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Juan Carlos Castillo Quiñones[*]
Nohemi Echeverria Vicente[**]

(De)securitizing Kurdish Politics in Iraq? The Kurds in the Post-1991 Political Context[***]

[*] Centro de Estudios de Asia y África, El colegio de México, e-mail: jcastillo@colmex.mx, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3942-2342

[**] Vrije Universiteit Brussel, e-mail: nohemi.echeverria@vub.be, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0623-5631

Abstract

Research on the security interdependencies between Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) tends to conclude that the Kurdish question in Iraq has been gradually normalized since 1991. Despite the growing number of studies focusing on the KRG, to our knowledge, none have examined the KRG's complex web of security interdependencies involving Turkey and the Iraqi central government from a desecuritizing approach. Using a revisionist interpretation of the Copenhagen School's model of securitization, this paper empirically examines (de)securitizing moves as applied by Iraq and Turkey to Iraqi Kurdistan. We refer to (de)securitization as the synchronous enactment of desecuritization alongside securitization discourses and practices that, in fact, might introduce more violence into politics and exacerbate protracted conflicts. The discursive evidence shows that Iraq and Turkey have normalized substantial dimensions of their security interactions with the KRG. However, other dimensions of the Kurdish question in Iraq have remained securitized. We use the figure of splitting speech acts to show the simultaneity of securitizing and desecuritizing discourses/

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practices towards Iraqi Kurdistan. We conclude that these synchronous movements have artificially divided the Kurdish territory, its leadership, and population. We end by discussing how desecuritization, as a selective process, has introduced more violence into Iraqi Kurdish politics and the implications for scholarship interested in the Kurdish question.

Keywords

securitization, desecuritization, Kurdistan Regional Government, Kurdish question, Iraq, Turkey

Introduction

In the last decades, many studies have emerged tracking the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) capabilities, behavior, and the political impact of its de facto statehood.[1] However, scholarship that discusses the political nature of the KRG tends to analyze it from a state-centric approach. Namely, scholars tend to view the KRG as a monolithic unit with a common set of interests.[2] These interpretations do not fully explain how the multiple nature of interactions between state and non-state actors directly impacts the political situation of ordinary Kurds within Iraq.[3] Despite the growing number of studies focusing on the KRG, to our knowledge, none have examined the KRG's complex web of security interdependencies involving Turkey and the Iraqi central government from a desecuritizing approach. In these accounts, desecuritization refers to reversals in the perception of the KRG as an existential threat, meaning a supposed improvement in the political position of the Iraqi Kurds vis-à-vis the Iraqi and Turkish governments after its de facto statehood.

Studies aiming to understand the Kurdish question in Iraq have endorsed positive assessments of the post-1991 desecuritization trend.[4] On the one hand, the violence perpetrated against the Kurds can be attributed to the partition of Kurdistan and the subsequent development of securitizing discourses and practices towards the Kurdish populations by their host states. On the other hand, although a desecuritization process of the Kurdish question took place in the region during the 1990s, we argue that many dimensions of the Kurdish political sphere remained securitized in both Iraq and Turkey.

1. Y. Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq From insurgency to statehood*, Routledge 2014; O. Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State*, Lynne Rienner Publishers 2012; D. Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq*, Syracuse University Press 2010; G. Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy*, Routledge Curzon 2003.

2. G. Stansfield, *The unravelling of the post-First World War state system? The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the transformation of the Middle East*, "International Affairs", 2013, Vol. 89, Issue 2, pp. 259–282, DOI: 10.1111/1468-2346.12017.

3. M. Charountaki, *State and non-state interactions in International Relations: an alternative theoretical outlook*, "Brit-

Moreover, no study of the Kurdish question in Iraq has outlined the potential negative consequences of viewing the desecuritization of the KRG as something inherently positive. Most studies do not critically assess the diverging strands of securitizing/desecuritizing practices and discourses involved in overarching (de)securitization processes. Therefore, this study does not take this process for granted as a necessarily positive outcome. We refer to (de)securitization as the synchronous enactment of desecuritization alongside securitization practices that "might introduce more violence into security politics and, in fact, exacerbate protracted conflicts."[5] These negative consequences are generally absent in the security analyses of the Kurdish question in Iraq vis-à-vis the Iraqi and Turkish governments. Therefore, this paper supports further discussion of the normative implications that the desecuritization strategy has had on Iraqi Kurdistan.

Using a revisionist interpretation of the Copenhagen School's model of securitization,[6] this article examines (de)securitizing movements as applied to Iraqi Kurdistan by Iraq and Turkey. In analyzing these movements, we propose to empirically investigate two implications of Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard's theoretical reasoning: 1) the artificial division that (de)securitizing discourses create between Kurdish populations and contested territories, and 2) the violence it has brought about in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Our main argument is that changes in the political perception of the Kurds in Iraq have only taken place as the simultaneous enactment of securitizing and desecuritizing moves. That is, in practice, there is no such thing as a complete normalization of the political situation of the Kurds in Iraq, but rather a complex discursive reframing of the Kurdish question by Turkey and the Iraqi central government since 1991. Faced with the emergence of the KRG as a de facto political entity in 1992 and the US invasion of Iraq, both governments were forced to accept its existence and gradually desecuritize selected dimensions of their interactions with the Kurdish leadership. Desecuritization moves were directed mainly at promoting economic cooperation with the KRG. Simultaneously, however, these moves kept other realms of the Kurdish political sphere, areas of the Kurdish territory, and other organizations and sectors of the Kurdish population highly securitized.

In this study, we conclude that ontological, temporal, and normative biases have prevailed in the understanding of the relationships between the KRG, Iraq, and Turkey. To overcome these biases, we use the figure of *splitting speech acts*[7] to demonstrate that there is no general desecuritization process of the Kurdish question in Iraq. Rather, there are quite selective desecuritizing discourses and practices that have introduced more violence into Iraqi Kurdish politics.

ish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies", 2018, Vol. 45, Issue 4, pp. 528–542, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2018.1430530.

4. See for instance: Ö.K. Pusane, *The role of context in desecuritization: Turkish foreign policy towards Northern Iraq (2008–2017)*, "Turkish Studies", 2019, Vol. 21, Issue 3, pp. 392–413, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2019.1675047.

5. J. Austin, P. Beaulieu-Brossard, *(De)securitization dilemmas: Theorising the simultaneous enaction of securitization and desecuritization*, "Review of International Studies", 2018, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 301–323, DOI: 10.1017/S0260210517000511.

6. O. Wæver, *Politics, security, theory*, "Security Dialogue", 2011, Vol. 42, No. 4/5, pp. 465–480; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press 2003; B. Buzan, O. Waever, J. De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers 1998.

