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# Path Dependence from Proxy Agent to De Facto State: A History of 'Strategic Exploitation' of the Kurds as a Context of the Iraqi Kurdistan Security Policy

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The scientific goal of this paper is to conceptualize the phenomenon of 'strategic exploitation' of Kurdish political entities and to investigate it as a process that triggered the change in Kurdish actorness from isolated non-state to de facto state. Covering two centuries, the contribution examines actorness and cases of patron-client relations between Kurdish political entities and sovereign states. It answers the question: What was the path of strategic exploitation of the Kurdish political entities and how does it affect the contemporary security policy of Iraqi Kurdistan? Combining the concepts of proxy war, de facto state, and path dependence, it argues that the persistent experience of strategic exploitation shaped the collective strategic thought of Kurdish political entities and has a visible impact on contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan security policy. It applies the process-tracing method based on an analysis of literature on the history of Kurds and Kurdistan to investigate patron-client relations and variability of actorness. The article concludes that the experience of 'strategic exploitation' has shaped the main direction of Iraqi Kurdistan security policy. It is expressed in practice as abstaining from an official declaration of secession and diversifying relations with external actors.

Keywords: Kurdistan, proxy war, de facto state, security policy, path dependence

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One way of telling the history of the Kurds and Kurdistan might be by enumerating and explaining irregular and long-lasting cases of strategic exploitation by its quasi-patrons. Most of the literature on proxy wars focuses on reasons and expected benefits for the quasi-patron, but ignores (see e.g. Groh 2019; Rauta 2020; Hughes 2014b) or only briefly mentions motivations for the agents (see e.g., Mumford 2013; Ahram 2011). Based on the available source material and studies, an attempt to assess to what degree an agent was aware of its role and to understand the quasi-patron's intentions seems challenging.

Therefore, it can be assumed that Kurdish political entities perceived entering a relationship with the quasi-patrons as conducive to the implementation of their own local interests, e.g., the Kurdish principalit-

ies in the Ottoman and Iranian Empires (Eppel 2016, 27–45; Klein 2011, 170–71); the Assyrians and Great Britain 1915–1932 (Ahram 2011, 62–65; Browne 1932); the Soviet Union and the Mahabad Republic in 1946 (Vali 2011, 27–60); the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Iran, USA, Israel 1962–1975 (Borghard 2014, 180–210). The long-term adaptation of the role of a proxy agent shaped collective strategic thought of the Kurdish political entities, which was expressed by balancing asymmetric interactions, which then led to the transformation from non-state proxy agents into a de facto state, against the intentions of the quasi-patron.<sup>1</sup> This raises the following research question: What

<sup>1</sup> It is clear that a de facto state can also be a proxy agent, but it will differ significantly from other non-state proxies in terms of its actorness and available security policy instruments. The fundamental difference results from effective-

was the path of strategic exploitation of the Kurdish political entities and how does it affect the contemporary security policy of Iraqi Kurdistan?

The analysis will trace the proxy role of the Kurdish political entities between 1823, when the signing of the Treaties of Erzurum between the Ottoman and Iranian empires initiated the process of ending the Kurdish vassal states, and 2005, when the Iraqi constitution legalised the functioning of the Kurdistan Regional Government (hereinafter Iraqi Kurdistan) as a de facto state within the Iraqi state. This aims to explain the evolution of the Kurdish agency and strategic thought. From the mid-nineteenth century until 1991 the Kurdish entities lacked the ability to operate actively and efficiently in relation to other actors in the international system<sup>2</sup>.

Studying the past proxy roles of the Kurdish political entities is necessary for further studies on the contemporary nature of Iraqi Kurdistan's empirical sovereignty (see Berg and Kuusk 2010), its specific practices of participating in international relations, and its implementation of security policy. Based on studies of the asymmetry in relations between patrons and their proxy agents, this paper analyses the phenomenon of long-lasting strategic exploitation and fills in the gap between two seemingly separate areas of research: the proxy war and de facto states. The researchers of both concepts identify the phenomenon of non-state and de facto state entities cooperating with their patrons. However, if they refer to the historical context of such cooperation, then only in the narrow timeframe necessary to explain a specific event, such as secession, insurgency, or international rivalry (see, e.g., Kozera et al. 2020). In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, only a few works in the area of de facto states (e.g. Rafaat 2018) and proxy wars (e.g. Ahram

2011) outline the historical context more broadly, but focus only on the twentieth century. In contrast, this article refers to both concepts and at the same time indicates the longer continuity of the historical development of the Kurdish agency with a focus on its role as a proxy actor, which dates to the sixteenth century.

