IIRF Reports

Thomas Paul Schirrmacher

The Case for the Autonomy and Statehood of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI/KRG)

A Consolidated Argument

2026/29

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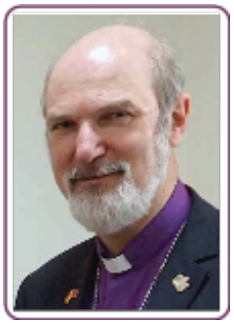
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CONTENTS

Preliminary remark 5
Introduction 5
1. A strong democratic mandate: the 2017 referendum 6
2. Why the question must be raised anew, right now 6
3. The Iraqi constitution and its systematic non-implementation 8
4. Kurdistan as a haven for minorities and a place of basic democratic rights 9
5. A reliable partner of Europe and the West 11
6. The international law of self-determination: the Montevideo criteria, ICJ jurisprudence, and the question of remedial secession 12
7. Precedents – useful for context, but to be used with caution 14
8. International and historical voices of support 15
9. The Kurdish diaspora in Germany – and the open question of the official KRG position 21
Appendix: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (map) 23



Flagpole at the Citadel of Erbil, Kurdistan © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

Preliminary remark

Although this article may be distributed or republished by organisations with which I am affiliated or that I lead, the views expressed here are entirely my own and do not represent the official position of any of these organisations.

Introduction

The Kurds – estimated at between 30 and 45 million people worldwide – are the largest people in the world without their own state. Their homeland stretches across four states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – and a further roughly two million Kurds live in Europe, of whom about 1.3 million are in Germany, many already in the second or third generation.

Years of cooperation with Kurdish associations in Germany allow one to say: their Kurdish origin matters to them, while at the same time they understand themselves as Germans and Europeans – and in doing so have proven to be reliable partners for democracy, minority rights, religious freedom, and equal rights. This cooperation goes back a long way: as early as 14 December 2015, the author delivered the keynote address to some 300 guests at Goethe University Frankfurt on the founding of the German-Kurdish Lawyers' Association (Deutsch-Kurdische Juristenvereinigung e.V.), where he called for the Kurds' right to self-determination.[1]

His engagement with the Kurdish question reaches back further still and is both scholarly and personal: he has studied the subject academically and remained in ongoing dialogue with Kurds in Germany and from all parts of the Kurdish-settled territories. As early as 1985, his publishing house for Culture and Science (Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft) published the "Kurdish Grammar" ("Kurdische Grammatik"), and it has since brought out numerous further books by and about Kurds; he himself has published articles on the subject as well.

In northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has developed since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 into one of the most stable democratic entities in the Middle East. The argument consolidated below rests on nine points: democratic legitimacy, the timeliness of the question, the systematic non-implementation of the Iraqi constitution, the protective role for minorities, the role as a partner of Europe, the international law of self-determination, the border question, international voices of support, the Kurdish diaspora – and, quite openly, the still-unresolved position of the Kurdish government itself.

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[1] "Germany: Founding of the German-Kurdish Lawyers' Association – Schirrmacher calls for the Kurds' right to self-determination at the founding of the German-Kurdish Lawyers' Association," Evangelical Alliance Germany, 14 December 2015; see also Polla Garmiany, „Kurdish lawyers in Germany aim to bolster lobbying power of Kurds," Rudaw, 29 June 2015.

1. A strong democratic mandate: the 2017 referendum

On 25 September 2017, the citizens of the Kurdistan Region voted in a referendum on their political future. According to the official result of the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (IHERC), 4,581,255 citizens were eligible to vote; 3,305,925 cast a ballot, a turnout of 72.16 percent. Of these, 2,861,471 (92.73 percent) voted yes and 224,468 voted no.[2]

Unlike many comparable processes in the region, the vote proceeded entirely peacefully – a democratic will expressed through ballot boxes rather than violence between population groups. For a Western audience that measures legitimacy first and foremost by democratic procedure, this is probably the single strongest argument for the Kurdish cause.

That Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran issued massive warnings beforehand, and that Baghdad subsequently declared the referendum unconstitutional, sent troops to Kirkuk, temporarily stripped the region of some of its powers, and cut budget transfers, changes nothing about the democratic quality of the vote itself.[3] That the Peshmerga withdrew in order to avoid bloodshed further speaks to the political maturity of the Kurdish leadership at that moment.

2. Why the question must be raised anew, right now

Since the referendum, almost nothing has been heard publicly on this topic – neither from the Kurdish government, which has grown reticent since the political fiasco that followed the referendum, nor from international politics. That is precisely what makes a renewed voice from outside important. Two recent developments give concrete occasion for this.

First, on 21 February 2024 Iraq's Federal Supreme Court ruled the eleven minority seats in the Kurdistan regional parliament unconstitutional – the court held that "the Kurdistan Parliament consists of one hundred members," thereby striking the seats reserved for Turkmen, Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs, and Armenians – and at the same time ordered that all oil and non-oil revenues be remitted to Baghdad.[4] Two days later, on 23 February 2024, the same court ruled that the

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[2] Official result of the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission (IHERC), quoted in "'Yes' vote wins by 92.7 percent in Kurdistan Referendum: Initial result," Kurdistan24, 27 September 2017, https://kurdistan24.net/en/story/372844 (4,581,255 eligible voters; 3,305,925 votes cast = 72.16 % turnout; 2,861,471 yes votes = 92.73 %; 224,468 no votes).

