, like the one at Altun Kupri in 2009, have been prevented from turning violent only by last minute American intervention ("Iraq's Dangerous Trigger Line: Too Late to Keep the Peace?" 2010). This tension creates a major vulnerability to militants who want to use the ethnic divide to restart violence and destabilize the region ("Iraq's Dangerous Trigger Line: Too Late to Keep the Peace?" 2010). A single well placed bomb could easily turn the standoff into a shooting war. American forces have been cast in the role of referee in this tense face-off, a role in which they have had considerable success given the circumstances at least in maintaining the status quo

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<sup>13</sup> The reality was that a rough parity in the regional parliament and the lack of a clear winner in the regional presidential race had been a source of festering tension since 1992 (Katzman, 2009. 2).

(Raphaeli, 2005). The American strategy of bring the two sides into daily contact to promote trust, conducting joint operations on a limited basis and in rare cases sharing facilities seems to have born some fruit (“Iraq’s Dangerous Trigger Line: Too Late to Keep the Peace?” 2010). None-the-less tensions remain very high, especially in and around the city of Kirkurk, and the underlying issue of where autonomous Kurdistan begins and ends is still unresolved and not likely to be resolved in the immediate future.

### **The Present Situation (Internal):**

At present the governorates of Erbil and Dohak are under KDP control while the PUK controls Suleymania (Butters, 2006). Within their respective territories each party exercises a near monopoly on power and while they have succeeded in keeping the violence that plagues most of Iraq at bay, the price has been at times draconian measures (Butters, 2006). Each party has its own police, security and intelligence apparatus (Mohammed, 2009). In his *Time* piece “Trouble in Kurdistan” Andrew Lee Butters quotes mullah Ahmed Wahab, a member of the Iraqi parliament who likened the situation to, “a hundred small Saddams” (2006). This and other elements of Butters description of the means by which the domestic tranquility of Kurdistan is maintained ring eerily reminiscent of some of the coercive techniques which the old regime employed. Human Rights Watch’s 2009 report on the state of affairs in Kurdistan, “On Vulnerable Ground,” generally corroborates Butters’ description.

In recent decades Kurdistan’s domestic politics have been to a large extent shaped by the KDP-PUK rift. This pattern continues today.

FIG 1. COMPARING THE KDP AND PUK

KDP 1946 -	PUK 1975 -
-Leader: Barzani	-Leader: Talabani
-Tribal/traditionalist	-Slight Leftist Orientation
-Hereditary Head of the Barzani Tribe	-Founded PUK as a break away organization in 1975
-Inherited leadership of the KDP	-Highly Educated, Urban, Intellectual
-Affiliated with Naqshbandi Sufi order the rival of the Qadiri order (significance?)	-Affiliated with Qadiri Sufi order the rival of the Naqshbandi order (significance?)
-Draws support heavily from the Bahdinani dialect speaking areas in the north	-Draws support heavily from the Sorani dialect speaking areas in the south

Note: Ba'athist Iraq and post-Revolution Iran were used as patrons by both sides at different times.

The above comparison illustrates just how little actual political difference there is between the two parties. To a large extent they represent not competing ideologies or visions, but rather rival claims to power by regionally affiliated personality cults/alliances within the broader framework of Kurdish nationalism (Anderson, 2007. 137).<sup>14</sup> As the comparison above attempts to demonstrate, the ideological differences between the two are essentially superficial.

Liam Anderson contends that the continuing historical pattern has been for Kurdish political parties to form around charismatic individuals, not as ideological movements or broad based political alliances (2007. 133). This is certainly true of the KDP, PUK and PKK which are strongly affiliated with respectively with Barzani, Talabani and Ocalan (Anderson, 2007. 133). The leadership of these organizations has been essentially static for decades. The extension of this tendency is that both the KDP and PUK draw overwhelmingly from their leaders' respective tribal and patronage networks. Predictably, nepotism is the norm. (See Fig. 2)

<sup>14</sup> The phrase "personality cult" is particularly descriptive of Barzani's organization (Anderson, 2007. 137-8).