The primary focus, in the theoretical dimension, is conceptualising and explaining the relation between strategic exploitation and the transition process from isolated entity to non-isolated de facto state. The development of contemporary Kurdish de facto statehood and its avoidance of isolation was conditioned by the long-term experience of strategic exploitation. From the perspective of proxy war studies, this is an analysis of the proxy actor, which, because of its experience of strategic exploitation, effectively counteracts the operational control of the states wishing to act as its patron. In terms of pursuing interests, the patron takes steps to maximize the profit resulting from the relationship with the agent. Therefore, to increase the level of operational control, the patron aims to isolate the agent from other actors (Groh 2019, 103, 121; Ahram 2011, 26). In some specific cases, the patron presses its agent to secede (e.g. Turkey and Northern Cyprus; Russia and Transnistria). In general, the result of the act of secession without international recognition hinders constructive resolution of the conflict with the parent state, isolates the agent from the international community, and thus increases the patron's operational control over it. Iraqi Kurdistan was able to avoid such a situation. The following research identifies established asymmetric relations between Kurdish political entities and sovereign states without their enacting operational control as 'quasi-patrons'.

The importance of this case study for researchers of de facto states follows from the above. Some are not fully convinced that an entity that has not declared secession and is not isolated by the International Community – despite meeting the other conditions qualifies as a de facto state. Some relevant researchers of de facto states list Iraqi Kurdistan as a de facto state, but do not characterise it specifically or explain how it fits their criteria (McGarry 2004; Florea 2014). The existing case studies of Iraqi Kurdistan, within broadly understood literature on the de facto states (Rafaat 2018; Palani et al. 2019; 2020; Jüde 2017; Mac-

ness of governance over specific territory and its population. This transformation from a combat organization to a state was in fact favoured by the internal intention to build statehood by the awareness of the need to diversify sources of external support.

<sup>2</sup> Even though there have been cases of Kurdish political entities that were able to maintain some degree of isolated de facto statehood, e.g. Iraqi Kurdistan (known as 'Free Kurdistan') during 1961–1975 (Rafaat 2018, 89–97). As described further, this entity was unable to play an independent role within the international system nor even inside Iraq. The patron (Iran) had full operational control and decided to abolish 'Free Kurdistan' when this became opportune.

Queen 2015; Voller 2012; Natali 2015; 2010; Romano 2004; Gürbey, Hofmann, and Seyder 2017), do not refer to the proxy war concept, although in some of these works there are indirect references to the agent's role in proxy wars. The exception is Gareth Stansfield, who rightly points out that Iraqi Kurdistan is still seen as a proxy actor, not an established actor that has already developed its own state institutions and maintains relations with sovereign states (Stansfield 2017, 61–62). He also notes that the renunciation of the role of a proxy agent took place in the period 1999–2006 through the peace process between the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) (Stansfield 2017, 72–73).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces a framework and conceptual grid for research on the history of 'strategic exploitation' of the Kurdistan political entities. Section 2 outlines four types of Kurdistan political entities' actorness and discusses supporting examples of asymmetric relations between Kurdistan political entities and quasi-patrons. Section 3 explains the strategic thought of the contemporary Kurdistan political entities, which resulted from the experience of strategic exploitation. Section 4 concludes the paper.

### 1 Framework and Conceptual Grid

Being primarily concerned with the causal impact of temporality in the analysis of the Iraqi Kurdistan security policy, the path dependence concept is the most obvious answer to the question of how the role of Iraqi Kurdistan evolved. It will be used to conceptualize the continuity from patron-client relations, through the proxy actors, to the Kurdish de facto state in Iraq. The path dependence framework allows exploration of the history of those processes to find specific junctures (Mahoney and Schensul 2006, 6–7). It assumes that the present and future development of a particular process depends on its historical development. Therefore, a given process can develop along various paths that can lead to the achievement of various equilibrium states (Pierson 2000, 253–54). Likewise, institutional transformations are conditioned by past and present events that at the beginning of the path may hinder or exclude the possibility of reaching certain states in the later stages of devel-

opment of the local institutional system defined as a combination of various formal institutions that can change over the course of one generation and informal ones that transform over many generations (Williamson 2000, 595–613). Consequently, political development of the Kurdish political entity that is related to cooperation with quasi-patrons is punctuated by junctures that shape not only the practices of exchange of mutual benefits but also a wide spectrum of social life within the Kurdish political entity. Some specific sets of junctures could be characterized as 'critical' because of their 'triggering factors', which mean incidents and practices that shaped the trajectory of a path and triggered the transformation of the actorness of Iraqi Kurdistan from an isolated insurgency to a non-isolated de facto state.

