Contested geographies of Kurdistan

Oil and Kurdish self-determination in Iraq

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to Serena,
who always believed

Acknowledgments

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List of abbreviations

AKP – Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)

ANT – Actor-Network Theory

APOC – Anglo-Persian Oil Company

AUIS – American University of Iraq - Sulaimani

BP – British Petroleum

Bpd – barrels per day

CDJ – Coalition for Democracy and Justice

CSO – Civil Society Organization

EITI – Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative

GCC – Gulf Cooperation Council

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

HRW – Human Rights Watch

ICSSI – Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative

IMF – International Monetary Fund

INOC – Iraq National Oil Company

IOC – International Oil Company

IPC – Iraqi Petroleum Company

IR – International Relations

ISF – Iraqi Security Forces

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

ITP – Iraq-Turkey Pipeline

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê)

KIB – Kurdistan International Bank

KIU – Kurdistan Islamic Union

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq

MNR – Ministry of Natural Resources

MoP – Ministry of Planning

NGC – North Gas Company

NOC – Iraqi North Oil Company

PSA – Production Sharing Agreement

PSC – Production Sharing Contract

PYD – Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat)

PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê)

PMU – Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Shaabi)

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Yekêtiy Niştîmaniy Kurdistan)

SOMO – State Organization for Marketing of Oil

STC – Save the Tigris Campaign

TEC – Turkish Energy Company

UPP – Un Ponte Per

Notes for the external examiners

The page number is missing (and highlighted in yellow) in some direct quotations when the source was available only in epub format. I will rectify omissions with the most recent published edition at the earliest opportunity.

The thesis has not been submitted for language correction yet. I apologise for typos and grammatical inaccuracies.

INTRODUCTION

My name is a dream, I am from the land of magic, my father is the mountain, and my mother the mist, I was born in a year whose month was murdered, a month whose week was murdered, a day whose hours were murdered.

(Sherko Bekas, *The Cross, the Snake, the Diary of a Poet*)

    …
Dozens of families waited in the rain.
'I can inhale home,' somebody said.
Now our mothers were crying. I was five years old
standing by the check-in point
comparing both sides of the border.

The autumn soil continued on the other side
with the same colour, the same texture.
It rained on both sides of the chain.

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.
Then the chain was removed to let us through.
A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.

(Choman Hardi, *At the Border, 1979*)

It was an uneventful morning in June 2017 when I first arrived in Kirkuk driving from Sulaymaniyah. The temperature would have gone up beyond 40 degrees in a matter of hours. It was Ramadan. Flames burned from flare stacks and black smoke poured from facilities on the outskirts of the "oil city". Refining smell was all around. As I got closer to central districts, I went through the security controls of several checkpoints managed by the Iraqi Federal Police and no longer Kurdish Peshmerga. Whereas the counteroffensive against the Islamic State (ISIS) was inching towards the last few jihadist pockets in Mosul, ethnic acrimony was mounting again given that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) had geared up for an explosive referendum on the independence of the autonomous region (eventually held on September 25, 2017). Although Kurdish factions were immersed in their own feuds, the referendum campaign blew on the groundswell of deep resentment against the central government and mutual accusations of betrayal and deceit. Once again Kirkuk would have become the symbolic and military frontline of federal disputes, if not the ultimate embodiment of the historic hatred fragmenting

Iraq into ethno-sectarian components. In mid-October Baghdad responded to what appeared to be the prelude to secession with the bloody re-deployment of security forces and Shi'a militias in the disputed territories, then controlled by Peshmerga. I would have been back almost one year later, after the dust from the political fallout somehow settled.

At the time of my first visit clouds were gathering on the horizon, with the KRG President Masoud Barzani extending the scope of the referendum to all the "Kurdistani" areas regardless of the administrative boundaries of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and making it clear that any alteration of de-facto borders, redrawn with the blood of the many martyrs who had sacrificed their lives to tackle the ISIS insurgency, would have not been tolerated. Despite the assertiveness of the KRG top brass, a breaking point could not be seen yet. Barzani also warned that negotiations would have followed the vote (a yes-vote easy to guess) in order to reach a new comprehensive agreement over "borders, water, and oil". Those three issues of bargaining so clearly stated in one sentence were meaningful for the reasons that had brought me there. I was in Kurdistan precisely to understand how the politics of oil has been implicated in the re-articulation of Kurdish self-determination since the downfall of Saddam Hussein onwards, materially and discursively.