The extent to which Kurdish political life revolves around individual charismatic leaders elevates the significance of and the risk posed by the Peshmerga. As Anderson contends, party controlled Peshmerga act as an extension of the power of the party leader (2007. 133-4). He credits the *personal* mutual dislike between Talabani and Barzani with escalating the 1994-8 internecine conflict, a process that was enabled by the unchecked power of the two leaders to utilize their respective Peshmerga against one another in the feud (Anderson, 2007. 133). One result of this is that integration of the Peshmerga into the Iraqi national armed forces represents a direct and real threat to the hard-power of the two Kurdish leaders.

### **Tribal Identity in Kurdish Politics:**

There are substantial tribal overtones in Kurdish politics and surrounding the Peshmerga in particular. In many respects Talabani acts like a tribal leader and Barzani in fact is one. David McDowall describes the general dynamic of the region in these terms,

“Kurdish society is essentially tribal, and derives from the largely nomadic and semi-nomadic existence of most Kurdish tribes in previous centuries. Loyalties, first to the immediate family, thence to the tribe, are quite as strong as in the Arab world. However, unlike the Arabs, Kurdish tribal cohesion is based on a mix of blood tie and territorial loyalty, and it should be remembered that a substantial number of Kurds in low-lying areas are not tribal even the territorial sense” (McDowall, 1991. 17).

Mujahed Mohammed attributes this tendency toward tribalism in part to geographic forces (2009). Kurdistan is largely composed of mountainous terrain and many communities were historically organized around isolated mountain valleys (Mohammed, 2009).<sup>15</sup> The terrain has long proved prohibitive to decisive victories in the region (Mohammed, 2009). His

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<sup>15</sup> There are many parallels to feudal Japan and modern Afghanistan.



assessment is supported by the long and successful use of Kurdistan as an insurgent safe haven. Simply put, Kurdistan is a place where wars are easy to start and very hard to decisively end.

The Peshmerga are synonymous with the Barzani and Talabani clans who respectively are affiliated with the KDP and the PUK. Both organizations are officially politically rather than tribally based, but have a heavy draw from their respective tribes. Not insignificantly, the two are also affiliated with rival Sufi religious orders, though Gunter qualifies this by pointing out that religiosity is not high among the Kurds, a view which tracks with other writers' characterizations of the Kurds as basically secular at least with regard to politics (1996. 228). The official ideological differences between the two parties are minimal at most. Congressional Research Service Middle East Specialists Kenneth Katzman and Alfred B. Prados in their "The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq" made the following assessment in 2005,

"The KDP, generally more tribal and traditional in orientation, is strongest in the mountainous northern Kurdish areas. The PUK predominates in southern Kurdish areas. The two have differed over the degree to which they should accommodate the central government and over their relationships with Iran, sometimes swapping positions. But their biggest differences have resulted from disagreements over power and revenue sharing" (2).<sup>16</sup>

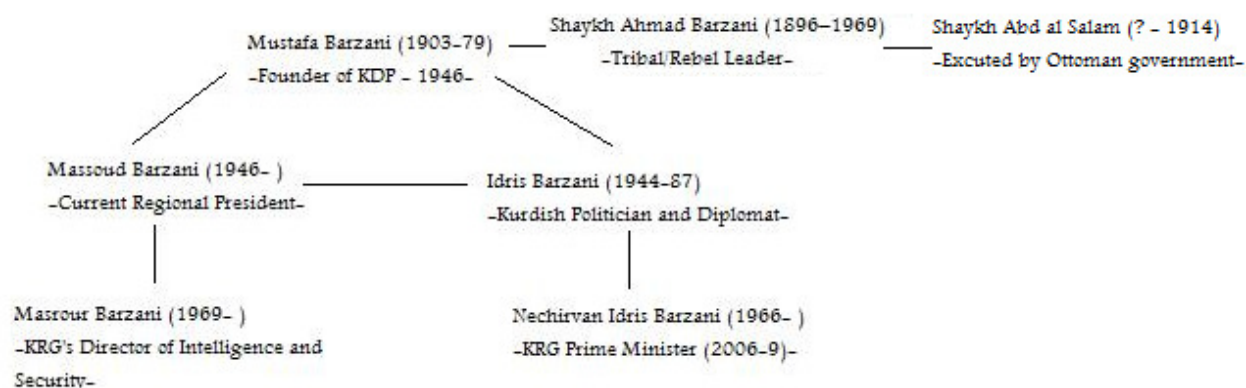
### **Nepotism, Tribal Ties and Patronage:**

Integration of the Preshmerga into Iraq's national armed forces represents a threat to the tribal/familial/patronage based power structure of the Kurdish political elite. The following is illustrative of the extensive role played by tribal ties/nepotism in the current Kurdish government.