Long-term experience of the role of a surrogate by Kurdish political entities resulted in the formation of specific rules and routines that are carriers of accumulated knowledge, which is the basis for formulating the assumptions of the security policy. To explain this while considering Kurdish political entities as institutions, it is worth referring to the New Institutionalism: "By virtue of their long-term adaptive character, [institutions] yield outcome distributions that are characterized by relatively high means" (March and Olsen 2008, 13). Assuming that the dynamics of cooperation between the Kurdish political entities and quasi-patrons normalizes a specific set of rules, it can be noted that although they may evolve, they are stable in the short-term perspective:

"by virtue of their short-term stability and their shaping of individual actions, they give those distributions relatively high reliability (low variability). In general, following the rules provides a higher average return and a lower variance on returns than does a random draw from a set of deviant actions proposed by individuals" (March and Olsen 2008, 13).

From this arises the assumption that strategic exploitation by the quasi-patrons prompts the agent to lock-in rules developed during the cooperation at the expense of looking for more favourable practices. Only a long-term analysis allows one to identify specific junctures and triggers that are valuable for understanding the contemporary agency of Iraqi Kurdistan.

### 1.1 Non-state and De Facto State Proxies

The method of using agents (states or non-state entities) to achieve military goals is called 'war-by-proxy' (Deutsch 1964, 102), 'proxy war' (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984, 263) or 'proxy warfare' (Mumford 2013, 11–17). In general, it can be defined as a substitute for a direct confrontation between states that takes place on the territory of a third country and is disguised as the latter's internal issue. In contemporary literature, this category also encompasses a situation where a state or non-state actor provides its chosen proxies with indirect military support in order to achieve its goal (e.g., weapons, training, funding, intelligence) (Mumford 2013, 45–46, 57). Therefore, the non-state proxy agent can be defined as a non-state political entity (with combat capabilities) that is supported, used, or inspired by an external actor to carry out military actions to achieve the quasi-patron's aims (for further detail see Bryjka 2020; Krieg and Rickli 2018; Marshall 2016; Rauta 2016; Ahram 2011; Bar-Siman-Tov 1984).

For the sake of clarity in this study, I propose to distinguish the de facto state proxies within the category of non-state proxies. De facto states can be defined as entities that meet the criteria of the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) for statehood but lack international recognition (Toomla 2013, 58). The following research uses a conceptual grid that departs from the narrow definitions of de facto states, which only recognise entities isolated by the international community and thus ignore the Iraqi Kurdistan. Such narrow definitions of the de facto states are criticised (see, e.g., Chorev 2010; Pegg 2004, 38; 2017), and in addition some scholars argue to apply the de facto state category to entities that have not announced formal secession, but where there is no doubt about their independence aspirations (Caspersen 2012, 9–11; Pegg 2004, 38). Therefore, I take the position that the de facto state category can be used to study Iraqi Kurdistan due to its agency characteristics and clear intention of secession.

De facto states stand out from other non-state proxies in terms of their intention to participate in international relations in the role of recognized state; their exercise of a de facto monopoly to use (internally) legitimate force within a given territory; and their practise of legitimizing a de facto government (e.g., gen-

eral elections). Therefore, unlike other non-state entities, de facto states have nonmilitary instruments to provide their population with a wide range of state services in the field of various security spheres (e.g., food, health, social, economic, and energy security). Thus, their security policy has a much wider scope than other non-state proxies whose security policy is mostly concentrated on the use of military instruments.

### 1.2 Strategic Exploitation and Quasi-Patrons

In the literature on the de facto states, a patron is defined as an entity that provides economic, political, and military aid to a de facto state, whose existence in some way fulfils the patron's interest. In this perspective, the patron is fully responsible for the security of such an entity. Due to the act of secession, most de facto states are isolated by the international community, e.g., Transnistria, Northern Cyprus, Nagorno-Karabakh (see Berg and Vits 2018; Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2012). Therefore, the patron is fully responsible for the survival of its agent and can decide on its cooperation with other external actors. Moreover, if there is mutual positive affect (shared identity), then any attempt to abandon the agent will be associated with significant internal and image costs. The quasi-patrons which, for the purposes of this study, I define as entities that enter an asymmetric and transactional relationship with another entity, deliver significant military, political or economic help but without the intention to support the agent's strategic goals. At the same time, the quasi-patron does not have significant influence over the survival of the agent or its external contacts (Kosienkowski 2018, 79).

The main practice to gain control over the agent is to use an existing conflict with the agent's parent state. The patron uses various tools (military, political, economic) to intensify the conflict to a level where the parent state decides to intervene in the area where the agent is present, and therefore the patron is able to offer military assistance to its agent and inspire the act of its unilateral secession. The result is the emergence of the de facto state with no chance of gaining international recognition, whose survival is largely dependent on its patron (e.g., Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia).