7. J. Austin, P. Beaulieu-Brossard, *(De)securitization dilemmas...*, op. cit., pp. 301–323.

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Theoretical Framework

Securitization refers to situations where the use of exceptional measures is legitimized against an issue labelled as an existential threat. In that sense, securitization is a research program that analyzes (de)securitization processes, i.e., securitizing and desecuritizing discourses and practices that are simultaneously enacted. The Copenhagen School's model of securitization offers the traditional account of this process. The model identifies what, when, and how an issue is securitized; that is, displaced from the sphere of normal politics to constitute a security issue. According to Buzan et al., a situation or issue can be non-politicized (not constituting a threat or not subject to policymaking), politicized (subject to policymaking), or securitized (presented as an existential threat and subject to measures outside normal politics to address it).[8]

The securitization theory is based on identifying the assumptions and collective beliefs that shift an agenda from a non-politicized to a security status. It requires an authority (e.g., Iraqi or Turkish government officials) to frame an issue as an existential threat to a referent object (e.g., Turkish/Iraqi territorial integrity) or collective subject (Turkish/Iraqi nation). The securitization move is accomplished only when a relevant audience accepts the endorsement of extraordinary measures to address the named threat.[9] Securitization is, in this sense, a "security grammar" found in textual artefacts known as speech acts.[10] Speech acts label an issue as an existential threat by pushing all other agendas aside and compelling the use of exceptional measures. In this case study, a securitization act is carried out when, by arguing a sense of priority and urgency of containment, some securitizing actor (e.g., governments and political elites) label something as an imminent existential threat (e.g., the Kurds) for some referent object (e.g., the territorial integrity or ethnic identity of the nation) through discursive tools and speech acts.

On the other hand, desecuritization was first defined as "a failed securitization move in which a target audience no longer accepts portraying an issue as a threat."[11] Desecuritization is, thus, a process in which a political community no longer considers an issue as a threat, stopping or reducing the calls for emergency measures to handle it. Later studies reinforced the view that desecuritization is an ontological and ethical counterpoise to exceptional security politics (securitization). Post-Waever, authors broadened the concept, suggesting that issues could be deliberately desecuritized by normative stances and ethico-political moves that reject the realm of exceptional measures. As a result, current understandings of desecuritization embrace a normative stance that expects as its outcome a return to normal, peaceable political negotiation. Aradau's notion of desecuritization as *emancipatory politics* is central to this more normatively minded vision.[12]

8. B. Buzan, O. Waever, J. De Wilde, *Security: A New...*, op. cit., p. 23.

9. Ibidem, pp. 23–27.

10. J. Austin, P. Beaulieu-Brossard, *(De)securitization dilemmas...*, op. cit., pp. 305–306.

11. O. Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, in: *On Security*, ed. R. Lipschutz, Columbia University Press 1995, p. 56.

12. See: C. Aradau, *Security and the democratic scene: De-securitization and emancipation*, "Journal of International Relations and Development", 2004, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 388–413, DOI: 10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800030.

Later researchers have questioned essentializing views on desecuritization movements. These studies showed that an empirical reading of desecuritization reveals its manifold expressions in practice. The alleged removal of an issue from the sphere of exceptional measures into normal politics can take place through the stabilization of a conflict, the replacement of one security issue for another, the resolution of the threat in question through political channels (rearticulation), and the depoliticization of an issue (silencing).[13] Different expressions of desecuritization, however, do not necessarily address the incompatibilities at the core of the securitization process, raising doubts about the positive potential of desecuritization moves.

Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard have developed the most comprehensive critique of prevailing normative and linear interpretations of the Copenhagen School's premises. They structure the critique on three grounds: methodological, temporal, and ontological. We focus on the latter two in this paper. Temporal biases refer to how understandings of securitizing and desecuritizing moves as being mutually exclusive – one pertaining to the realm of exceptional politics and the other to normal politics – lead to the illusion of the latter being derivative of the former. Desecuritizing moves, however, do not possess an essentially linear temporality. Rather, securitization and desecuritization practices often come together through splitting speech acts. This understanding provides a more dynamic approach when examining security interactions. When analyzing the 2009-2015 peace process between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Rumelili and Çelik, for instance, found that "rhetorical moves that recognized the legitimacy of Kurdish claims […] have always been followed by counter-statements reproducing the official narratives" (i.e., securitizing the Kurdish question).[14] We argue that cases like those in Turkey and Iraq can provide evidence of Kurdish desecuritization speech acts being simultaneously enacted at the very moment that securitization occurs, "without a lapse of time."[15] Therefore, instead of talking about a desecuritization process in Iraqi Kurdistan, we refer to it as (de)securitization.

Ontological biases refer to how the different elements of a (de)securitization process (securitizing actor, referent object, subject, and audience) are essentialized. This is particularly problematic for the referent subject because it is often assumed and portrayed as homogeneous. These assumptions are best captured in desecuritization movements. Here, conditions for the desecuritization of the referent subject are enunciated without considering the complexities and overlapping identities that constitute it.[16] Once more, Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard used the figure of a splitting speech act to illustrate how desecuritizing moves often involve deliberate efforts to prevent an issue from being rein-

13. See: L. Hansen, *Reconstructing desecuritization: the normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it*, "Review of International Studies", 2012, Vol. 38, Issue 3, pp. 525–546, DOI: 10.1017/S0260210511000581.

14. B. Rumelili, A.B. Çelik, *Ontological insecurity in asymmetric conflicts: Reflections on agonistic peace in Turkey's Kurdish issue*, "Security Dialogue", 2017, Vol. 48, Issue 4, p. 290, DOI: 10.1177/0967010617695715.

15. J. Austin, P. Beaulieu-Brossard, *(De)securitization dilemmas...*, op. cit., p. 310.

16. Ibidem, p. 315.

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tegrated into the conventional political sphere. Instead, these strategies aim to "split" supposed threats into "more or less threatening parts, requiring more or less extraordinary measures"[17] to address them.

Revisiting perspectives argue that, within securitization processes, societies are continuously re-defined and artificially divided between moderates and hardliners by more powerful external actors. By creating this division, desecuritization establishes the conditions to consider a segment of the population as potentially reconcilable and to be treated through "normal politics," while other sectors of the population are securitized and treated with extraordinary measures.

Securitization and desecuritization movements receive separate treatment in current academic literature, leading to a normative problem. This separation gives rise to the assumption that desecuritization movements are inherently positive; however, this view overlooks the fact that such moves are enacted as an external and artificial imposition on the referent subject. Desecuritization discourses serve as an instrument to segment a society between "who or what is to be securitized against (hardliners) and who is potentially reconcilable (desecuritizable)."[18] However, historical evidence shows that the external division of ethnic communities creates an environment conducive to protracted conflicts, including instances of genocide.