[3] Baghdad's response to the 2017 referendum (Art. 111 of the Iraqi constitution, deployment of troops to Kirkuk, budget cuts); see "2017 Kurdistan Region independence referendum," Wikipedia; "Iraqi Kurds set date for independence referendum," Al Jazeera, https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2017/6/8/iraqi-kurds-set-date-for-independence-referendum.

[4] "Iraq's top court rules against Kurdistan Region parliament minority seats," Rudaw, 21 February 2024, https://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/210220241323 (direct quote from the court: "The Kurdistan Parliament consists of one hundred members").



Thomas Schirrmacher with His Excellency First Ahmed, Minister of Justice of Kurdistan © ISHR

federal government must pay the salaries of the roughly 1.2 million KRG employees directly; according to Finance Minister Taif Sami, payment was to begin "as soon as the formal payroll is received from the Kurdish authorities" – the ruling thus formally obligated Baghdad, while in practice remaining dependent on the KRG's cooperation.[5]

In March 2024 the court's chief justice, Jassim al-Umairi, himself had to clarify publicly: "salaries must be paid in cash to the remaining employees who have not completed the localization process due to technical procedures until the complete localization of salaries is achieved" – technical delays in account registration, in other words, were no justification for withholding salaries.[6] Because Baghdad continued to delay payments, Kurdish employees had to go to court again: on 14 July 2025 the Federal Supreme Court once more heard arguments on interim injunctions for monthly payment.[7] That one and the same basic-rights question – Kurdish civil servants' claim to their wages – had to occupy the courts

5 "Iraqi government to pay KRG employees per top court's order," The New Arab, 23 February 2024, https://newarab.com/news/iraqi-government-pay-krg-employees-top-courts-order (quote from Finance Minister Taif Sami).

6 "KRG salaries must be paid regardless of technical issues: Federal court head," Rudaw, 19 March 2024, https://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/190320241 (direct quote from Jassim al-Umairi, Chief Justice of the Federal Supreme Court).

7 "Federal Supreme Court to Hear Lawsuits Over Delayed Salaries in Kurdistan Region," PUKmedia, 10 July 2025, https://pukmedia.com/EN/Details/78530 (hearing date 14 July 2025).

twice within eighteen months is itself clear evidence that the constitutional reality in Baghdad does not function.

A second possible occasion lies closer in the future: in September 2027 the independence referendum will mark its tenth anniversary.



Lalisch Baba Chauish and Thomas Schirrmacher at the central Yazidi sanctuary in Kurdistan © ISHR

3. The Iraqi constitution and its systematic non-implementation

The 2005 Iraqi constitution recognizes Kurdistan as an autonomous federal region and guarantees it far-reaching rights that Baghdad, however, consistently undermines. Article 4 establishes Arabic and Kurdish as equal official languages. In practice, Arabic dominates the administration, and in July 2025 Iraq's Ministry of Higher Education even banned the use of Kurdish in university exam answers in the disputed territories (Kirkuk, Mosul, Diyala). The responsible KRG ministry stated unambiguously: "This policy violates Article 4 of the Iraqi Constitution, which recognises Kurdish as an official language," calling the measure discriminatory; after protests by Kurdish academics and parliamentarians it was partially reversed.[8]

Even more serious is the blocking of Article 140. Its wording obligates the Iraqi state explicitly and without discretion: "Full authority for implementation shall be exercised by the federal government … to achieve the results of normalization, census, and a final referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed areas within the specified timeframe ending on 31 December 2007"[9]. That deadline passed nearly two decades ago without normalization, census, or referendum having taken place; Iraq's own Federal Supreme Court has repeatedly confirmed that Article 140 nonetheless remains in force and is to be implemented.

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8 "Iraq Bars Kurdish Language in University Exams in Kirkuk, Mosul, and Diyala," Kurdistan24, July 2025, https://kurdistan24.net/en/story/854003/; "KRG: Kurdish Language Ban Violates Iraqi Constitution," Kurdistan Regional Government, July 2025, https://gov.krd/mohe-en/activities/news-and-press-releases/2025/july/krg-kurdish-language-ban-violates-iraqi-constitution/ (direct quote from the KRG).

9 Constitution of the Republic of Iraq (2005), Art. 140, quoted in "Article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Article_140_of_the_Constitution_of_Iraq; on its continued validity see "Iraq's Supreme Federal Court: Article 140 on disputed areas 'remains in effect'," Kurdistan24, https://kurdistan24.net/en/story/380289.



The Minister for Religious Affairs of Kurdistan, H.E. Dr Pishtiwan Sadiq, grants Thomas Schirrmacher an audience © ISHR

Add to this Baghdad's control over export pipelines and budget funds, as well as – as shown above – the repeated blocking of salary payments. These violations do not warrant looking away: a central government that overshoots a constitutional deadline it set itself, unambiguously, by nearly twenty years, yet selectively invokes the same constitution whenever it suits it, raises serious doubts about its legitimacy to decide alone about Kurdistan's future.