In the case of the Kurdish political entities, there were two cases in which an external actor decided on the survival of the Kurdish entity and withdrew its support at no relevant cost. The first example is the Mahabad Republic, whose establishment in 1946 was inspired by the Soviets and which collapsed as a result of the withdrawal of their support in the same year. The second example is Iranian patronage over Free Kurdistan (1961–1975), although the structural context (landlockedness and mountainousness) in this specific case gave Iran the ability to interrupt the cooperation of the Kurdish entity with other actors (Israel and the USA), which resulted in the military defeat of the first Kurdish de facto state in Iraq. In both cases, discontinuation of support did not have significant internal consequences for the quasi-patron due to the lack of mutual positive affect (related to common ethnicity, religion, ideology). However, those states decided about the agent's survival and thus should be qualified as patrons.

The main reason for the quasi-patron's decision to cooperate with the Kurdish political entities is to use (exploit) them to achieve the quasi-patron's strategic goals. That phenomenon can be defined as 'strategic exploitation' and understood as an asymmetric relationship between the quasi-patron's and the Kurdish political entities, which aims to achieve a specific military or political goal of the exploiter. The quasi patron initially builds some sort of trust to fulfil their own goals with the intention not to fulfil the agent's goals, and even to prevent them from being accomplished. This is related to the second criterion of 'negative patronage' proposed by Aram Rafaat (2018, 22). Although the relationship is deeply asymmetric, both parties (Kurdish political entity and quasi-patron) expect it to be beneficial. However, the assumptions of both parties may be mutually exclusive.

The interaction between an agent and the quasi-patron may have many variations on the axis from full consistency of the most important intentions to their mutual exclusion. However, for cooperation and its course, it is not important whether such compliance occurs objectively. More important is whether it is interpreted in this way by decision-makers at a given time. Due to for example the lack of affectivity regardless of aim premises, medium- and long-term inten-

tions will most often be interpreted as mutually exclusive. Hence, the quasi-patrons' tendency to end the relationship with their agent by attempting to suppress it.

According to Geraint Hughes, the agent-quasi-patron relationship meets three conditions: military support, common aim, and the durability of the relationship (minimum of several months) (Hughes 2014a, 12). States with a deficit in legitimising power over their territory may decide to cooperate with various types of armed non-state organisations and delegate to them the basic functions of the state related to maintaining security (Ahram 2011, 9). In some cases this meant acceptance of existing local power rather than delegating a role. Examples of this type of proxy actors include the Kurdish vassal states in relation to the Ottoman and Iranian Empires, and Iraqi Kurdistan after 2003 in relation to the Iraqi central government. These cases differ from the examples cited in the literature on proxy war (Bryjka 2021, 161; Ahram 2011, 9) in terms of the durability of the relationship.

## 2 The Actorness and the Path of Strategic Exploitation of the Kurdish Political Entities

Finding specific junctures should be preceded by defining the Kurdish political entities' role transition path. Based on the characteristics of the Kurdish political entities (territorial control and subjectivity), the path can be divided into four key periods (see Table 1).

In the sixteenth to nineteenth century, the Kurdistan political entities were generally territorial, multi-level (tribal and confessional) institutional systems bound by an ambiguous relationship with the Ottoman and Iranian Empires. It can be assumed that for the High Porta the main reason behind establishing the relationship with Kurdistan political entities was maintaining a buffer zone with the Iranian Empire and some sort of domestic affect as "Sunni allies against the Alawite Kizilbas, who constituted a threat to the Ottomans and were considered sympathetic to the Shi'i Safawids" (Eppel 2008, 239). Iran had similar motivations. Furthermore, and most importantly, the mountains inhabited by Kurdish tribes were a difficult barrier to overcome, so both sides dragged local lead-

**Table 1: Transformation path of actorness of Kurdish political entities**

Period	Actorness	Agents
early 15 <sup>th</sup> to mid-19 <sup>th</sup>	Subject: Vassal states and tribal confederations.	e.g., Emirates of Ardalán, Soran, Baban, Badinan, Bitlis; Mukri tribe
mid-19 <sup>th</sup> to 1991	Object: Non-state insurgencies with episodes of de facto statehood.	tribal and political leaders; Free Kurdistan (1961–1975)
1991–2005	Object: Isolated de facto state.	Southern Kurdistan / Iraqi Kurdistan
2005–ongoing	Subject: Non-isolated de facto states.	Southern Kurdistan / Iraqi Kurdistan; (from 2012) Western Kurdistan / Syrian Kurdistan

**Table 2: Kurdistan political entities as proxy agents from the sixteenth to early nineteenth century**

Period	Agent	Quasi-patron	Quasi-patron reasons	Agent reasons
16 <sup>th</sup> – mid-19 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Emirate of Baban	Ottoman Empire	To secure borderlands; to gain advantage in regional rivalry.	To gain advantage in local rivalries.
	Emirate of Ardalán; Mukri tribe	Safavid/ Qajar Empires (Iran)		

ers onto their own side, thus strengthening local rivalries.