In this article, we use the term (de)securitization to refer to the simultaneous enaction of securitizing/desecuritizing moves. This is a way to differentiate it from its traditional nomenclature that separates them into two differentiated and exclusive processes. The term desecuritization move is used here to refer to alleged setbacks of an issue as an existential threat, while securitization explains the discursive process involved in labelling something as such.

The Securitization of the Kurds and the Kurdish Question in Iraq

The securitization of Kurdish identity is linked to the processes of state formation in the Levant and Persian Gulf following the end of the Ottoman Empire. During the Ottoman period, ethnicity was not a relevant cleavage, as political life was structured around confessional affiliation. In the early 1920s, however, France and Britain encouraged the creation of ethnically defined states where some ethnicities were regarded as legitimate holders of political privileges, while other ethnic groups were labelled as "minorities" and securitized accordingly. Modern nation-states were established in former Ottoman provinces, and the Kurdish territories were split among Turkey, Syria, and Iraq in the aftermath of World War I.

17. Ibidem, p. 304.

18. Ibidem, p. 302.

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The newly imposed order was not entirely impervious to transgression, and a process of spatial contestation began, with the Kurds challenging the fixed borders. Several Kurdish insurrections broke out across Kurdistan, aiming to contest the post-war political order. In Iraq, Sheikh Mahmoud Barzanji revolted against the British in 1919 and again in 1922 when he declared the Kingdom of Kurdistan. The rebellion was a milestone in the history of Kurdish nationalism.[19] Other revolts emerged in Iranian and Turkish Kurdistan, displaying a convergence of nationalist and religious motivations (e.g., Ismail Agha's 1919 revolt in Iran or Sheikh Sa'id's uprising in Turkey in 1925). The states framed these uprisings as manifestations of Kurdish "tribalism" and dismissed any political aspirations behind them.[20] Kurdish activism was successfully suppressed by the end of the 1920s in Iran, and Turkey brutally crushed its last Kurdish rebellion in Dersim in 1938.[21]

Eventually, the uprisings led to the formation of a collective sense of Kurdish identity. Public spaces, landmark Kurdish cities, myths, and historical narratives played an important role in the political formation of Kurdistan as a contested space and identity marker – Kurdishness.[22] Several Kurdish organizations emerged in the twentieth century, varying in their strategies for accessing political autonomy and cultural rights. Each movement in the region devised different political projects and ideologies to achieve its goals. However, the transnational dimension of the Kurdish question turned Kurdish movements into a singular cross-border security dilemma that needed to be contained regionally.

The emergence of a contesting Kurdish ethno-nationalism led to the labelling of the Kurds as an existential threat to the nascent Middle Eastern states. Turkey, Iran, and Iraq sought to contain the Kurdish struggle through regional security mechanisms such as the Pact of Saadabad in 1937. The Pact validated the strategic use of a pre-existing colonialist view of Kurdistan as a "backward" region[23] and a source of sedition and regional insecurities. The agreement solidified the mutual interest of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran to securitize the Kurds on a regional, trans-border basis. The Pact pledged mutual assistance in suppressing any cross-border guerrilla movement – namely, a Kurdish one – operating in their respective territories. Later, the Middle East Defense Organization (1951) and the Baghdad Pact (1955) were designed to enhance security against potential communist infiltration in the region, although, in practice, both were also used to contain any trans-border Kurdish guerrilla.

This prevailing security approach toward the Kurds during the Cold War was encouraged by Western interests. Western conceptions of security manifested in a top-down military approach[24]

19. W. Jwaideh, *The Kurdish national movement: its origins and development*, Syracuse University Press 2006, p. 181.

20. See: K. Soleimani, *The Kurdish image in statist historiography: the case of Simko*, "Middle Eastern Studies", 2017, Vol 53, Issue 6, pp. 949–965, DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2017.1341409.

21. See: M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structure of Kurdistan*, Zed Books 1992.

22. Kurdishness is related to experiences and chronicles of injustice and repression that helped to forge a collective identity – *Kurdayetî* – and a sense that Kurds must rely on themselves, rather than on national governments, to protect and promote their political interests and collective aims. See: W. Gourlay, *Kurdayetî: Pan-Kurdish Solidarity and Cross-Border Links in Times of War and Trauma*, "Middle East Critique", 2018, Vol. 27, Issue 1, pp. 25–42, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2017.1411110.

23. See for instance: M. Yeğen, *The Turkish State Discourse and the Exclusion of Kurdish Identity*, "Middle Eastern Studies", 1996, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 216.

24. See: P. Bilgin, *Regional security in the Middle East. A critical perspective*, Routledge 2005.

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aimed at maintaining the stability of allied regimes in the Middle East. However, rather than primarily deterring Soviet expansionism, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq directed their resources to counter perceived internal threats. The Cold War provided these states with both the means and justifications to securitize pluralism in defense of a homogeneous ethnic nationalism.

In Iraq, a Kurdish political movement consolidated between 1961 and 1970, mobilizing broad sectors of Kurdish society. The perception of Kurdistan as a fragmented colony further propelled the Kurds into a self-determination struggle. Previously, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had been founded by the Barzani family in 1946, managing to control large swathes of territory and establishing itself as the main Kurdish force in Iraq. In 1970, the Iraqi government offered an agreement to the Kurds, promising self-government and proportional participation in the state's representative institutions. However, the talks collapsed due to disagreements over the status of the oil-rich province and city of Kirkuk.

The failure of negotiations in the 1970s triggered the beginning of a phase of maximum securitization of the Kurds in Iraq. In 1974, Baghdad unilaterally announced a Law of Autonomy for the Kurds, excluding Kirkuk and other regions demanded by Kurdish nationalists. The Kurdish leadership rejected the Law, and armed confrontation with the government resumed on an unprecedented scale. As a result, the Iraqi government initiated an extensive Arabization campaign in Kirkuk, during which thousands of Kurds were expelled and relocated to southern parts of Iraq, known as strategic villages.[25]

In the context of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Iraqi regime carried out a genocidal campaign under the code name "Anfal" to punish the Kurds for their support of Iran. The repression included massive deportations and the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja. Halabja drew international attention to the Kurdish question and triggered intense responses from the Kurdish diaspora and pan-ethnic solidarity bonds. A sense of Kurdishness, or Kurdish collective identity, was strengthened, with the Kurds seeing themselves as part of a larger aggrieved community that extended far beyond Iraq. The phase of intense securitization only ended in 1991 with the transformation of the Kurdish movement into a quasi-state project,[26] paving the way for an apparent desecuritization of the Kurdish question in Iraq.