### **FIG. 2 PARTIAL BARZANI FAMILY TREE**

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<sup>16</sup> More recent sources seem to generally concur with Katzman and Prados' characterization.



Kurdish politics entail a complex system of patronage networks. These patronage networks are often familial or tribally based, as illustrated above. The Peshmerga are a part of this power structure and their integration into Iraq's national armed forces would rob the existing elites of KUP and PUK of both their organizations' hard power and of a major portion of a patronage networks from which they draw support. Integration of the Peshmerga into Iraq's national armed forces inherently represents a threat to the power structure of Kurdistan's two leading parties because it would decrease their ability to dole out patronage via the Peshmerga hierarchy. The Peshmerga employ an estimated 200,000 Kurds, giving the PUK and KDP many patronage positions to offer to their members and supporters, to say nothing of providing status and pensions to former Peshmerga (Mohammed, 2009). Some 50,000 of Kurdistan's former Peshmerga receive pensions ranging from the equivalent of \$50 to \$1000 a month (Jalar and Mohammed, 2009). This represents a major means of administering systems of patronage through official and quazi-official channels. As former Peshmerga Haji Zakaria, said of one of his former colleagues who does not receive a pension, "He didn't realize that being loyal to Kurdistan is not enough" (Jalar and Mohammed, 2009). As Zakaria goes on to explain, "It is the party that rewards you. Kurdistan doesn't exist. It never will" (Jalar and Mohammed, 2009).

Nepotism is a common practice and in the context of the region's tribal history and instability a very rational one. For instance, Massoud Barzani appointed one of his brothers as commander the Kurdish Special Forces and his arguably barely qualified son as head of the KDP intelligence and security apparatus (Qdir, 2007). A similar pattern prevails on the PUK side. Talabani has appointed one of his sons as head of the PUK's security apparatus, the other as the PUK representative to the U.S. and the PUK's lone Iraqi national ministerial appointment went to his brother-in-law (Qdir, 2007). These are high level examples of how the system works, but the practice of appointment and promotion based on patronage extends throughout all levels of the KRG and the Kurdish private sector through a system of patrons and sub-patrons, each with their own base of followers (Qdir, 2007; McDowall, 2004. 384-9). Peshmerga commanders have often set up and operated their forces along these lines utilizing the patronage system at all levels (Qdir, 2007; McDowall, 2004. 384-9). These *aghas* can and occasionally have transferred their loyalty between political parties in response to circumstances and competing offers (McDowall, 2004. 384-9). The result is that if the Peshmerga were to be turned over to Iraq's national military some of these sub-patrons would lose one of the primary incentives for their loyalty to Kurdistan's two dominate parties and at the same time would have a decreased ability to maintain their own patronage networks. It appears that fear of loss of control would not be wholly unfounded. During the 1994 civil war both sides appeared to lose operational control over their forces (McDowall, 2004. 386). Turning the Peshmerga over to the Iraq's national armed forces could mean losing control over this valuable patronage resource and at the same time giving up a symbol integral to the Kurdish nationalist cause.

#### **The Peshmerga and Kurdistan's Other Minorities:**

The Peshmerga are important to the KUP and KDP as a tool of control both against other Kurds and the other minorities in Kurdistan. According to Human Rights Watch,

“Kurdish forces have mostly relied on intimidation, threats, arbitrary arrests, and detentions to coerce the support of minority communities for the KRG plan regarding the disputed territories. In some extreme cases, Human Rights Watch found, they resorted to violence, including torture. These threats, coupled with the financial support, have so far kept many minorities compliant, according to minority community members who spoke with Human Rights Watch. KRG officials, for their part, have adamantly denied allegations that they have been responsible for acts of intimidation and violence, blaming the problem entirely on Sunni Arab extremist groups” (“On Vulnerable Ground,” 2010).