Landlocked and mountainous terrain isolated the Kurdish political entities from the world. For this reason, the inhabitants of the greater Kurdistan could not participate significantly in international trade. Therefore, the local population could not accumulate the capital necessary to develop effective administration. The mountains provided a sense of security and ensured survival, but at the same time made political consolidation impossible and strengthened linguistic differences, which later became one of the fundamental barriers to the development of the Kurdish national movement.

Controlling this area by establishing effective administration of an external entity was unachievable. At the same time, the Kurdistan political entities were too small in terms of potential and political power to accomplish permanent domination over each other or to find a way to consolidate. Therefore, the Kurdistan political entities were willing to enter relationships with external entities, which, in return for the realization of external interests, provided the resources necessary to gain an advantage in internal competition. The external origin of resources perpetuated the practice of seeking a local advantage by relations with neighbouring empires, rather than developing their

own abilities to overcome unfavourable structural conditions. The success of local dynasties and tribal leaders has been directly bounded by external patronage, as their ability to adapt and play a role in Ottoman-Safavid rivalry (Eppel 2016, 29–32). The dynamic of the High Porta and Iranian relations with the Kurdish political entities until the nineteenth century contributed to the formation of a self-reinforcing dependency path as a gradual regression of the ability to adapt to changing conditions.

Loyalty to one or the other of the dynasties that ruled in the Ottoman and Iranian empires was rather volatile and dependent on the possibility of the Kurdistan political entities to pursue its own interests and the assessment of the advantage of one of the empires over another (Eppel 2016, 31). At the same time, the two empires had different strategies for dealing with the Kurdish political entities. The Ottomans preferred strong, autonomous emirs, while the Safavids expelled the strong Kurdish emirs and rulers and nurtured marginal families, who were perceived as more dependent on the empire (Eppel 2016, 28). From the early nineteenth century, with the development of national movements, the Ottoman and Iranian empires simultaneously started the process of centralisation that later resulted in collapse of the Kurdish political entities' subjectivity (Eppel 2008).

The emergence of new actors in the region – the British and Russian empire – ushered in a new quadrilateral reality (Eppel 2008; Ates 2013). Britain influenced the centralisation policy of the Ottoman Empire to counteract Russia's growing influence in the Caucasus and the Balkans. The first Treaty of Erzurum in 1823 and the campaigns of Reşid Mehmed Paşa and Çerkez Hafız Mehmed Paşa in 1834–1839 were decisive for the fall of the Kurdish vassal states. However, the Ottoman Empire could not fill the institutional void resulting from elimination of the Kurdish political entities by establishing its own effective administration until the emergence of the Turkish Republic in the twentieth century. The Kurdish agency was excluded by the system of power of the parent state both in the nineteenth century in the Ottoman Empire, and later in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Therefore, the Kurdish political entities were forced into the role of constant insurgency, which with difficulty and only temporarily could gain some sort of territorial control (e.g. Mahmud Barzanji rebellions of 1919 and 1922–1924, Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925, Ararat rebellion of 1930, Republic of Mahabad proclamation in 1946). Due to the lack of permanent institutional control over the territory and immanent conflict with the parent states, relations between the Kurdish political entities and external patrons were characterized by a much greater asymmetry than in the previous period.

The end of the Iranian-Ottoman rivalry resulted in a lack of demand for the loyalty of the Kurdish political entities and thus justification for their privileges. The Ottoman Empire could use its resources to diminish the sovereignty of the Kurdish principalities. There was an urgent need to collect taxes, recruit soldiers, and develop efficient administration. That was also an effect of the pressure from Western countries, mainly Great Britain, which feared that if the High Porta did not impose effective control over these areas, then Russia would do so.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire both simultaneously fought against Kurds on their border and competed to enlist the local population in their armies (Averianov 1900, 88–91). The resulting chaos prevented the Kurdish political entities from consolidating and taking advantage of the opportunity, which was the emergence

of new actors in the region (Mossaki 2018; Averianov 1900, 83, 88–89; 113).

According to Peter Averianov, during the Russo-Iranian War of 1804–1813, Iran paid the Kurds high salaries for participation in the war and exempted them from all taxes. Iranian defeats were associated with an increase in the cost of Kurdish loyalty: new privileges; new governors if the Kurds were in any way dissatisfied with them; and even a ban on insulting Kurds (Averianov 1900, 11)<sup>3</sup>. In 1809, the Russians persuaded the Kurds living in the vicinity of Yerevan not to provide military aid to the Iranians and Ottomans. In exchange, Russia offered its citizenship (which Kurds did not accept), retaining privileges, and freedom to conduct military operations in territories not controlled by Russia. Moscow also temporarily allowed migration to other conquered areas in the Caucasus (e.g., Karabakh). However, Russian military leaders considered raids on Kurdish settlements to be the most effective method of securing their territorial gains (Averianov 1900, 23–26).