25. M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and...*, op. cit., p. 31.

26. D. Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State...*, op. cit.

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The Aftermath of the Gulf War and KRG's (De)-securitization Process

The desecuritization of the Kurdish question in Iraq began in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991. This process was closely linked to the formation of a Kurdish statelet in "Bashur" (Southern Kurdistan). The outcomes of the war with Iran and the subsequent Kuwaiti crisis changed the entire nature of the Kurdish movement in Iraq. The Iraqi defeat fostered a massive Kurdish uprising in 1991. The United States established a no-fly zone for the Kurdish areas that provided the power and resources to set up a de facto autonomous region in these zones. This context granted the Kurds the opportunity to dismantle the Iraqi administrative apparatus and establish the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992.

Since then, the desecuritization of the Kurdish political realm in the region has taken place as a *stabilization* and *replacement* process.[27] On one hand, stabilization refers to how contingent factors, such as dramatic changes in the regional or international context, can lead to a decrease in the intensity of the so-called existential threat. On the other hand, replacement removes an issue from the sphere of exceptional politics, while "another securitization takes its place."[28] The establishment of the KRG triggered the stabilization of certain dimensions of the Kurdish question beyond Iraq. These dimensions included the KRG leadership, parts of Iraqi Kurdistan territory, and sectors of the Kurdish population identified as "moderates." However, at the same time, other dimensions of the Kurdish political spectrum were either replaced or continued to be handled as security issues. In Turkey, for instance, the PKK has remained labelled as a terrorist group to delegitimize its political strategies and downplay Kurdish narratives based on ethnic distinction.[29] Similarly, in Iraq, Kirkuk and the disputed territories have been reframed as potential threats to Iraq's territorial integrity.[30]

The most visible desecuritizing movement was the stabilization of the KRG, which evolved from being viewed as a "threatening" Kurdish guerrilla movement to a "desecuritizable" institutionalized project. The establishment of the KRG was facilitated by both political developments within Iraqi Kurdish politics and significant changes in the regional context. On one hand, early attempts at unity in Kurdistan were hindered by the factional intra-Kurdish war of 1994. However, efforts to unify resumed in 1998 with the signing of a US-brokered peace agreement. The two main Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), reached power-sharing agreements that encouraged a state-building process. By prioritizing negotiation over conflict, these Kurdish parties adapted their strategies to align with

27. L. Hansen, *Reconstructing desecuritization...*, op. cit., pp. 525–546.

28. Ibidem, p. 529.

29. See: B. Rumelili, A.B. Çelik, *Ontological insecurity...*, op. cit.

30. H.H. Hama, *Politization of Kurdish Security in Iraq since 2003*, "Jadavpur Journal of International Relations", 2015, Vol. 19, Issue 2, pp. 137–158, DOI: 10.1177/0973598416639414.

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the demands of external actors, thereby securing access to international aid, power, and international recognition.

On the other hand, the Kurdish statehood process was further advanced by the US invasion of Iraq and its alliance with the Kurds. From 2003 to 2017, mainstream narratives framed the Kurds as regional allies against Islamic extremism and as key partners for countering Iranian influence in Iraq. For the US, the KRG served as a "security provider,"[31] allowing Iraqi Kurds to circumvent their previous isolation and foster military cooperation with Western countries. The post-Baathist environment radically transformed Kurdish interactions with regional players following the constitutional recognition of the KRG. In order to avoid conflict with US interests, Iraqi and Turkish policymakers were compelled to incorporate the KRG's interests into their political agendas and officially acknowledge its existence within the borders of Iraq.

Splitting Speech Acts and the (De)securitization of the Kurdistan Regional Government

As stated earlier, splitting speech acts are discursive strategies that attempt to artificially divide social reality in a dichotomous manner (i.e., bad Kurd/good Kurd). In this context, desecuritizing strategies generate zones of tension and ambiguity that benefit the most powerful actors. In conflicts characterized by antagonistic encounters between competing narratives, the articulation of one party's dominant narrative entails the construction of the opposing side's account as illegitimate and threatening.[32] Thus, the desecuritization of the KRG failed to transform the us/them binary at the core of the Kurdish question.

KRG's desecuritization process took place through splitting narratives of the referent subject (the Kurds). In the post-1991 context, discursive strategies aimed at stabilizing the KRG in the region were enunciated by both members of the international community and the KRG leadership itself. The narrative sought to differentiate Iraqi Kurdistan from a more antagonistic and antidemocratic neighborhood to guarantee its de facto recognition. The desecuritizing movements used the "democratic experiment,"[33] "victimhood,"[34] and "liberal bulwark"[35] discourses to lobby for the recognition of the KRG in Western countries. In a commentary for the Wall Street Journal, the then KRG President Barzani claimed:

"I am proud that the Kurdistan Region is both a model and gateway for the rest of Iraq. Our difficult path to a secular, federal democracy is very much inspired by the US [...]. [We] remain proud of what the Kurdistan region is today: a thriving civil society in the heart of the Middle East."[36]

31. P. Sosnowski, *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*, "International Journal of Conflict and Violence", 2022, Vol. 16, pp. 1–13, DOI: 10.11576/ijcv-5688.

32. B. Rumelili, A.B. Çelik, *Ontological insecurity...*, op. cit., p. 6.

33. See: Y. Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation...*, op. cit., pp. 70-81.

34. See: B. Baser, M. Toivanen, *The politics of genocide recognition: Kurdish nation-building and commemoration in the post-Saddam era*, "Journal of Genocide Research", 2017, Vol. 19, Issue 3, pp. 404–408.

35. In reference to the KRG, the UK government concluded that "(it) is a genuine democracy, albeit an imperfect and still developing one, and a beacon of tolerance and moderation in a wider region where extremism and instability are on the rise. Its values are broadly our values." See: *UK Government Policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, UK Parliament 2014, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/

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The memory of "Anfal" and Halabja granted the Iraqi Kurdish political elites enough legitimacy for their claims for autonomy and guarantees for Kurdish rights. The expansion of KRG's oil sector and the provision of security were linked to a narrative of economic growth and democratic Kurdish governance. The international aid directed to the Kurdistan Region in the 1990s and from the UN-sponsored Oil-for-Food Program (OFFP)[37] led to an economic boom. These developments encouraged splitting speech acts in the international community that portrayed Iraqi Kurdistan as an emergent democracy coexisting with a chaotic and authoritarian Iraq.

Encouraged by the new geopolitical background, between 2005 and 2014, the KRG began to act as a quasi-state.[38] Economic and political stability were the main bargaining tools for the Kurdish elites to seek political recognition. Between 1998 and 2015, the KRG's negotiation capabilities strengthened with the establishment of a power-sharing agreement between the PUK and the KDP and their commitment to build a viable polity in *Bashur*. The first moves to desecuritize the KRG's policies were carried out by the United States and Turkey in the mid-nineties. Stability in the Kurdistan Region offered advantages for both Washington's foreign policy goals in Iraq and Ankara's energy and security concerns regarding its own Kurdish "problem."[39] Moreover, for Turkey, the desecuritization of the KRG facilitated its fight against the PKK militias, which had established a stronghold in the Qandil Mountains of the Kurdistan Region.