It is no doubt that hydrocarbons have provided sustenance for institution-building in the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq. The de-facto petro-state emerging out of post-Ba'athism is oil-dependent as much as the parent state. The ruling oligarchy inherited the same mentality of building statehood upon the development of the geological potential: the optimism and the confidence that Kurdish leaders have about the future is largely linked to the possibility of generating income from oil exports. After all, modern Iraq was carved out of energy interests to a large extent. Even more than the baseline source of public revenue to consolidate power or a high-yield commodity imbued with strategic salience, however, oil is tinged red with identity politics and woven into the weft of a very contentious texture, delineating multiple (and contradictory) geographies: the KRI is a new hub on the global energy markets; a rentier economy held captive by patrimonial elites, territorially split along party lines into a *yellow* zone and a *green* zone; a self-appointed haven of stability in the midst of disorder for foreign investors and allies in the West; the closest thing ever attained to the yearned dream of an independent Kurdish state for millions of Kurds living not only in Iraq but in neighbouring countries and the diaspora as well; an unruly separatist region surrounded by ethnically-mixed areas for the Iraqi central government. As the title of the dissertation suggests these geographies are riven by contestation: oil acts as catalyst for situated memories of ethnic persecutions and foreign domination, warfare and rebellion, statelessness and exile, nationhood and citizenship.

Therefore, the ways natural resources are imagined, territorialized, commodified, and governed enter the fluid re-composition of collective identities within the political community. However, from a theoretical viewpoint these are rather uncharted waters in International Relations (IR), which has

predominantly looked at the natural environment subscribing to static and state-centric geographical assumptions that cannot see anything but a causative role. Indeed, within a semantics of triggers, stressors, thresholds, and curse-like properties the political dynamics at play are often misrepresented or become unfathomable altogether. Then, a leap over the narrow boundaries of the discipline is somewhat required to make sense of socio-natural entanglements and explore the wide context in which material forces translate nature into resource for human use, without endorsing the environmental determinism on which IR much indulges.

Accordingly, this piece of research comes out of an interdisciplinary endeavour that is aimed at re-politicising resource geographies through the empirically-grounded, critically-committed, and ethnographically-oriented study of the mutual exchanges between resource materialities and practices of signification. In such an expanded sense, which deviates from the path of mainstream IR theories, resource geographies are conceptualized as socially constituted fields of power in which discursive imaginaries of resource use and material patterns of wealth accumulation mediate and intersect with the mechanisms of identity formation. Theoretical imports from critical geography, political ecology, and anthropology back up this sort of re-engagement with the matter of nature in the social sciences. The struggles fought over and around oil arise expectations, beliefs, perceptions, symbols, visions. At the same time, extractive localities are also embedded in global production chains, flows of capital, transportation networks; in short, the infrastructural hardware of capitalist accumulation underpinning the contemporary industrial paradigm. As a consequence of these ramifications oil-related local conflicts tend to be invariably characterized by an international dimension also.

Given the general aim set out above, this research hopefully opens up an interdisciplinary dialogue that is attentive to the epistemological project of political ecology and embraces progressive understandings of security, identity, and power in the light of critical theory. Although the idiographic approach pursued here excludes generalizations out of context, the analytical framework is suitable for application to other cases in the measure that it draws attention to the "glocal" dynamics of extractivism and gives an exploded view of the many layers bringing together ecologies, development, and governance within a resource frontier. I believe that the re-appraisal of nature in IR is needed for the purpose of locating agency in often decentred and blurred environmental processes, even more so at a time of increasing and unsustainable anthropogenic changes. Among other things, this implies that knowledges of nature (in the plural) always express power relations and that the deconstruction of techno-political knowledges brings to surface interesting taxonomies of winners and losers that would go unnoticed otherwise.