4. Kurdistan as a haven for minorities and a place of basic democratic rights

A central argument for the Kurdish cause lies in the region's role as a comparatively safe space in a conflict-ridden environment – and this can be captured precisely along several dimensions, not merely in general terms as "minority protection": religious freedom, women's rights, press freedom, a pluralistic party system, parliamentary structures, and regular, competitive elections. During the advance of the so-called Islamic State from 2014 onward, according to the organization Refugees International, roughly 850,000 internally displaced people from central and southern Iraq fled to the region, along with a further approximately 215,000 Syrian refugees – together more than a million people, of whom roughly half a million alone went to Dohuk governorate, predominantly members of religious minorities, especially Christians and Yazidis.[10]

[10] Refugees International, "Waiting for Winter: Displaced Iraqis in the KRI," 2014, https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/waiting-for-winter-displaced-iraqis-in-the-kri/ (ap-

The UK Parliament's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG FoRB), led by Jim Shannon MP, visited the region in February 2026 together with Aid to the Church in Need UK and met Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, who told the delegation that around 90 percent of Iraq's remaining Christians now live in the Kurdistan Region.[11] The delegation's report states that it was "impressed with the significant work undertaken by the KRG" to promote coexistence and the integration of religious minorities into society, documents land donated free of charge by the KRG for the construction of churches – such as the Chaldean Catholic Church of St. Peter and Paul and the Syriac Orthodox church in Ankawa – and, in recommendations 14–19, urges the government to continue this policy.[12]

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) likewise notes in its reports that the region's displacement camps are predominantly inhabited by religious minorities who fled ISIS, while at the same time criticizing unresolved property disputes involving Christians in the disputed territories.[13] On 7 March 2021, as part of his Apostolic Journey to Iraq, Pope Francis made a point of visiting Erbil, where he was received by President Barzani with a protocol equal to that of a head of state, and publicly thanked the region for opening its arms to Christians displaced from Mosul, the Nineveh Plain, and Qaraqosh; his Mass at Franso Hariri Stadium was the largest public event of his entire Iraq trip.[14]

In fairness, this picture also includes: in 2023 the minority quotas in the Kurdistan regional parliament themselves became a point of contention, when Christian parties protested their abolition – a reminder that minority protection in Kurdistan, while comparatively strong, is not automatic.[15]

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prox. 850,000 IDPs from central Iraq plus approx. 215,000 Syrian refugees, as of October 2014).

11 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (APPG FoRB) & Aid to the Church in Need UK, APPG FoRB Iraq Report 2026, p. 18 (meeting with Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, 16 February 2026).

12 Ibid., p. 21 (KRG land donations for church construction) and pp. 24–26 (recommendations 14–19 to the KRG; quote from recommendation 14: "impressed with the significant work undertaken by the KRG to promote co-existence and integration of religious minorities into society").

13 US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Annual Report 2024, Iraq, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/Iraq.pdf; USCIRF, "Issue Brief: Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq 10 Years After ISIS's Genocide," September 2024, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/2024%20Iraq%20Genocide%20Issue%20Brief.pdf.

14 Fazel Hawramy, "Pope Francis thanks President Barzani for protecting Christians during ISIS war," Rudaw, 3 March 2021, https://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/07032021; "The Relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the Vatican," Kurdistan Regional Government, https://gov.krd/english/news-and-announcements/posts/2021/march/pope-franciss-visit-to-the-kurdistan-region/.

15 "ASIA/IRAQ – Minority quota in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region abolished: Christian parties appeal to President Abdul Latif Rashid," Fides, http://www.fides.org/de/news/74829.



A delegation of archbishops from various churches at the Union of Islamic Scholars in Erbil, Kurdistan © IIRF

5. A reliable partner of Europe and the West

Kurdish forces were the international coalition's most important ground force in the fight against ISIS – the Peshmerga in Iraq, the YPG in neighboring Syria. Cooperation with the German armed forces (Bundeswehr), the United States, and NATO proceeded in coordinated fashion and without major friction. NATO formally joined the anti-ISIS coalition in 2017 and took over coordination of training support for the Peshmerga.[16]

Germany continues to this day to maintain more than 500 soldiers in Erbil and Baghdad under NATO and coalition missions; the Bundestag extended the mandate in late 2025/early 2026 through 31 December 2027, with a budget of €109 million for 2026 alone. Since 2014, Germany has provided more than three billion euros in security and humanitarian assistance to the region and continues to support the unification of Peshmerga command structures.[17]

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[16] "NATO joins anti-ISIS coalition, will coordinate support for Peshmerga," Rudaw, 26 May 2017, https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/26052017-amp.

[17] "German Parliament Extends Troop Deployment in Kurdistan Region Until End of 2027," Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/890796/; see also German Bundestag, resolution recommendation on extending the Bundeswehr mission in Iraq, https://bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2026/kw05-de-bundeswehr-irak-1136956.