So far, this narrative seems to point to a broad emancipatory trend of desecuritization of the Kurdish question in Iraq. However, as part of accommodating the KRG to Turkish and Iraqi political agendas, not all Kurdish actors and realms were considered "non-threatening" by Iraq and Turkey. What occurred was a simultaneous enaction of (de)securitizing moves aimed at identifying which Kurds/Kurdish organizations and territories would remain securitized and which were potentially reconcilable. As a result, Kurdish leadership and the population were externally and artificially divided between "hardliners/terrorists" and "moderates." In order to examine this process, we will investigate how (de)securitizing moves were enacted by both Turkey and Iraq.

Turkey

Since the 1960s, Turkish foreign authorities have presented the possible emergence of a Kurdish autonomous region in Northern Iraq as an existential threat to Turkey. The PKK's use of Iraqi Kurdistan as a headquarters and the gradual transformation of the Iraqi Kurdish guerrilla into a de

cmfaff/564/56409.htm#n76, (access 11.03.2021).

36. M. Barzani, *Kurdistan is a Model for Iraq*, The Wall Street Journal 2008, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122645258001119425, (access 15.07.2021).37. See: Y. Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation...*, op. cit.

38. According to Sosnowski, from 2005 onwards, Iraqi Kurdistan can be conceptualized as a non-isolated de facto state. See: P. Sosnowski, *Path Dependence from...*, op. cit., p. 6.

39. J. Jüde, *Contesting borders? The formation of Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto state*, "International Affairs", 2017, Vol. 93, Issue 4, pp. 847–863, DOI: 10.1093/ia/iix125.

facto state were perceived in Ankara as potential destabilizing factors. In the 2000s, this perception partially changed in the minds of Turkish policymakers.[40]

Turkey-KRG relations initiated a process of desecuritization in the economic sector beginning in 2007. Turkish authorities shifted their framing of the KRG from viewing it solely as a security threat to recognizing it as a commercial partner. The transformation of the KRG into a key US ally in 2003 was pivotal in this change of perception. At the same time, the re-election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2007 also led to a decrease in the military's role in Turkish foreign policymaking. According to Serhun, a more "nuanced understanding" of Turkish nationalism[41] allowed for the accommodation of the KRG's existence within Turkish public discourse. Furthermore, the Turkish government began improving its political and economic relations with neighboring countries[42] alongside what seemed to be a serious commitment to European Union accession. Finally, accelerated Turkish economic growth necessitated access to new sources of energy and a revised approach to the Kurdish question. The KRG became the cheapest source of hydrocarbons and an alternative to the Turkish business sector's dependence on Russian and Iranian hydrocarbons.[43]

The KRG's portrayal as an economic partner gained acceptance among a broad Turkish audience,[44] especially in the financial sector and among some groups seeking a political solution to the Kurdish question. Desecuritizing strategies were manifested in stabilizing narratives and symbolic gestures between Turkish and Kurdish high-level authorities. For example, during President Barzani's visit to Turkey, the KRG presidency noted that "the visit was simultaneous with raising the flag of Kurdistan at the Istanbul airport."[45] This gesture, marking the first official recognition of the KRG as an economic partner in the region, seemed to indicate a gradual moderation of the Turkish elite's discourse towards the Kurds in Turkey.[46]

Driven by financial concerns, the Turkish economic elite was at the forefront of reframing the political discourse towards the Kurds in Iraq. Investments, pipelines, oil, and gas became the main topics redefining the tone of the relations. Turkish Kurdish policy coincided with Barzani's interests in using oil exports and foreign investment to transform the KRG into the new "Dubai" of the Middle East. In 2011, the first visit of a Turkish Prime Minister to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region occurred for the opening of the Turkish Consulate and the International Airport in Erbil.[47] In 2013, Barzani paid a historic visit to Diyarbakir, in the Kurdistan region of Turkey, where mutual references of brotherhood set the tone of the encounter. Erdoğan's message to Barzani was a "welcome to the Turkish Republic,

40. See: Ö.K. Pusane, *The role of context...*, op. cit., pp. 392–413.

41. S. Al, *Elite Discourses, Nationalism and Moderation: A Dialectical Analysis of Turkish and Kurdish Nationalisms*, "Ethnopolitics", 2015, Vol. 14, Issue 1, pp. 94–112, DOI: 10.1080/17449057.2014.937638.

42. M.B. Altunışık, L.G. Martin, *Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East Under AKP*, "Turkish Studies", 2011, Vol. 12, Issue 4, pp. 569–587.

43. See: Ö.K. Pusane, *Desecuritization of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards Northern Iraq: Actor, Context and Audience*, Conference paper, ECPR General Conference 2017.

44. See: ibidem.

45. *President Erdogan invites KRG to Turkey to discuss Region's economic situation after "very good meeting" with President Barzani*, Rudaw 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/260220172, (access 21.05.2021).

46. K.F. Toktamis, *A peace that wasn't: friends, foes, and contentious re-entrenchment of Kurdish politics in Turkey*, "Turkish Studies", 2018, Vol. 19, Issue 5, pp. 697–722, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2018.1500139; S. Al, *Elite Discourses, Nationalism...*, op. cit., pp. 94–112.

the land of your brothers" while Barzani stated "Long live Turkish and Kurdish brotherhood. Long live peace. Long live freedom."[48] The meetings helped to redirect the Turkish political agenda on the Kurds towards a narrow normalization process expressed mainly in terms of economic cooperation.

At the same time, other dimensions of the Kurdish question in Iraq remained securitized, such as the possible annexation of Kirkuk to KRG jurisdiction and the PKK's presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. Soon it became clear that KRG's desecuritization was not unconditional or encompassing the whole Kurdish question. The relationship with the KRG was dependent upon the Kurdish leadership's commitment to maintaining intact the internal borders of Iraq.