During the nineteenth century, the dominant Ottoman strategy to legitimise its power over Ottoman Kurdistan was based on violence and exploitation of the Sunni common identity. The High Porta focused on exploitation of local rivalries and used charismatic Kurds, e.g. Izmail-Hakki Pasha, as its proxy agents. The Ottomans exploited religious legitimacy during the wars with Russia by drawing over to their side the Kurdish religious authorities who legitimised the conflict as a holy war (Averianov 1900, 23–26).

The quadrilateral power dynamic resulted in the creation of new frontiers and new centralised national governments by the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. Although the position of the Kurdish local political actors in this period was relatively high, in the quadrilateral world it was relegated to mercenary force used to realise rather short-term goals. Today, it can be assessed that past external privileges and material benefits may have prevented Kurdistan's tribal societies from seeking potentially more beneficial avenues for social development. This perpetuated the practice of

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Averianov does not precisely mention any of Kurdish political entities by name. If the above description refers only to Iranian/Russian conflict areas with Kurdish presence, then it can be assumed that Iran's policy towards Ardalan operated on similar principles



**Table 3: Kurdish political entities as proxy agents from the nineteenth century to 1991**

Period	Agent	QP/ patron	QP/patron reasons	Agent reasons
19 <sup>th</sup> century	Kurdish tribes and tribal confederations.	Russia (QP)	Expansion over Iranian and Ottoman territories.	To gain external support of own political ambitions; to gain material benefits (tribal chiefs); to gain advantage from being on the winning side.
1915–1955	'Iraqi Levies' Assyrians, Arabs, Marsh Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen (from 1928 mostly Assyrians).	Great Britain (patron)	Maintaining control over Iraq and Southern Kurdistan.	To gain advantage in local rivalries; to gain external support of own political ambitions (mainly the Kurds and Assyrians).
1946	KDP / Mahabad Republic	Soviet Union (patron)	Imposing pressure on Iran in the context of rivalry with Great Britain.	To obtain political and military protection.
1961–1972	KDP	Soviet Union (QP)	To impose pressure on Iraq in the context of the rivalry with the USA.	To gain external support of own political ambitions, military training, arms, and funds.
1966–1975		Iran (patron)	Weaken Iraq through domestic conflicts.	
1972–1975		USA (QP)	Impose pressure on Iraq in the context of rivalry with the Soviet Union.	
1966–1975		Israel (QP)	To weaken Iraq through domestic conflicts; to reduce military involvement in the Arab Israeli conflict.	

Note: KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party; QP – quasi patron.

**Table 4: Kurdistan political entities as proxy agents from 1991 to 2003**

Period	Agent	QP	QP reasons	Agent reasons
1991	KDP; PUK	USA	To use as a proxy force during an intervention.	To gain external support for own political ambitions.
1992–2003	KDP	Turkey	To gain benefits from cross-border (illegal) transit of goods (mainly oil); to diversify its oil sources; to gain military support in war with the PKK.	To gain material benefits from cross-border (illegal) transit of goods and oil; to reduce hostilities; to gain military support in regional rivalry with the PUK and the PKK.
1992–2003	PUK	Iran	To reduce the influence of the USA and Turkey on Iraqi Kurdistan.	To gain support in rivalry with the KDP and material benefits from cross-border (illegal) transit of goods.
2003	KDP; PUK	USA	To use as force during an intervention.	To gain external support of own political ambitions.

Note: KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party; PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan; PKK – Kurdistan Workers Party; QP – quasi-patron.

**Table 5. Kurdish political entities as proxy agents after 2003**

Period	Agent	QP/parent state	QP reasons	Agent reasons
2003–ongoing	KDP	Turkey (QP)	To impose pressure on the PKK; to gain economic and political benefits; to impose control over the KRG.	To gain advantage in rivalry with the PKK; to gain access to outside world (politically and economically); to reduce the Turkish hostility.
2003–ongoing	KRG	USA (QP)	To preserve the stability of post-war Iraq and deter Iranian incursion.	Seeking security; to gain external support of own political ambitions; to reduce asymmetry in relations with Turkey and Iran; to gain and maintain political domination in post-war Iraq under QP protection.
2007–ongoing	YBŞ	PYD (non-state QP)	To impose pressure on the KRG; to gain influence in the region of Sinjar.	Seeking security and external support for local political goals.
2016–ongoing	YBŞ	Iraq (parent state)	To coordinate military operations against ISIS; to gain advantage in rivalry with the KRG over disputed areas; to cover up the inability of enforcing the monopoly on the use of force over Iraqi territory.	Seeking security; to coordinate military operations against the ISIS; to deter Turkey from military operations against agent; avoiding the point of no return with parent state.
2018–ongoing	PYD	Syria (parent state)	To coordinate military operations against ISIS and Turkey-backed rebels; to cover up the inability of enforcing the monopoly on the use of force over Syrian territory.	
2014–ongoing	PYD	USA (QP)	To impose pressure on Syria and its allies; to gain influence on the course of the civil war in Syria.	To deter Turkey from military operations against agent; to put the QP in the role of promoter of Rojava internal self-determination within the state of Syria.
2018-ongoing	PYD	Russia (QP)	To supplant the USA in Syria (as a part of Russian Grand Strategy); to build an image as a security provider and mediator; to exploit the PYD as an asset in transactional relations with Turkey.	