In addition, I wish to fill a gap in the literature on Kurdish Studies in that scant attention has been given so far to the geographical and ecological discourses summoned in the construction of Kurdistan and Kurdishness. An empirical study of Kurdish self-determination in northern Iraq appears to be very

timely. Since the US-led invasion in 2003, the de-facto and de-jure borders of the KRI are continually being changed, with the oil and gas economy playing a pivotal role in that. With the blessing of the international community and against the vetoes of regional powers, the KRG has consolidated indeed its institutional capacity thanks to the unilateral export of oil, bypassing Baghdad. This notwithstanding, resource sovereignty has received less attention than other identity markers, or rather it has not been considered as a relevant factor for the re-constitution of nationhood. After all, it is said that resource politics is all about interests. Quite the contrary, the Kurdish case shows that a drop of oil is heavier than its economic value as it also carries cultural and social messages. Therefore, I hope to succeed in providing an original and complementary angle to trace the most recent evolution of the nationalist narrative.

To make the story even more complicated, such development occurred within a geopolitical scenario in flux, to say the least. The Syrian civil war that flared up in 2011 set into motion the entire regional architecture; its spillovers have somewhat encouraged the awakening of national mobilizations in the four quadrants of Kurdistan, this resulting in the *kurdification* of the vacuums left by retreat or withering of state legitimacy in the host countries. In this regard, however, the upsurge of violence should not be considered the result of state fragility per se, as it is commonly accepted in security and policy circles. Rather, the recrudescence of conflict is expressive, in my view, of the re-negotiation of allegiances and borders by deployment of growing amounts of violence on the one hand, and the structural socio-economic inequalities in which the broader region is mired in on the other hand. This mixture led Syria to plunge into a downward spiral of increasing atrocity, with the TEV-DEM movement led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) managing to fight off the ISIS pressure and at the same time practice an unprecedented model of democratic confederalism (inspired by the writings of Abdullah Ocalan) in the north-eastern areas of the country. These developments were read with concern by the Turkish government to the extent of occupying militarily the districts of Afrin and Azaz, north-west of the Euphrates, in order to break the territorial continuity of Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria, first in August 2016 and again in January 2018, whereas a two-year ceasefire with the PKK was already broken in June 2015. On the Iraqi side, the rise of a de-facto petro-state in the Kurdish northern governorates is the mirror-image of the weakness of central institutions and benefited from the fault lines running deep through the US-designed federal order.

Against this picture and the profound changes underway, I concentrated on how the creation of an extractive regime in the KRI has related with the frantic re-making of in-group identities, symbolic markers, territorial disputes, and othering processes, and on how conflicts and imaginaries get remodelled over and through resource geographies. To make it clearer, the rationale can be summarized as follows: what impact has the appropriation and commodification of oil and gas resources by KRG elites had on the negotiation of political identities? In more general terms, then, the research question