Erbil Citadel, Kurdistan: view of the bazaar © Schirrmacher

Through their fight, Kurdish forces made a substantial contribution to protecting European security interests, and the areas they liberated became an anchor of stability in a highly unstable region. This is also directly in Europe's interest: containing Islamist groups, protecting religious minorities, energy partnership, stabilizing northern Iraq, migration prevention, and economic cooperation are concerns that Europe and a strengthened, reliable Kurdish self-administration directly share. An independent or substantially more autonomous Kurdistan would therefore lie not only in the interest of the Kurds but demonstrably also in the interest of Europe.

6. The international law of self-determination: the Montevideo criteria, ICJ jurisprudence, and the question of remedial secession

In practice, Kurdistan meets the classic criteria of statehood. The 1933 Montevideo Convention defines the state as a subject of international law in Article 1 by reference to a "permanent population," a "defined territory," a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states; this so-called three-element doctrine is regarded in international-law scholarship as customary international



Lalisch Baba Chauish and Thomas Paul Schirrmacher at the central Yazidi sanctuary in Kurdistan © Schirrmacher

law, which the Convention merely codified.[18]

The right of peoples to self-determination, according to the settled jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), is a binding foundational principle of international law with erga omnes effect – the ICJ affirmed this in the 1971 Namibia advisory opinion, the 1975 Western Sahara advisory opinion, the 1995 East Timor judgment (Timor-Leste), the 2004 Wall advisory opinion concerning the Palestinian territories, and most recently in the 2019 Chagos advisory opinion.[19] In its 2010 Kosovo advisory opinion, the ICJ further held that unilateral declarations of independence do not, as such, violate international law.[20]

A general, enforceable right to secession cannot, however, be derived from the right to self-determination under the prevailing doctrine; what is discussed is only the possibility of so-called remedial secession as a last resort, where a people is durably and fundamentally denied internal self-determination and subjected to serious human-rights violations. A 2026 international-law thesis submitted at Johannes Kepler University Linz reaches a cautious conclusion: international law does offer arguments that could support Kurdish aspirations for independence, but it does not yield a secure and enforceable legal claim to secession – a unilateral declaration of independence would, under the Kosovo advisory opinion, not be unlawful, but Kurdish statehood founders above all on the absence of political support from the international community of states, not on

[18] Convention on Rights and Duties of States, Montevideo, 26 December 1933, Art. 1, LNTS 3802, 165; Arian Gargari, Kurdische Unabhängigkeitsbestrebungen aus Sicht des Völkerrechts [Kurdish Aspirations for Independence from the Perspective of International Law], thesis, Institute for International Law, Air Law and International Relations, Johannes Kepler University Linz (supervisor: Birgit Haslinger), March 2026, p. 24.

[19] ICJ, Legal Consequences for States of the Continued Presence of South Africa in Namibia, Advisory Opinion, ICJ Reports 1971, 21 ff.; ICJ, Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion, ICJ Reports 1975, 12 ff.; ICJ, East Timor (Portugal v. Australia), Judgment, ICJ Reports 1995, 102 ff.; ICJ, Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, ICJ Reports 2004, 171 ff.; ICJ, Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965, Advisory Opinion, ICJ Reports 2019, 128 ff.; summarized in Gargari (n. 18), pp. 39 f.

[20] ICJ, Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo, Advisory Opinion, ICJ Reports 2010, 436 ff.

international law itself.[21] A markedly more affirmative study published in 2020 in the International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation, by contrast, concludes that there is "significant support for the Kurdish right to self-determination," because the Kurds as a people have suffered "exceptional circumstances of extreme and prolonged oppression," "without any effective alternative than secession as a remedy"[22]. These two assessments – one cautious, the other affirmative – honestly mark the range of academic opinion rather than concealing it.

Independently of this, no conceivable solution touches Iraq's internationally recognized borders in a manner comparable to other secession cases: the Iraqi constitution itself designates the region's territory as a distinct federal entity; for the few disputed territories it explicitly obligates the state to a resolution that Baghdad has stalled for years. That delay cannot be attributed to Kurdistan.

It also remains telling that even today's Autonomous Region was not decided upon by the Kurds themselves, but traces back to UN Security Council Resolution 688 of 5 April 1991, in which the Council "condemns" the repression of the Iraqi civilian population, "demands an immediate end to the repression," and "calls for unrestricted access for international humanitarian organizations to all areas of Iraq" – the United Nations and the US-led coalition subsequently established the no-fly zone from which today's Autonomous Region de facto developed.[23] When the region first voted democratically on its own future in 2017, this triggered protests worldwide, as though something wrongful had been done.

7. Precedents – useful for context, but to be used with caution

A look at other recent state formations – Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo, South Sudan, Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor) – shows readers that new states are indeed recognized internationally when the political and legal preconditions are met. These cases are expressly not to be understood here as identical precedents, but as evidence that recognition is possible.

An important difference from practically all the cases named must, however, be stated openly: in every one of them there was either a substantial number of states actively supporting the separation, or a government of the territory concerned that itself officially sought independence – usually both. In Kurdistan's case, the regional government has remained largely silent on this question since the fiasco that followed the 2017 referendum, albeit understandably so given the harsh response from Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran.