Note: KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party; KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government; PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan; PYD – Democratic Union Party; YBŞ – Sinjar Resistance Units; Rojava – Western Kurdistan, also known as Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; QP – quasi-patron.

local tribal and religious leaders who sought power, security, and material wealth in cooperation with external actors at the expense of developing the potential of their own population.

In this period Kurdish political entities did not have the possibility to establish successful cooperation

with more than one patron. In the case of the Mahabad Republic, it would have been difficult to convince the British to support a project perceived by their agent, Tehran, as hostile. Similarly, in the situation of the Iraqi Kurds in the 1970s – for the USA and Israel it was an impossibility to continue support

for the KDP when allied Iran withdrew its support. Other neighbouring states shared a perspective on Kurdish identity that denied its existence as a separate ethnicity.

The cooperation between the KDP and Iran during 1966–1975 is a significant example of a quasi-patron successfully gaining control over its proxy, even against other quasi-patrons (Israel and the United States). Iran used the advantage of structural conditions to impose full control over cooperation between the KDP and the other quasi-patrons (Bulloch and Morris 1992, 137–39; Borghard 2014, 182–83). This is an example of a situation where the mountainous nature of Kurdistan has brought both a tactical advantage and a deficit by making the possibility of contact with other quasi-patrons dependent on Iran's control of physical access. In this particular case, contacts with more than one quasi-patron did not reduce the asymmetry in the relationship with the patron. Therefore, it can be assumed that if there was any 'navety' in the decision-making process by the KDP, it was more about the insufficient commitment to seeking any agreement with the parent state. It could have been caused by a false sense of security provided by mountains and by the involvement of a global power, the United States, which was seen (incorrectly) as a guarantee for the support of Iran and Israel (Rafaat 2018, 108–9). Structural conditions ceased to play such a significant role after the US intervention in Iraq in 1991, which started the process of binding USA-KRG interests in Iraq.

In the period 1991–2003, Iraqi Kurdistan began to shape its various international roles: through military cooperation with the USA, it entered the role of a security provider. The KDP itself, due to gaining control over the Turkish-Iraqi border, became an intermediary in the illegal oil trade between the sanctioned Iraq and Turkey. This laid the foundation for the future role of the KRG as a trading partner for Turkey. The building of mutual trust allowed the KRG to act as a mediator later, for example, during a ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK. The consensus on state-building (interrupted by the civil war in 1994–1998) and relations with the USA made it possible for the KRG to assume the role of a legally functioning fed-

eral region in 2003, while preserving and extending internal sovereignty as a de facto state.

The presence of the USA in Iraq after the intervention in 2003 and the official status of the KRG allowed the Iraqi Kurds to develop its set of roles. The KRG started to play a significant role as a 'security provider' in the context of the war against terrorism. It helped to develop military cooperation with Western countries. This resulted in an increase in both the internal and external legitimacy of de facto statehood. The role of the 'economic partner' is important mainly in relations with Turkey: the KRG is trying to reduce the Turkish feeling of being threatened by the existence of Kurdish political agency. The quasi-patron's high profits from economic cooperation are perceived as protecting Iraqi Kurdistan from external intervention. At the same time, both Iraq and Syria face the emergence of the other Kurdish political entities (e.g., YBŞ – Sinjar Resistance Units; PYD – Democratic Union Party) which have ambitions to repeat the KRG path and establish non-isolated de facto states.

YBŞ and PYD have the ability to use sophisticated survival strategies such as the combination of mimicry and primacy of material facts over declarations, e.g. by a demonstration in both symbolism and external discourse of the intention of internal self-determination with the simultaneous empirical secession; reducing asymmetry by building the ability to cooperate with various entities, e.g. by engaging cooperation with parent states to increase the costs of Turkish military operations against the YBŞ in Sinjar (disputed territory between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq) and against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria established in 2012 by PYD in Syria. Cooperation with the parent state is necessary to reduce the negative effects in the case of withdrawal of the quasi-patron's support, and at the same time, it is necessary to achieve the main goal which is legalization of local de facto administration with its empirical sovereignty by the parent state.