investigates the transformative effect of resource governance on the processes of identity formation within the political community.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter **I** is a brief introduction to the turbulent history of Kurds in Iraq and the strained relationships with central power, from the foundation of the kingdom in the aftermath of WWI to the present days; to the mythology of Kurdistan and its indefinite geographical representation; to the evolution of Kurdish political self-identification, from diluted ethnic consciousness to nationalist causes; finally to a more detailed excursus on the swelling of the petroleum industry over time and under different political regimes. Chapter **II** calls into question the spatial ontology ingrained in IR and the ensuing analytical traps, which are held responsible for the flawed assumptions shared by realist and liberal theories on resource conflicts. Based on an epistemological rejection of the modernist binaries that separate human and non-human domains, it presents the added value of a political ecology approach. The relational understanding of natural resources is further specified with reference to oil. Chapter **III** closely looks at the methodological implications of an interpretive logic of inquiry, which is rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology and reflexive positioning, discussing ethnography both as methodology and method in social sciences and subsequently explicating how such premises were translated into a research roadmap aimed at generating thick empirical evidence. It also tells about the practical realities and limitations of a multi-sited fieldwork conducted in a politicised context and in proximity to conflict zones. Chapters IV, V, and VI constitute the analytical core of the dissertation. Each chapter is devoted to a specific level of analysis. Chapter **IV** places energy issues at the centre of federal relations, illustrating the role of oil as a carrier of external legitimation for the KRG, whose energy policies are dissected in their discursive, material, and geopolitical components. Beyond tracking the journey of a barrel of Kurdish crude and examining the populist rhetoric behind the framing of the oil nation, the "energyscape" is also viewed in connection with the emotional attachment to the mountainous homeland defining the Kurdish sense of belonging. Chapter **V** provides a careful and much detailed explanation of how the oil complex reflects the sultanistic regime upon which the Barzani and Talabani houses keep thriving unabated. Inter- and intra-party infighting across the energy battlefield are examined, with particular attention to what happened in Kirkuk, before and after the ISF takeover in the disputed areas. The crony and violent traits of the KDP-PUK duopoly are discussed in the perspective of the neo-tribal and neo-patrimonial politics embodied by ruling parties. Chapter **VI** starts out from an overview on petro-capitalism and its local repercussions to focus empirically on two case studies, which bring into light the dispossession of local communities bearing the brunt of extractive activities. In view of the alternative resource imaginary engendered by practices of resistance, it is argued that the elites strengthen dependency relationships through the oil complex with the purpose of weakening civil society and toughened one-party rule in each half of the region.

What does oil mean for Iraqi Kurds nowadays? I sought to answer this straightforward (though challenging) question through the immersion in the context under study and with over three years of musings on the myriad issues it involves. I was asked once by one of my closest informant to tell the facts as they are and let people know. I hope that the following pages are up to the task.

I. THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

Borders, identity, oil

Look, from the Arabs to the Georgians,
The Kurds have become like towers.
The Turks and Persians are surrounded by them.
The Kurds are on all four corners.
Both sides have made the Kurdish people
Targets for the arrows of fate.
They are said to be keys to the borders
Each tribe forming a formidable bulwark.
Whenever the Ottoman Sea [Ottomans] and Tajik Sea [Persians]
Flow out and agitate,
The Kurds get soaked in blood
Separating them [the Turks and Persians] like an isthmus

(Ahmad-i Khani, *Mem-u-Zin*, 1692; as translated in Hassanpour, 1992: 53)

Sitting around an old table
they drew lines across the map
dividing the place
I would call my country

(Choman Hardi, *Lausanne, 1923*)

Although this work has the ambition of presenting some advancement to the understanding of resource politics that might be relevant to all settings, the interpretive bent behind the research process makes theory-building inseparable from the socio-cultural context within which concrete observations were made. Based on the premise that knowledge production relies on the physical and emotional presence of the researcher within the epistemic community, chapter III specifies in epistemological and methodological terms why a case-centered approach yields much to any interpretive inquiry (or is even the only way forward). Accordingly, I chose to slightly upend the usual order of a dissertation in political science by moving up the overview on the Kurdish question before theoretical framework and research design. This opening chapter is meant to guide the reader through the fundamental events and the collective meanings underpinning the rise of Kurdish nationalism(s), in Iraq and beyond. Nonetheless, this is something more than a justification or a description of the case study. In the first place, this long initiation to the many signifiers and manifestations of Kurdistan seeks to ground some concepts and notions, which will be central in successive chapters, into the modern history of Kurds. Hence, with the prospect of ensuring internal coherence, the preliminary discussion of the context drives a sort of

alignment of theory to the empirical reality under scrutiny. Furthermore, even within Middle Eastern studies, Kurds have suffered a relative marginalization, in my view, and the reader might be not familiar with the intricate fabric of Kurdish issues. This is strictly related to the second reason for starting the dissertation from here. Even if one would accept that there is no permanent and value-free Archimedean point to adjudicate knowledge claims, as I will elucidate openly later on, any inquiry is still influenced and often triggered by interests and background knowledge of the inquirer. From this perspective, I wish to be transparent about how I came to the formulation of the research question stated in the introduction by pointing up the entanglements (between borders, identity, and oil as the subheading above suggests) that caught my attention before venturing into the field.