The KRG flatly denied these allegations in a November 2009 press release, claiming that it respects the rights of its minorities, pointing to the considerable aid it has offered minorities and declaring that the specific instances mentioned in HRW report would be investigated thoroughly (“KRG statement on Human Rights Watch report – ‘On Vulnerable Ground,’” 2009). Whatever the truth regarding HRW’s particular allegations, it is clear that the KRG is aggressively, even desperately trying to ensure the cooperation of the minorities, particularly in and around Ninewa. In a report entitled *Iraq’s New Battlefield: The Struggle Over Ninewa* the International Crisis Group found that both sides were employing a variety of tools including intimidation and aid to try to ensure the cooperation of the minorities (2009. 23-9) The merger of the Peshmerga into the Iraqi Army and National Guard would deprive the KRG of one-half of its stick-and-carrot approach to winning over the minorities in Ninewa and elsewhere.

### **Building Blocks of Kurdish Identity:**

“*The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.*” -Old Kurdish Adage (Philips, 2005. 22)

Historic Grievances:

The single most critical tool for mobilizing Kurdish identity has been the Kurds' very real and very dramatic historical grievances. The statistics alone are remarkably telling. According to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlement's *IDP Site and Family Survey* in 2001 roughly 805,805 Kurds had been displaced to the safe haven zone (Ahmed, 2005. 43). The Al-Anfal campaign alone claimed 100,000-200,000 Kurdish lives ("Anfal Campaign against the Kurds," 2007; Olson, 2005. 113). Mohammed M.A. Ahmed sums it up well, "While the Jewish people continue to pursue NAZI criminals for crimes that they committed against their people some 55 years ago, the Kurds are being told to forget and forgive the crimes committed against them by their Arab countryman during the past 35 years" (2005. 42). The historic abuses committed against them are still very much alive in the Kurdish national imagination and recent terrorism of Arab origins has only served to validate perceptions of Arabs as hostile. The continuing presence of Arab settlers whom Saddam dispatched to the North in an effort to alter the demographics of the region, many of whom took over property taken from Kurds, continues to rub salt in the wound, especially around flashpoints like Kirkurk. The desire to reclaim territory lost to the demographic tinkering of the Baathists and to prevent any future such "Arabization" is a potent motive for the Kurds to retain an independent military capacity.

Several authors, most notably Robert Olson point to the February 1, 2004 bombings which rocked the headquarters of both the KDP and PUK in Erbil, killing more than 100 people, as the point-of-origin for resurgent Kurdish nationalism and simultaneously, indeed perhaps partly because of, a growing perception of Arab terrorism as an eminent threat (2005. 109) One dramatic, albeit extreme, example of how past events continue to shape Kurdish attitudes toward Arabs can be found in Kurdish journalist Khasraw Saleh Koyi's, "How to deal with Arab 'Islamist and Nationalist' Terrorism in Kurdistan," published just days after the bombing which

enjoined Kurds to, “Neither trust Arabs nor be fooled by their sweet talks and deceptive promises,” and to, “View every Arab stranger in Kurdistan as a suspect and a potential time bomb” (2004). While views like Koyi’s are extreme, they are not isolated. Kurdish attitudes toward Arabs, both inside and outside of Kurdistan have been shaped by a long history during which the relationship has gravitated back and forth from mutual disinterest to outright oppression. Current Kurdish attitudes are shaped by this long history, by more recent atrocities like the Anfal campaign and by the current reality of terrorism, mostly of Arab origin. These historic grievances give the Kurdish leadership a powerful tool for mobilizing Kurdish national identity, especially among those old enough to remember the Al-Anfal campaigns of 1987-8.

The reality of the current threat from terrorism has been linked in the popular Kurdish imagination to the pattern of Arab repression experienced by the Kurds stretching back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and deliberately so. This has in turned served to perpetuate the Kurds’ image of themselves as a nation under threat. KRG press releases and official speeches commonly invoke the fear of terrorism in the same breath as the abuses of the Baathist era, for instance in the KRG’s response to allegations of abuse by HRW (2010). Indeed, given the violence plaguing the rest of the country considerable concern over terrorism creeping in Kurdistan is not without some justification. Invoking the fear of a basically Arab terrorist threat may be used to bolster support for the current leadership and its policies, as well as to artificially mobilize Kurdish nationalist sentiment, but the threat is none-the-less a very real one. The threat from terrorism, especially when conceptualized as contiguous with the historic pattern of repression by the Arab dominated Iraqi state provides a justification for retaining KRG control over the Peshmerga even in the event that the Kurds place their full faith in the Iraqi federalist bargain, something which they do not appear to have done.