### 3 Strategic Thought of the Kurdish Political Entities

For most of the nineteenth and almost the entire twentieth century, the population of geographical Kurdistan failed to build any lasting territorial subjectivity comparable to that of the Kurdish Federal

Region in Iraq. Kurdish vassal states could not survive because of the asymmetry of their potentials in relation to the Ottoman and Iranian empires. This was determined by structural isolation (i.e., landlockedness) and, in consequence, inability to maintain constant relations with other states (or even to pursue such relations at all). The long-term adoption of the role of a proxy agent shaped the collective strategic thought of the Kurdish political entities. This was expressed by balancing asymmetric interactions, which led to the transformation from proxy agents (objects) into the de facto state (subject) against the intentions of the quasi-patrons or patron. Diversification of relations with the quasi-patrons is vital for a non-state actor (both insurgency and de facto state) to survive. An insurgency can transform into a de facto state if it is able to maintain relations with more than one quasi-patron (asymmetry reduction by balancing) and at the same time gain lasting territorial control.

Cooperation between the quasi-patrons and the Kurdish political entities as an institution differs from common diplomacy because of a much deeper asymmetry that results from non-compliance with transnational principles, norms, and rules. Even if it is enacted by the representatives of the KRG and the quasi-patrons and visible in mutual interaction, the implementation of arrangements by quasi-patrons is still much less restricted by transnational norms than in the case of relations between full sovereign states. The result is a constant need to look for alternative quasi-patrons that will provide the necessary resources and security guarantees in exchange for, e.g., natural resources. Maintaining appropriate relations with other quasi-patrons is possible only when the de facto state is not a subject of effective operational control of the patron (as in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan's relations with Iran during 1961–1975).

The historical continuity of the role of a surrogate or an agent or a 'client' of external aid and the long-lasting practice of matching one's own political practice with the interests of quasi-patrons, shaped the present strategic thought behind the implementation of the Iraqi Kurdistan security policy. Repeated practices and the experience from past episodes of cooperation have shaped today's strategic thought. Iraqi Kurdistan is aware of its strategic limitations and the

asymmetry in relations with the quasi-patrons. Therefore, it seeks to reduce that asymmetry by avoiding isolation and looking for diversification of relations with the quasi-patrons by soliciting cooperation with as many sovereign states as possible and avoiding the point of no return in relations with any of the quasi-patrons and the parent state.

The practice and experience of being a proxy agent determine the fundamental problems that limit the effectiveness of the KRG security policy. This is observable by, e.g., specific territoriality (PUK-KDP duopoly) and obstacles to unification of administration and security forces that are connected with negative effects of rent-seeking and privileged role of Peshmerga within society (see Sosnowski 2019). Due to decentralization of the Kurdistan political agency, a multiplicity of political centres while maintaining some coherent references to the (pan)Kurdish identification; different Kurdish intra-groups could maintain relations with different regional rivals at the same time (e.g., KDP with Turkey, PUK with Iran) and, at the same time, pursue a coherent policy as a single entity within the KRG. On the one hand, this can increase the risk of a fratricidal conflict, but on the other hand, it was used as an asset. Decentralization of the KRG is an asset only if there is a strong mutual understanding of the common goal and absolutely and consistently coordinated action towards its implementation. The establishment of the KRG by KDP and PUK and its survival is an example of the common Kurdish strategic thought and effectiveness of its implementation.

The functioning of the KRG and its legal nature require that relations with external entities be implemented only through governmental institutions. The lack of unification of security instruments and the duplication of their competences by institutions outside the KRG control hampers the building of statehood and is a barrier to the implementation of security policy assumptions. However, it should be understood that it is difficult to get rid of them because they have been shaped over the centuries as a result of the role of proxy agent.

#### 4 Conclusions

The research has highlighted both long-term and short-term triggers of the role transformations of the Kurdish political entities. However, their effects would probably be completely different if not for the accompanying long-term triggers. The first combination was a short-term trigger of the Treaty of Erzurum (1823) and a long-term trigger of the Anglo-Russian rivalry (nineteenth century). The second was a combination of the US-led intervention in Iraq (1991) and the ability of the Iraqi Kurds to adapt, which resulted from the experience of being an object of strategic exploitation.

The experience of strategic exploitation showed the Kurdish Achilles' heel, which is the tendency to look for security in asymmetric contacts with external actors. The mountainous territory and cooperation with world powers gave a false sense of security. However, since 1992, Iraqi Kurdistan and since 2014 Rojava have developed their own security instruments that ensure their de facto internal sovereignty and encourage external entities to cooperate. In a practical dimension, it is reflected by implementing strategies to prevent isolation, e.g., by abandoning unilateral secession, diversifying relations with the quasi-patrons and maintaining benign and beneficial relations with the parent state as much as possible. The intention behind this is to reduce international isolation and avoid repeating the situation where the survival of the Kurdish political entity depends on the asymmetric relationship with a single actor – the patron. It can be perceived as a proof of independent strategic thought resulting from a long experience of strategic exploitation.

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