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21 Gargari (n. 18), pp. 54 f. (conclusions).

22 Pasar Abdulkareem Fendi, Salawati Mat Basir, Hakar Abdulkarim Findi, Hazhar Othman Rahman, "The Right to Self-Determination of Kurds in Iraq: Perspectives International Law," International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation, Vol. 24, Issue 5 (2020), p. 2397.

23 UN Security Council, Resolution 688 (1991) of 5 April 1991, https://unscr.com/en/resolutions/688/.



Baharka refugee camp in Kurdistan © ISHR

A recent analysis, written eight years after the referendum, aptly describes the KRG's strategy since then as a shift from immediate independence toward economic and institutional development – independence remains a distant goal but is presently set aside.[24] This restraint is politically understandable and matches the academic finding cited above (Section 6) that practical enforceability founders more on international support than on international law itself; but it does qualify how far the precedents cited apply to the Kurdish case, and it is addressed openly in the final section of this paper.

8. International and historical voices of support

The list of those who have spoken in favor of Kurdish statehood, or at least its serious consideration, is long and ranges from civil-society organizations to Western parliaments. Historically, the claim reaches back to the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which, in Section III ("Kurdistan," Articles 62–64), gave the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited areas east of the Euphrates the possibility, within a year, of separating from Turkey by majority vote with the consent of the Council of the League of Nations: "If … the Kurdish peoples … shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a ma-

[24] "Eight Years Later, Kurdistan Continues to Work Toward Independence," The Middle East Uncovered, 2025, https://www.themiddleeastuncovered.com/p/eight-years-later-kurdistan-continues.

jority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation."[25]

This clause never took effect because Turkey never ratified the treaty; it was replaced in 1923 by the Treaty of Lausanne, which contained no Kurdish rights whatsoever. The fifteen-point autonomy agreement concluded between Baghdad and the KDP in 1970, the Kemalist promise of 1919/1920 to Kurdish representatives, and the protective zone established after the 1991 Gulf War pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 688 all show a recurring pattern: Kurdish autonomy has historically been promised repeatedly without ever becoming full statehood.



Portrait of Mustafa-Barzani (1903–1979)
© Schirrmacher

At the political level, support for Kurdish statehood spans Israel, the US Congress, and European parliaments alike. Then-Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu stated on 13 September 2017, shortly before the referendum, that Israel "supports the legitimate efforts of the Kurdish people to attain a state of its own"[26]. Other senior Israeli figures went further, both before and after: former Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar wrote in the Jerusalem Post on 12 June 2017 that "Israel should recognize Kurdistan and try to persuade the US to welcome a state for the Kurds as well"[27]; Minister for Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi said on 24 May 2018, "we wish the Kurds to implement all their ambitions, and to be independent"[28]; and Likud Knesset member Yoav Kisch submitted a Knesset

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25 Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920), Section III "Kurdistan," Art. 64, quoted in Riza Dinç, Die kurdische Frage und das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Völker [The Kurdish Question and the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination], master's thesis, Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Bonn (supervisor: Christian Hillgruber), August 2005, Appendix 4, p. 98.

26 Statement by the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, 13 September 2017, quoted in "Netanyahu Says Israel Endorses Independence for Kurds," VOA News, 13 September 2017, https://www.voanews.com/a/netanyahu-israel-endorses-independence-for-kurds/4027190.html.

27 Gideon Sa'ar, statement to The Jerusalem Post, 12 June 2017, quoted in "Ex-Israeli Interior Minister calls Israel, US to support Kurdistan independence," Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/371720/Ex-Israeli-Interior-Minister-calls-Israel%2C-US-to-support-Kurdistan-independence.

28 Tzachi Hanegbi, Israeli Minister for Regional Cooperation, 24 May 2018, quoted in "We want people of Kurdistan to succeed, gain independence: Israeli Official," Kurdistan24, https://



Thomas Schirrmacher visits the Rabban Hormizd Monastery in Kurdistan © IIRF

motion that same month arguing that "Israel must lead and support the Kurdish effort to establish an independent state"[29].

Within the US Congress, in roughly chronological order: Rep. Jared Polis (D-CO) told the House on 31 July 2014 that, should Iraqi Kurds seek to separate from what he called "the failing Iraqi State," "I strongly encourage America to promptly recognize a new, independent Kurdistan"[30]. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), then chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats, wrote in the Washington Times on 26 July 2017 that "it is long since past time that we recognize the Kurdish people as an independent nation and not a subjugated province of Iraq"[31]. Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ) introduced H.Res. 534 on 25 September 2017, "Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the people of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have the right to determine their status as a sovereign country," arguing "the United States is obligated to support their bid for independence – if it is in our national interest"[32]. Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) declared on 27 September 2017 that "the Kurds should have an independent state as soon as possible"[33]. Rep. Steve King (R-IA) said on 28 April 2018 that "the Kurdish peo-

www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/376002/We-want-people-of-Kurdistan-to-succeed%2C-gain-independence%3A-Israeli-Official.