## Language:

The issue of language presents a real practical barrier to integration of the Peshmerga into the Iraqi national army. The no-fly zone and resulting *de facto* autonomy established in 1991 permitted a rebirth of Kurdish civil society and with it a proliferation of Kurdish language media outlets (Gunter, 2007. 16-7). At the same time the administration of Kurdistan was returned to Kurdish hands, as was the educational sector (Gunter, 2007. 16-7). The result is that the generation of Kurds now of fighting age has grown up speaking Kurdish *exclusively* (Gunter, 2007. 16-7). Most Arabs certainly do not speak Kurdish. What language would be used in an integrated force? Would Kurds serve in specifically Kurdish units, be placed in integrated units or some combination thereof?

The question is complicated by the Kurdish language's politically loaded status as a badge not only of "Kurdishness," but of specific identities within the Kurdish one. Like Arabic, the Kurdish dialects vary considerably. Unlike the Arabs of Iraq the Kurds do not speak the same dialect. The Kurmanji and Sorani dialects dominate in the north and south respectively, with an additional three minority dialects in evidence elsewhere in the region (McDowall, 2004. 9-11). David McDowall characterizes the more prominent two dialects as differing as much as English and German grammatically and as much as Dutch and German in vocabulary (2004. 9-11). He goes on to point out that these two "dialects" are really just standardizations of even more localized dialects that vary greatly (2004. 9-11). The divide within the language is significant to our geopolitical understanding of the region because it mirrors the rift within Kurdish domestic politics. The territories from which the PUK and KDP draw their respective support bases largely speak *different* dialects that border on being mutually unintelligible.

One important commonality amongst the various Kurdish dialects is that they are part of the Iranian ethno-linguistic group (O'Leary, 2005. 17). Kurdish is rife with Persian loanwords (Beeman, 2007. 281). Indeed, McDowall notes that in the south-east the local Kurdish dialect is much closer to modern spoken Persian than it is to the Surani dialect (McDowall, 2004. 10).<sup>17</sup> This linguistic connection to Farsi serves to reinforce Kurdish distinctness from Arab Iraqis and their effective exclusion from any political arrangement rooted in the rhetoric of pan-Arabism. Likewise it attaches the Kurds to Iran, which is perceived as an extreme other many by Iraqis, especially Arab Sunni, for whom the memory of the Iran-Iraq war is still all too fresh.

The language issue represents a significant barrier to integration of the Peshmerga into Iraq's national armed forces not only because of the practical problems of merging two armies that speak two different languages, but because of the considerable symbolism attached to the language itself. The language has at times even been employed in an almost weaponized symbolic manner. For instance, when the Peshmerga began patrolling the streets of Kirkuk the street signs suddenly were changed from Arabic to Kurdish, sending a not so subtle message that Kirkuk was Kurdish territory and that Arabs weren't welcome (UNHCR, 2007. 89). The question of language has become loaded with symbolism for Iraqis both Kurdish and Arab, especially in and around the disputed territories. Consequentially, the issue of language is a real barrier both on a practical and symbolic level to the integration of the Peshmerga into Iraq's national armed forces.

### ***Kurdish Identity v.s. Kurdistan Identity:***

Integral to the KRG's efforts to win the support of minorities in Ninewa, Kirkuk and elsewhere in the disputed territories has been its efforts to promote a shared "Kurdistani"

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<sup>17</sup> Given the thrust of McDowall's work he would appear to be referring to the south-east of "greater Kurdistan," not Iraqi Kurdistan. However, the text is not explicitly clear on this point.



identity. The Kurdish government is actively trying to promote a belief that, while remaining ethnically and/or religiously distinct, the minorities of Kurdistan share with the Kurds a connection to the land, a experience as marginalized non-Arabs and an interest in/desire for multicultural tolerance (O'Leary, 2005. 27-9). The basically secular Peshmerga are a part of this effort. One Kurdish officer told journalist Michael Totten that, "We have Catholics, Christians, Muslims, Yezidis, Sunnis, it doesn't matter" (2007). The absence of a mosque or other major religious venue on the grounds of the extensive Peshmerga compound that Totten visited would appear to confirm the organization's claims to at least nominal secularity (2007).