Turkish authorities were always careful to advance their energy interests with the KRG while keeping cordial relations with the Iraqi central government and supporting it in its conflict with the Kurds over the disputed territories. Therefore, they advanced the idea of economic cooperation with the KRG while respecting territorial integrity and partnership with the Iraqi central government. Analysts close to Ankara presented these exchanges as beneficial for the three parties involved:

"The pipelines (in northern Iraq) are expected to bring in revenue, increase interdependence, and so serve peace and stability between Turkey and Iraq, and also serve unity within Iraq, since both Kurds and Shiites would benefit from the agreement."[49]

As the events following the 2017 Kurdistan referendum demonstrated, Turkish policymakers seem determined to prevent the creation of a Kurdish state by making Erbil economically dependent on Ankara. In terms of political discourse, Turkey replaced the KRG leadership with the PKK as the securitized element of its referent subject. In this sense, the Turkish authorities evoked splitting speech acts regarding the Kurdish question to create a clear division between the threatening, violent PKK and the reconcilable KRG. The discursive replacement of security concerns aimed to create an artificial perception that Turkish policy was not anti-Kurdish but rather against the PKK's armed struggle. Turkish splitting speech acts legitimized vigorous military campaigns against the PKK while simultaneously framing the KRG as a commercial partner and a Kurdish political ally in the fight against "terrorism."

The KRG tried to accommodate Turkey's demands by echoing Turkish discourses and concerns. In official statements and interviews, members of the KRG signaled their disapproval of the PKK's

47. On this occasion Erdoğan expressed "We consider this to be a very historic moment. We believe that this visit will build a very solid bridge in bilateral relations between Iraq and Turkey and between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey especially." See: *Barzani and Erdogan Open Erbil Int'l Airport and Turkish Consulate*, Iraq Business News 2011, https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2011/03/31/barzani-and-erdogan-open-erbil-intl-airport-and-turkish-consulate/, (access 15.06.2021).

48. *Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani urges support for peace process in Diyarbakir rally with Turkish PM*, Hurriyet Daily News 2013, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iraqi-kurdish-leader-barzani-urges-support-for-peace-process-in-diyarbakir-rally-with-turkish-pm-58028, (access 10.07.2021).

49. M. Yetkin, *Kurdish dreams might come true, through oil pipelines*, Hurriyet Daily News 2013, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/kurdish-dreams-might-come-true-through-oil-pipelines-57994, (access 10.17.2021).

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presence in Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani stated "We will use all methods including pressure to deter the PKK from launching cross-border attacks."[50] Furthermore, the KRG Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs highlighted that the "PKK must stop destabilizing and escalating tensions in the area to allow life to return to the people of the region."[51] In fact, Turkey enforced a quasi-patron relationship on the KRG,[52] turning it into a proxy in its war on the PKK. In recent years, the strategy has involved other political actors such as the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, both framed by the Turkish authorities as agents serving PKK directives. Military incursions have also spread to northern Syria, leading to the de-Kurdification of the Afrin region in 2018.[53]

In that sense, the desecuritizing conditions imposed on the KRG were bound up with Ankara's border concerns, which collided with the transborder dimension of the Kurdish question. Thus, Turkish (de)securitizing movements toward the KRG made demands that artificially divided its political space and population into a perverted notion of "bad Kurds" and "good Kurds."

Kirkuk, with its significant Turkmen population, became another bone of contention in Turkey-KRG relations. Concerns about the inclusion of the oil-rich province in the KRG's jurisdiction marked a red line for the Turkish authorities. Soon, Erdoğan made it clear that his alliance with the Kurds had the Kirkuk issue as a primary condition and opposed the KRG's attempts to define Kirkuk as a Kurdish province: "Turkey, by no means agrees with the rhetoric 'Kirkuk belongs to the Kurds.' Kirkuk Belongs to Turkmens, Arabs, Kurds, and all who live there. Therefore, do not claim 'Kirkuk belongs to us' or […] you will ruin your relations with Turkey."[54] He even asserted that "Kirkuk is historically a Turkmen city regardless of whether some accept it or not."[55]

The outbreak of the Syrian war destabilized the regional context, making Turkey's policy of desecuritization towards the KRG more difficult to sustain. At the same time, the balances imposed on the KRG proved in practice impossible to maintain, both in light of the economic crisis that has gripped the Kurdistan Region since 2014 and the failure of the peace process in Turkey in 2015. Finally, the KRG independence referendum in September 2017 completely re-securitized Turkish-KRG relations. Thereafter, Turkey's policy towards the KRG has been aimed at seriously limiting the KRG's aspiration to statehood while simultaneously avoiding a political vacuum in Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, while the political relations with the KRG deteriorated due to the referendum, the economic ties between the KRG and Turkey were not broken but remained tense. After the KRG's intentions regarding the referendum went public, Erdoğan expressed his dissatisfaction and asserted: "You [the

50. *Masoud Barzani says won't allow PKK to operate from Iraqi Kurdistan*, Ekurd Daily 2012, http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/4/turkey3893.htm, (access 22.08.2021).

51. A. Zaman, *KRG PM: Talk of Iraqi Kurdish independence red line for Iran, but not Turkey*, Al-Monitor 2016, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/12/krg-iraq-kurdistan-region-nechirvan-barzani-iran-turkey.html, (access 05.11.2024).

52. See: P. Sosnowski, *Path Dependence from...*, op. cit., pp. 1–13.

53. F. Saeidi, D. Osmanzadeh, *Colonial sovereignty and religious necropolitics: The sacred victimization of infidel Kurds in the Middle East*, "Ethnicities", 2024, Vol. 0, No. 0, p. 12, DOI: 10.1177/14687968241287204.

54. *Kirkuk Belongs to Turkmens, Arab, Kurds, and All Who Live There*, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2017, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/74612/kerkuk-kurtlerindir-safsatasina-turkiye-olarak-uymuyoruz, (access 22.10.2021).

55. *Kirkuk is Historically a Turkmen city*, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye 2017, https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/74615/16-nisan-is-dunyasi-nin-kaderini-ilgilendiren-bir-secimdir, (access 22.10.2021).

KRG]. […] Take those flags immediately and continue your path only with Iraq's national flag. Or else, you will have to go back on your current position."[56]

From 2017 onwards, Turkey's policy towards the KRG has been based on deterring narratives, military incursions and threats of retaliatory action. Deterring narratives have been stated in ultimatum terms, such as threatening to close the "tap" of the pipeline that transports Kurdistan's oil to global markets.[57] Moreover, Turkey initiated in 2018 a series of military campaigns -known as Claw operations- aimed at fully securitize the border regions of Iraqi Kurdistan.[58] Consequently, the KRG authorities have been forced to fulfil the unilateral conditions imposed by Turkish (de)securitizing movements. Thus, through splitting narratives, the Turkish authorities have introduced a series of (de)securitization moves that both benefit their agenda of militarizing the Kurdish question in Turkey, limit the KRG's scope for action and, at the same time, create a buffer zone between northeast Syria -Rojava- and Iraq.