29 Yoav Kisch (Likud), Knesset motion, May 2018, quoted in "MK pushes Israel to recognize Kurdistan as an independent state," Jewish Coalition for Kurdistan, https://www.jcfk.org/newsroom/334-mk-pushes-israel-to-recognize-kurdistan-as-an-independent-state.

30 Congressional Record, House of Representatives, 31 July 2014, remarks of Rep. Jared Polis (D-CO), Vol. 160, https://www.govinfo.gov/link/crec/160/h/7145.

31 Dana Rohrabacher, "Give Iraqi Kurds a Nation They Can Call Their Own," The Washington Times, 26 July 2017, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jul/26/give-iraqi-kurds-a-nation-they-can-call-their-own/.

32 H.Res. 534, 115th Congress (2017-2018), "Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the people of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have the right to determine their status as a sovereign country," introduced by Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ), 25 September 2017, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-resolution/534; see also "Rep. Trent Franks Introduces Bill Backing The Kurds' Right To An Independent State," The Daily Caller, 25 September 2017, https://dailycaller.com/2017/09/25/rep-trent-franks-introduces-bill-backing-the-kurds-right-to-an-independent-state/.

33 "Schumer Calls On Administration To Back An Independent Kurdish State," press release, Office of Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, 27 September 2017, https://www.

ple have earned their independence, by defending themselves and by defending others who needed their defense"[34]. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) told Kurdish-Americans in Dallas on 20 February 2018: "There should be an independent Kurdistan in the Middle East"[35].

Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) asked on social media on 5 January 2020, after the Iraqi parliament had voted to expel foreign troops, "Maybe it's time for a fully independent #Kurdistan in what is currently Northern #Iraq?"[36] – a position he did not repeat after becoming US Secretary of State in 2025: in a meeting with KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani that May, the State Department's own readout spoke only of "a strong and resilient [Kurdistan Region] as a foundational pillar" of the US-Iraq relationship, with no mention of independence[37].



Ministry of Religious Affairs of Kurdistan
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Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, called in March 2025 for "an independent Kurdistan stood up as part of the landmass that is Syria" – a statement about Syria's Kurds, not the Iraqi KRG, but still illustrative of continuing Congressional sentiment[38]. Two former senior US officials went further after leaving office: former National Security Advisor John Bolton said in a January 2023 interview that "an independent Kurdistan is in U.S. interest," and repeated in February 2024 that "the best thing for the interest overall in the region is an independent Kurdistan"[39]; and former Secretary of State Mike

democrats.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/schumer-calls-on-administration-to-back-an-independent-kurdish-state.

34 Statement of Rep. Steve King (R-IA), 28 April 2018, quoted in Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/375685.

35 Statement of Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) at the Reagan Day Dinner, Dallas, 20 February 2018, quoted in Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/374820.

36 Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), social media post, 5 January 2020, quoted in Rudaw (Turkish edition), https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/categories/world/1158988.

37 US Department of State, readout of Secretary of State Marco Rubio's meeting with KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, 23 May 2025, mirrored at https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2025/iraq-250523-state01.htm.

38 Statement of Rep. Brian Mast (R-FL), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, March 2025, quoted in Rudaw, https://www.rudaw.net/english/categories/world/856432 (statement concerns Syria's Kurdish-held areas, not the Iraqi KRG).

39 John Bolton, interview, 26 January 2023, published in Rudaw, 24 March 2023, https://www.rudaw.net/english/categories/interview/1076443; John Bolton, statement of 27 February 2024, quoted in Channel8, https://channel8.com/english/news/9597.



Winding roads leading to Hormizd Monastery in Kurdistan © Schirrmacher

Pompeo wrote in the New York Post on 20 May 2025 that "America should respect the legitimacy of the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, in which 93 percent of Iraqi Kurds chose independence"[40].

In fairness, the pattern itself is instructive: nearly all of these statements came from individual members of Congress speaking for themselves – clustered mostly around the 2017 referendum – or from former officials after leaving office. No sitting US administration has endorsed Kurdish independence since 2017; a 2020 Congressional Research Service report instead describes consistent US policy as supporting Kurdish autonomy within Iraq's existing constitutional framework rather than secession.[41]

Support in Europe has come from national and European parliaments alike. Charles Tannock, then a British Conservative MEP, pledged in The Telegraph on 21 September 2017 to back Kurdish independence if the referendum passed,[42] and chaired a cross-party group of MEPs, the European Friends of Kurdistan, which declared on 20 September 2017 that "a strong, democratic, politically inclusive Kurdistan will be a factor for stability in the Middle East" and called for "recognition and respect for the aspirations of the Kurdish people"[43]. Estonian politician Indrek Tarand, at the time a research fellow at Tallinn's International Centre for Defence and Security, argued already on 20 April 2016 that "the areas north and east of Mosul should be inter-

40 Mike Pompeo, "The Kurds deserve better – how the US can support an ally's bid for freedom," New York Post, 20 May 2025; quoted in "The Kurds Deserve Better: Pompeo Urges U.S. to Support Kurdish Autonomy," Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/841522/the-kurds-deserve-better-pompeo-urges-us-to-support-kurdish-autonomy.