It's often said that, "nothing unites like a common enemy." Integral to the creation of the Kurdistan identity is the perception of a shared threat or threats. Both the perception of a shared need to guard against this threat and the shared experience of serving in a military/paramilitary organization geared to protecting against it, would be powerful tools for forging this bond. The merger of the Peshmerga into the Iraqi Army and National Guard would be tantamount to an admission that this shared threat is no more.

### **Ex-Peshmerga Already in the Iraqi Army:**

Some former Peshmerga have voluntarily joined the Iraqi Army or National Guard, but lingering and perhaps even valid concerns over where exactly their loyalties lie and to whom, continues to be a source of tension. In *Nation Building and Stability Operations: a Reference Handbook* Cynthia Ann Watson characterizes the potentially contradictory dual loyalty of Peshmerga turned soldiers, whether real or perceived, as inherently detrimental to efforts to stabilize the country (2008. 111). This raises the question of whether or not integrating the Peshmerga into the Iraqi national armed forces would really help to resolve the underlying tensions.

Doubts over the loyalty of ex-Peshmerga now serving in the Iraqi national forces may not be as destabilizing as they appear. Tom Lassiter's *Seattle Times Piece* "Kurds Quietly Ready for Civil War" quotes a number of former Peshmerga now serving in the Iraqi forces as saying that they would not hesitate to mutiny and fight their Arab colleagues in the event of a showdown over Kurdish independence (2005). Ironically, this may in fact serve to stabilize the region. One consequence of this potentially mutinous presence within the Iraqi Army is that it would appear to decrease the ability of the central government to take any kind of aggressive action against the north for fear of its army turning on itself. The presence of numerous potentially mutinous former Peshmerga in Iraqi military may serve to discourage any attempt to force a conclusive showdown over the territorial dispute, at least on the part of the central government.

The Iraqi federalist bargain is a highly conditional one. Arguably, there exists a parallel to the early American experiment in federalism at least in that the various parties have agreed in part based on the standing option of secession by force of arms. The general dynamics of the arrangement are captured by the words of Rahim Mohammad Shakur, now a Brigadier General in the Iraqi Army, "I am a Kurd. If we are ever attacked I will stop being a regular Iraqi soldier and become a Peshmerga once again" (Olson, 2007. 209). In other words the status quo is acceptable, but if it is altered to an extent that the Kurds find unacceptable the arrangement could abruptly descend into renewed Arab-Kurd violence. If the case of Brigadier General Shakur is illustrative of broader attitudes, as Lassiter's article tends to suggest it is, then the Army's mistrust of former Peshmerga may in fact serve to stabilize the region. By threatening to divide the Army in such an eventuality the Kurds have provided themselves with a combination early warning system and insurance policy against any aggression on part of the central government. The Kurdish leadership is in the remarkably enviable position of having the loyalty of its own

considerable forces, plus those of a small portion of the Iraqi Army and National Guard. Even if the Peshmerga were to be merged successfully into the Iraqi national armed forces doubts over their loyalty would remain and probably with justification.

### **Territorial Claims:**

As mentioned earlier, the Peshmerga and Iraqi government forces are dug in across the so called trigger line from one another. The disputed zone between the trigger and green lines is a major bone of contention between the Iraqi central and Kurdish governments. Integration of forces would require the parties to reach a conclusive compromise agreement regarding the disputed “trigger line.” American forces have spent the last seven years trying to defuse the situation there without successfully reaching a conclusive settlement, though they have prevented the situation from erupting into open violence despite several close calls (Chon, 2009; “Iraq’s Dangerous Trigger Line: Too Late to Keep the Peace?,” 2010).

The territorial dispute is multifaceted. It is in large part a legacy of Saddam Hussein’s attempts to shift the demographics of the region during the 1980s and 1990s. However, the massive oil reserves there which Saddam was seeking control over and the continued presence of a substantial Arab settler population, some of whom have now been there for nearly thirty-years, continue to be an issue. Both sides have major reasons for desiring control over the region and the leadership on both sides could not politically back down even if it wanted to. The Malaki government would be accused of capitulating to Kurdish demands and the Kurdish leadership would risk a major back lash from its own people for giving away a major portion of what Iraqi Kurds claim as their historic homeland. As long as the issue remains unresolved the question of integrating the Peshmerga into the Iraqi Army and/or National Guard is essentially an academic one.