Iraq

In the case of Iraq, Kurdish issues were constitutionally desecuritized in the context of a post-Baathist federal system. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution included an official recognition in Article 117 of the KRG as an autonomous entity. Moreover, Article 140 provided a legal formula to resolve historical conflicts between the Kurds and the Iraqi state. Specifically, it outlined the jurisdiction over disputed territories, such as Kirkuk, through normalization (the return of Kurds who had been expelled from their regions from February 1963 until April 2003), a census, and local referendums. Kurdish was also declared an official language in Article 9, and the Constitution allowed the KRG to maintain its own security forces (peshmerga), recognizing them as the patrols of the Kurdistan region.

While many of the rights and demands of the Kurds were formally recognized in the 2005 Constitution, its key provisions have been overlooked or blatantly violated. In practice, the Kurdish question was not fully transferred to the sphere of normal politics. Some Kurdish demands were subject to negotiation with the central government, while the resolution of others remained stalled.

Stalemate and political paralysis characterized Kurdish-Iraqi relations from 2005 to 2014, and no single substantial political issue was resolved between them. The best example of how certain dimensions of the Kurdish question remained securitized was the issue of Kirkuk and the execution of Article 140. The Iraqi government used Kirkuk as a splitting narrative to transform the centraliza-

56. *Kirkuk Belongs to Turkmens…*, op. cit.

57. *'We have the tap': Turkey's Erdogan threatens oil flow from Iraq's Kurdish area*, Reuters 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-turke/we-have-the-tap-turkeys-erdogan-threatens-oil-flow-from-iraqs-kurdish-area-idUSKCN1C018V, (access 27.08.2021).

58. See: *Civilian casualties of Turkish and Iranian military operations in Northern Iraq 1991-2024*, Community Peacemakers Teams 2024, https://cptik.org/reports-1/2024/8/12/civilian-casualties-by-turkish-and-iranian-military-operations-1991-2024, (access 15.10.2024).

tion-federalization political debate in Iraq into a secessionist dispute, thereby avoiding engagement in a political solution to the problem.

Certain political forces within Iraq, primarily from the Iraqi Accord Front and National Alliance parties, began challenging the validity of Article 140, arguing that it guaranteed a quasi-state status for the KRG.[59] A Shiite leader remarked regarding Kurdish demands: "federalism on a sectarian basis will unleash other claims, such as […] demands from other religious minorities […]. All this would serve to weaken and divide Iraq, and so we reject it."[60] A revisionist political sector even attempted to rewrite the Constitution to make Iraq more centralized. For these political groups, the Constitution was crafted in a context of fragility for the Iraqi state and was heavily influenced by the United States.[61] Consequently, the broader federal system was framed as an existential threat to national unity. Critics of this level of decentralization in Iraq argued that as a result, "the central government was eviscerated, lacking sufficient power to keep Iraq together and functioning."[62]

For their part, the Kurds remained committed to the implementation of the provisions incorporated in the Constitution, including a decentralized political structure ensuring their political, economic, and cultural autonomy. The Kurdish leadership asserted their commitment to Iraqi unity by stating: "The Constitution […] specifies the distribution of [regional and federal] powers. The Kurdistan Region seeks no more power than the Constitution allows. It only seeks that the Constitution be implemented."[63]

Competing views on the Kirkuk issue exacerbated positions between the KRG and Baghdad, further ethnicizing the political discourse. The implementation of Article 140 was understood as an existential threat against Iraq's unity, while the KRG saw its failure as a danger to its political autonomy. On the one hand, the Iraqi government assumed that solving the issue via normalization and referendum would result in losing Kirkuk and implied a threat to the economic viability of the Iraqi state. Much of Iraq's oil is produced in Kirkuk, making it a significant source of revenue for the government.[64] Losing Kirkuk was equated by the political elites in Baghdad with the fragmentation of the entire country, but the real aim of the Iraqi government, we argue, was to re-centralize the state by securitizing the whole issue. On the other hand, beyond its oil wealth, Kirkuk was framed by the Kurds as a historically indivisible part of the Kurdish homeland. Kurdish leader and then Iraqi President Jalal Talabani characterized Kirkuk as "the Jerusalem of Kurdistan"[65] and Barzani asserted in 2002 that "for others, Kirkuk is important because it lies on a sea of oil. For us, Kirkuk is important because it lies on a sea of our blood."[66] Kurdish and Iraqi elites' war of ethnopolitical narratives was

59. L. Anderson, G. Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise*, University of Pennsylvania Press 2009.

60. International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: trouble along the trigger line*, 2009, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/88-iraq-and-the-kurds-trouble-along-the-trigger-line.pdf, (access 10.11.2023).

61. L. Behneer, *Why Sunnis Don't Support Iraq's Constitution*, Council of Foreign Relations 2005, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/why-sunnis-dont-support-iraqs-constitution, (access 27.10.2021).

62. D. Romano, *Iraq's Descent into Civil War: A Constitutional Explanation*, "Middle East Journal", 2014, Vol. 68, Issue 4, p. 557.

63. Ibidem.

64. Until the 1980s, the majority of Iraq's oil was produced in Kirkuk. Today, Basra accounts for most of Iraq's petroleum, following the discovery of a large oil reservoir in the province.

65. *Talabani criticized for designating Kirkuk "Jerusalem of Kurdistan", MP says it's "serious"*, Ekurd Daily 2011, http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/3/kirkuk666.htm, (access 05.05.2022).

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expressed in the Kurds claiming the Kurdishness of the disputed areas and the central government their Arabness. In 2014, with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the KRG de facto occupied the disputed territories to prevent an ISIS takeover. For the Kurdish authorities, the seizure of the disputed territories was a legitimate act in response to Baghdad's refusal to implement Article 140. When Kirkuk was effectively controlled by the peshmerga, al-Maliki saw the movement as a declaration of war on Baghdad and accused the KRG of being part of the "conspiracy" that enabled ISIS's advance in Iraq.[67] Far from seeking to normalize relations with the Kurds, the central government has employed the narrative of the implementation of Article 140 to justify the militarization of Kirkuk and the disputed areas. Since 2008, the disputed territories have become a de facto internal borderland between Erbil and Baghdad, characterized by a political vacuum and a *frontiering* process[68] that raised tensions between Kurdish security forces and the Iraqi army.

Arguably, these fault lines in the core of the Erbil-Baghdad relationship, along with the deep economic and political crisis that hit Kurdistan in 2015,[69] led to the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. The move was also aimed at pressuring Baghdad to negotiate greater autonomy that recognizes Kurdistan's ownership of the disputed territories. The call for a referendum, however, constituted a red line for the neighboring countries, triggering joint action by Turkey, Iraq, and Iran to punish the KRG and limit its political autonomy. The Iraqi army, supported by pro-Iranian militias, redeployed Iraqi forces in Kirkuk to expel the Kurds from Kirkuk and most of the disputed areas. This action marked a reversion to regional securitization of the Kurdish question while exposing the dependence of the KRG on external actors for its survival. In sum, the constitutional (de)securitization of the Kurdish claims in Iraq further contributed to the *sectarianisation* of the Iraqi political system[70] by simultaneously militarizing Kirkuk and the disputed areas.