41 Christopher M. Blanchard, Iraq: Issues in the 116th Congress, Congressional Research Service, Report R45633, updated 17 July 2020, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45633.html.

42 Charles Tannock, "The history of Kurdistan: why Britain owes a debt to the Kurdish people," The Telegraph, 21 September 2017, reproduced by the Jewish Coalition for Kurdistan, https://www.jcfk.org/opinion/119-the-history-of-kurdistan-why-britain-owes-a-debt-to-the-kurdish-people.

43 European Friends of Kurdistan (European Parliament group chaired by Charles Tannock MEP), statement of 20 September 2017, quoted in "Pro-Kurdish European Parliament group expresses support for Kurdistan referendum," Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/372746/Pro-Kurdish-European-Parliament-group-expresses-support-for-Kurdistan-referendum.



A delegation of archbishops from various churches at the Union of Islamic Scholars in Erbil, Kurdistan © IIRF/Martin Warnecke

nationally recognised as an independent Kurdistan"[44]. Swedish MP Fredrik Malm (Liberal People's Party) said on 2 June 2017, "I support Kurdistan independence one hundred percent," adding that Sweden's government should "recognize Kurdistan as an independent state"[45].

British Conservative MP Jack Lopresti, chair of the UK Parliament's All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Kurdistan Region, said on 17 January 2018 that Kurdish statehood should be "seriously considered" if Baghdad kept violating the constitution; by a Westminster Hall debate on 6 March 2019, however, his position had grown more cautious – he affirmed the Kurds' "right to self-determination" while adding that independence "might" come "one day … but not for now and perhaps not for a very long time"[46], illustrating, much as with Senator Rubio above, that individual enthusiasm for independence has cooled

[44] Indrek Tarand, "Apologia for a Kurdish State," International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Tallinn, 20 April 2016, https://icds.ee/en/apologia-for-a-kurdish-state/.

[45] Fredrik Malm (Liberal People's Party), quoted 2 June 2017 in Kurdistan24, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/371626.

[46] Jack Lopresti, "Kurdish statehood a serious option should Iraq continue to violate constitution," Kurdistan24, 17 January 2018, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/374272/Kurdish-statehood-a-serious-option-should-Iraq-continue-to-violate-constitution; Jack Lopresti, remarks in the Westminster Hall debate "Kurdistan Region in Iraq," House of Commons, 6 March 2019, Hansard, https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-03-06/debates/2DEBF969-9EE9-4BB0-9BED-8CEA201FAC27/KurdistanRegionInIraq.

into caution over time. At the European Parliament itself, the dispute between Baghdad and the KRG has also been raised directly: a 2023 parliamentary question explicitly addressed the dispute between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.[47] Solid, up-to-date European Parliament resolutions specifically on Kurdish statehood are, however, still lacking and should be added in a future version of this paper.

Corresponding voices also come from the Kurdish movement within Turkey: Fayik Yağızay of the pro-Kurdish DEM Party called in 2025 for institutionally anchoring international recognition of Kurdish self-administrations[48] – evidence that the demand for autonomy is alive within the broader Kurdish movement beyond the Iraqi KRG, though this should be read as an independent political voice, not as a position of the Iraqi KRG itself. The Society for Threatened Peoples (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, GfbV) called on the German federal government on 15 September 2017 to support the Kurdish wish for independence from Iraq, arguing that "when Kurds now wish to take their destiny into their own hands, this is understandable," while also insisting that any future Kurdish state constitutionally protect the rights of Yazidi, Assyrian, Turkmen, and Shabak minorities.[49]

9. The Kurdish diaspora in Germany – and the open question of the official KRG position

The Kurdish Community of Germany (Kurdische Gemeinde Deutschland, KGD) understands itself as a democratic, cross-party representative body for Kurds in Germany. It explicitly advocates a peaceful solution, democracy, the rule of law, minority protection, federalism where it works, self-determination in accordance with the UN Charter, and an internationally accompanied solution, and rejects every form of violence and terrorism.[50] This moderate, democratically grounded stance of one of Europe's largest Kurdish diaspora organizations – around 1.3 million people of Kurdish origin live in Germany alone – is itself an argument: it shows that the demand for Kurdish self-determination is bound up not with radicalism but with the very same democratic and rule-of-law values that also sustain European societies.

During a short speech at the KGD's Newroz reception in Berlin in March 2026, attended among others by former Thuringian Minister-President Bodo Ramelow,

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47 "Dispute between Iraqi Federal Government and Kurdistan Regional Government," Parliamentary question E-003498/2023, European Parliament, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-003498_EN.html.

48 Fayik Yağızay (DEM Party), 2025: "Institutionally anchoring international recognition of Kurdish administrations," Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/53584/die-kurdische-frage-braucht-eine-politische-loesung.

49 Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker (Society for Threatened Peoples), "Bundesregierung soll den Wunsch der Kurden nach Unabhängigkeit vom Irak unterstützen," 15 September 2017, https://www.gfbv.de/?p=15084.