### Evaluating the Indicators:

A.) *Indications of widespread primordialist beliefs in the Kurds' understanding of their own identity and origins.* – **Found.** The observations of Carole O'Leary and others indicate that many Kurds conceive of their own identity in basically essentialist terms (2007. 170). This has been historically reinforced by the process through which the state long tried to craft an Iraqi identity rooted in the rhetoric of pan-Arabism, which was basically exclusive of the Kurds (Houston, 2008. 111-3). Likewise, cultural and linguistic differences as well as a historic comparative geographic isolation have contributed to their sense of distinctness (Houston, 2008. 111-3; McDowall, 2004. 9-11). The abuses of the Baathist era served to dramatically reinforce this perception.

B.) *Indications of a culturally imbedded belief that Arabs represent an existential threat. The historical events/trends that might lead to such an embedded belief should be noted and their significance in contemporary culture analyzed. Characterizations of Arabs in Kurdish media, textbooks, etc. are also worth considering.* – **Found.** Arab Iraq is perceived as and indeed has historically been a major threat to the Kurds. The abuses of the previous era are sufficiently recent and were sufficiently widespread that almost the entire adult population of has some memory of them. At the time of the coalition invasion 805,805 Kurds had fled to the safe haven zone and still more were internally displaced (Ahmed, 2005. 43). The Al-Anfal campaigns alone killed 100,000-200,000 ("Anfal Campaign against the Kurds," 2007; Olson, 2005. 113). The residual effects of these abuses can be seen in the continuing hostility felt toward Arabs by much of the Kurdish population. This occasionally becomes dramatically apparent in Kurdish media outlets. For instance in Kurdish journalist Khasraw Saleh Koyi's, "How to deal with Arab 'Islamist and Nationalist' Terrorism in Kurdistan," in which he enjoined readers to, "When

encountering Arabs in Kurdistan, don't think of them in terms of Iraqism, Islam and brotherhood. Instead, think of what their nation has done to the Kurds in the past and what they are capable of doing to them today and tomorrow" (2004). While it would be a grave mistake to regard Koyi as a spokesperson for Kurds or their attitudes toward Arab Iraqis, his beliefs and attitudes are the products of a shared Iraqi-Kurdish socio-historical experience.

C.) *Evidence of a popular perception that Kurdish identity is fundamentally based on not being Arab.* – **Found.** There is a considerable body of evidence that not only is Kurdish identity posited partially on *not* being Arab, but that the Kurdish leadership is actually trying to actively promote and make use of this belief. The KRG needs to win over the support or at least the cooperation of the region's non-Kurdish minorities. This has been pursued through a variety of avenues, most critically the attempt to forge a common *Kurdistani* identity (O'Leary, 27. 2005). One of the fundamental building blocks of this identity is a "non-Arabness" shared by the Kurds, Turkomans, Chaldeans, etc.

D.) *Extensive use of the threatening Arab "other" as a tool for political mobilization in domestic Kurdish politics.* – **Found to a degree.** The very real threat posed by the Arab Iraqi government was for decades the centerpiece of the lexicon by which Kurdish nationalism was invoked and which the Baathist regime validated at every turn by repressing and outright murdering the Kurds. The residual effects of this are still to be seen in the rhetoric of the KRG leadership. For instance, even when responding to 2009 allegations of human rights abuses KRG press releases still use phrases like, "As an oppressed community ourselves" ("KRG statement on Human Rights Watch report – 'On Vulnerable Ground,'" 2009). The adversary generally invoked has changed to the shared threat of, "terrorists and extremists" ("KRG statement on Human Rights

Watch report – ‘On Vulnerable Ground,’” 2009). However, there are significant similarities between the way the old threat and the new are framed. That being said, both are very real.

The official speeches of the leadership generally do not refer to the problem of terrorism as being Arab in origin, at least in so many words. Rather the external threat is generally couched in terms of “violence plaguing the rest of Iraq” as it was for instance in Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani’s farewell address as he left office in 2009 (“Outgoing Prime Minister Barzani: ‘I look to the Future with Optimism,’” 2009).