Implications of the (De)securitization Approach for the Kurdish Question in Iraq

The (de)securitization analysis performed in the previous section questions specific expectations set by desecuritization normative-driven views on the Kurdish question in Iraq. If a desecuritization process has been in motion since 1991 in Iraqi Kurdistan, why have desecuritization moves led to increasing societal polarization and violence in Iraqi Kurdish politics and between Erbil and Ankara? Why, despite a desecuritizing trend, do sensitive dimensions of the Kurdish question (e.g. Kirkuk's incorporation into the KRG) continue to be resolved through violent rather than institutional channels? We argue that this study has shown the potential of a (de)securitization perspective to understand these contradictory findings and to question linear and normative interpretations of this process.

66. A. Rafaat, *Kirkuk: The Central Issue of Kurdish Politics and Iraq's Knotty Problem*, "Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs", 2008, Vol. 28, Issue 2, p. 252.

67. *Maliki's coalition: Kurdish annexation of Kirkuk is a declaration of war*, Middle East Monitor 2014, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140630-malikis-coalition-kurdish-annexation-of-kirkuk-is-a-declaration-of-war/, (access 10.07.2022).

68. The concept of frontiering offers insight into the emergence of militias in liminal territories as a means of regulating a vacuum in political order by leveraging the sectarian or ethnic belonging. See: D. Meier, *'Disputed territories' in northern Iraq: The frontiering of in-between spaces*, "Mediterranean Politics", 2020, Vol. 25, Issue 3, p. 354, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2019.1681733.

69. H.H. Hama, *Iraqi Kuridistan´s 2017 Independence Referendum: the KDP's public and private motives*, "Asian Affairs", 2020, Vol. 51, Issue 1, pp. 109–125, DOI: 10.1080/03068374.2019.1706338.

70. H.H. Hama, *Politization of Kurdish…*, op. cit., pp. 137–158.

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Usual explanations of these "contradictory" trends tend to view them as a desecuritization failure between the involved parties.[71] The conclusion of a desecuritization failure, however, reflects a normative view that sees the process as an optimal return to normal or emancipatory politics (dis-identification).[72] Nonetheless, in this study, we showed this expectation to be misleading and, in fact, to create more division and violence in hyper-securitized contexts.

The advantages of a (de)securitization perspective are two-fold for scholars interested in the Kurdish question both in Iraq and regionally. First, it provides a synchronous view of the (de)securitization process. This approach opens the possibility of understanding desecuritizing moves across dimensions, rather than by their outcomes or as the complete depoliticization of an issue. It also shows that competing narratives surrounding conflicts are not overcome despite the introduction of desecuritizing moves, precisely because those movements run parallel to securitizing ones. In this process, expectations and demands are set for those desecuritizable elements of the referent subject.

First, the demands include the fragmentation of a community in an artificial way that often can only be accomplished by violent means, threatening to create intractable divisions within the community. For example, the divisive federalism-centralization narratives surrounding the official recognition of the KRG have introduced more violence into Iraqi politics, further militarizing the relationship between the Kurds and the central government. In Turkey, Ankara's threatening rhetoric following the referendum has resulted in a return to the securitization of the Kurdish question, extending beyond its fight against the PKK. These retaliatory actions have made the KRG leadership acutely aware of the fine balance between economic cooperation and Turkey's actual commitment to full political autonomy. They have also highlighted the constant threat posed by securitizing actions embedded in the KRG's relationship with Ankara. Moreover, through the use of splitting speech acts, Turkey has fostered negative images between Kurds and Turks by artificially framing the broader Kurdish community into the so-called "good Kurds" – referring to the KRG – and the so-called "bad Kurds," which includes supporters of the PKK and its ideological affiliates.

Second, it reveals the power-ridden nature of any (de)securitization process. We argue that normative views do not pay sufficient attention to the power inequalities within desecuritizing processes and their potentially negative long-term effects. Desecuritization movements often involve the external imposition of demands for an issue or a specific sector of the population to be desecuritized. This unilateral imposition of desecuritization demands tends to reinforce the interests of

71. For the case of Kirkuk, see: ibidem.

72. Cf. C. Aradau, *Security and the...*, op. cit., pp. 388–413.

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more powerful actors at the expense of weaker ones. This description is pivotal for understanding the inherent asymmetries involved in the KRG's (de)securitization processes and their multi-layered outcomes. Thus, the study of the security complexities surrounding the Kurdish question in Iraq must consider the temporal and normative biases inherent in desecuritization policies, which often favor powerful actors.

Conclusion

After the First World War and until 1991, the Iraqi state systematically oppressed and securitized the Kurds. The historical account reveals that Kurdistan became a contested space, leading to the colonial invention of the Kurds as an existential threat to the nation. Consequently, Kurdish political movements emerged to challenge the political boundaries that separated the Kurds. From 1991 onwards, the Kurdish movement in Iraq demonstrated a steady trajectory toward statehood, compelling regional actors to acknowledge the existence of a Kurdish polity. Many studies have interpreted this process as a reversal of the historical narrative that depicted Iraqi Kurds as a regional threat. Established norms of state interaction with the Kurds in Iraq were transformed, creating sufficient space for desecuritizing certain Kurdish rights that had been largely annulled by the Iraqi state. However, as this study illustrates, not all aspects of the Kurdish question in Iraq transitioned into the realm of normal politics.

The analysis of the Kurdish question from a (de)securitization perspective shows simultaneous securitizing and desecuritizing moves taking place. The Kurdish case illustrates how the multi-dimensional nature of security constantly forces actors to balance (de)securitizing moves to satisfy their own internal political imbalances. As this study highlighted, desecuritizing strategies often rest on a dichotomous division of society, triggering violence and social fragmentation. Desecuritization as a conceptual framework should not be understood per se as a normatively good or emancipatory form of politics. Similarly, ontological security theorists warn that desecuritization can potentially create more conflicts than it resolves by legitimizing extreme measures in the name of peace. As such, desecuritization becomes a paradox in the sense that a process thought to be emancipatory may, in fact, become deeply oppressive because of its splitting nature.

Further research on desecuritization studies needs to bear in mind the oppositional narratives about Self and Other accompanying any (de)securitizing move. Scholars should also consider that the inherent antagonism within (de)securitizing moves cannot be resolved without the promotion of

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a more pluralistic view of society to avoid its binary division. However, the reconstruction of identity narratives to reduce antagonism has not been theorized sufficiently by security scholarship. This is still an avenue of future enquiry.

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