50 Cahit Başar, Secretary-General of the Kurdish Community of Germany, email to Thomas Schirrmacher, 7 August 2026.

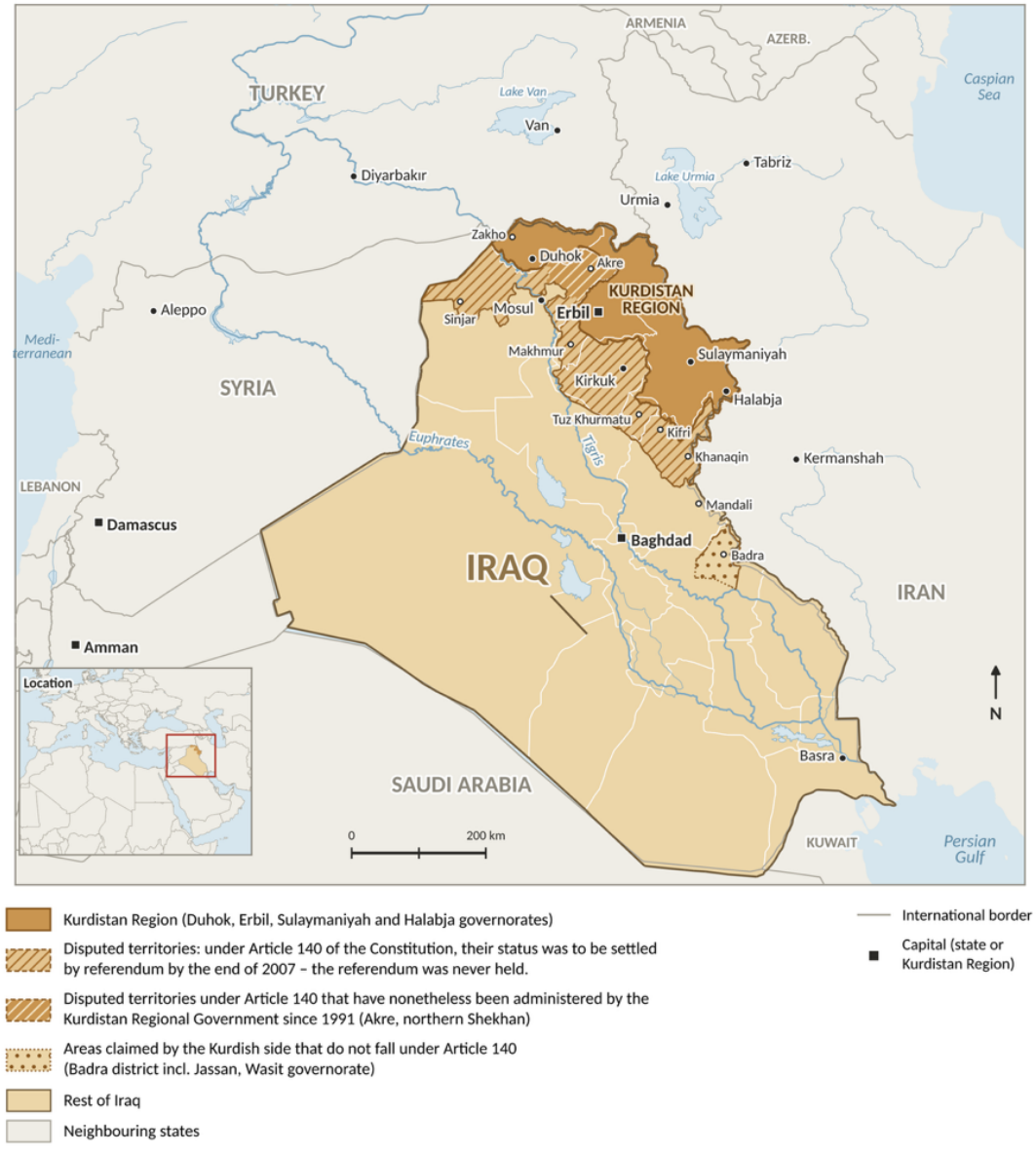
Federal Minister Karin Prien, and KRG Head of the Foreign Relations Department Falah Mustafa Bakir, a call for Kurdish autonomy received strong applause from the audience[51] – an informal but clear signal that a large part of the Kurdish community shares this position, at least in part.

In fairness, however, it must be stated openly here: unlike Somaliland, where the government there has actively and publicly campaigned for international recognition for decades, there is currently no up-to-date, publicly documented official KRG position in favor of full statehood – only an older, cautious statement dating from around the time of the 2017 referendum. Should the KRG in future officially adopt such a position, it would be a decisive additional building block for the argument made here.

[51] "Berlin Newroz Reception of the KGD with Ramelow, Prien, Aras, and Schirrmacher," Bonn Profiles, https://bonn-profiles.net/?p=12348.

Appendix: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (map)

Location, neighbouring states and disputed territories under Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution



Simplified, district-level depiction. Only the northern part of Shekhan district is under Kurdish administration.
The Article 140 territories also include Mandali (Baladruz district, Diyala governorate); Makhmur was Kurdish-administered 1991–2017.
Base data: geoBoundaries (CC BY 4.0), Natural Earth (public domain).

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