E.) *Indications of a desire for full independence, as opposed to simple autonomy, at some future date, including the belief that the Peshmerga exist in order to bring about an independent Kurdistan.* – **Unable to Clearly Determine.** It’s hard to get an accurate picture of how the Kurds themselves would view any future bid for full independence. At least in the abstract, the desire for a Kurdish state is still strong. The literature makes frequent reference to the 1.7 million signatures collected by petitioners seeking a referendum on independence in 2004 (Olson, 2005.133). However, as Liam Anderson asserts in his “The Role of Political Parties in Developing Kurdish Nationalism,” “Few but the most ardent nationalists would now give much credence to the possibility of a pan-Kurdish state emerging that embraces all 25 million plus Kurds spread across the borders of five countries in the Middle East” (2007. 123). The Kurds are doubtless cognizant that it is unlikely that an independent Kurdish state, even one limited to just the north of Iraq, could survive long against any of the major regional actors. Yet popular nationalist sentiment still holds on to a desire for an eventual state, though the political realities of the current federalist bargain prevent the KRG leadership from invoking the goal of independence, at least for the moment. (Olson, 2007. 209-11). The Kurds certainly might try for

independence if their autonomy were threatened, but beyond that it is difficult to assess the extent to which the desire for a state will motivate their future actions.

F.) *Indications that the leadership's grip on power hinges on continuing to maintain the popular perception of Kurdistan as a nation under imminent threat. (eg. an attempt to exploit the "rally round the flag" effect.)* – **Unable to Clearly Determine.** The monopoly on political power held by Kurdistan's two leading political parties is quite firm and has been since before the 2003 invasion. Both parties exercise considerable coercive power over their respective constituencies through their extensive security apparatuses, of which the Peshmerga are sometimes a part. The threat of terrorism is the principal justification for maintaining these apparatuses and their extensive powers ("On Vulnerable Ground," 2010). These party controlled security forces have doubtless been a part of why the two party monopoly has remained unbroken, but that does not mean that it is the whole explanation. The PUK and KDP might very well be able to maintain their near monopoly on political power without their security apparatus.<sup>18</sup> Both are very well entrenched politically, with extensive tribal and patronage networks to draw on, and charismatic experienced leaders. They might well be able to retain their grip on power even if the perceived external threat lost credibility and the powers of their respective security apparatuses shrank.

G.) *Indications that the Peshmerga are an integral part of the power base of individual Kurdish leaders.* – **Found.** There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Peshmerga and their pension system often act as an extension of patronage networks. As an employer, source of pension money and provider of social status the Peshmerga are key to maintaining the existing patronage systems from which the PUK and KDP leadership draw much of their support.

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<sup>18</sup> After all, the U.S. has spent the last two centuries basically dominated by just two political parties even though neither could generally exercise coercive physical force.

H.) *A monopoly or near-monopoly on power by current or former Peshmergas.* – **Found.** The current Kurdish leadership is composed largely of individuals affiliated with the Barzani and Talabani clans and/or their patronage networks, which are often rooted in tribal connections. This means that individuals formerly affiliated with Peshmerga fill most of the top leadership posts.

### **Conclusions:**

Fundamentally, the perceptions of Iraqi Arabs as hostile others and as fellow countrymen with whom to fight alongside, are incompatible. Integration would amount to a de facto admission that the existential threat posed by Arab Iraqis has passed. That admission, whether ultimately correct or not, would critically reduce the ability of the leadership to mobilize Kurdish and especially *Kurdistani* identity. This would jeopardize the existing power structure and the patronage networks built to sustain it. These local systems of patronage are partially built around the need to sustain the two major parties respective powerbases and their respective Peshmerga, which are now in the process of being unified into a single KRG force. Integration into the Iraqi National Army and/or National Guard would threaten or at least realign a portion of these patronage networks. Merging the Iraqi Army and Peshmerga would very probably alter the local political landscape quite radically and in ways which would be difficult to predict or control. In summary, integration would be incompatible with mobilization of Kurdish and *Kurdistani* identity politics and therefore would be detrimental to the local elites whose power relies on that mobilization.



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