1.1. Historical profile of Kurds in Iraq

The idea of Kurdistan, 'the land of the Kurds', is as much evocative as elusive. From northwest to southeast, the Kurdish homeland follows for approximately 200,000 square miles (Izady, 2015) the steep flanks and fertile valleys of the Taurus and Zagros mountainous arch: it starts from the heart of Central Anatolia and the headwaters of Tigris and Euphrates at east, laps on the Aras River and the foothills of the Lesser Caucasus in the Armenian highlands at north, lowers gradually to the Mesopotamian Plain down to the province of Kirkuk at south, and extends beyond the city of Kermanshah at east. Across this vast geographic area a diverse mixture of semi-nomadic tribes, whose roots are lost deep in time in the alleged Medes ancestry and were either shepherds driving livestock seasonally from one mountain pasture to another or peasants cultivating the lowlands, at some point in history began to be recognized by outsiders as Kurds, though these pastoralist communities called themselves by the tribal or clan name and did not use the label 'Kurd' in a political sense until the 20th century (Ozoglu, 2012: 27). The word Kurdistan, instead, first appeared in the 12th century to designate administratively the province inside the Seljuk Empire on the eastern ridge of the Zagros mountains near Hamadan (McDowall, 2003: 6; Ozoglu, 2012: 26). Likewise, the territory of Diyarbakir was later named as such by the Ottomans due to the sizeable Kurdish presence (van Bruinessen, 1992: 11). Hence, the imaginative geography of Kurdistan holds on a circular analogy between ethnicity and its territorial manifestation, which are thought to coincide: just as Kurdish land is defined upon the presence of an ethnic group, Kurds achieve the credentials of ethnic distinctiveness by virtue of territorial rootedness. Either drawn on a map or practiced into customary habits, however, the lines of ethnicity (or collective identity more generally) are unavoidably blurred insofar as their referents – ethnos and territory – are always projects in the making, rather than absolute entities.

This applies in principle to every political community with no exception, but it is even more revealing in the case of Kurdistan. Indeed, Kurds are known to be the largest stateless nation[1], and their troubled and unfulfilled road to self-determination has been "one of conflict, betrayal and dashed promises" (Yildiz, 2007: 14). As Ahmad-i Khani's poem reminds in the opening, Kurdistan was long the rough frontier in between mighty empires, a peripheral and inaccessible buffer zone on the fringes of rival power centres (O'Shea, 2004; Ünver, 2016), but a "Kurdish question" (Elphinston, 1946) properly came to rise only in the aftermath of World War I, when the Allies dissected the Ottoman Empire through a series of consecutive settlements. Kurdistan was arbitrarily partitioned as well. During post-war consultations and conferences, Kurds were acknowledged as a unitary people worthy of national recognition, but the extent for the practical exercise of that right was object of intense debate in the negotiations following the signature of the armistice of Mudros in 1918, which marked the Ottoman surrender. Although the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 instructed a commission to draft "a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia (...), and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia"[2], Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination that was intended to guide the reorganisation of former Ottoman territories got lost on the way soon. Britain, which brokered the regional architecture through the long-sought acquisition of a colonial mandate on Mesopotamia and Palestine as anticipated in the famous Sykes-Picot formula, was never convinced of supporting Kurdish claims in full. In fact, British policy was much inconstant: whereas at the 1921 Cairo Conference the then Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill maintained that "purely Kurdish areas should not be included in the Arab state of Mesopotamia" and that promoting Kurds' national unity was desirable (Yildiz, 2007: 11), Kemalists' yearns over Mosul and the perceived unreliability of Kurdish clans produced a change of mind. British expeditions were later on involved in suppressing repeated uprisings led by Mahmud Barzanji, a Kurdish Sheikh who had been previously appointed by the mandate authority as governor of Sulaymaniyah in 1918. The Treaty of Lausanne signed in July 1923 eventually overrode Sèvres, which nevertheless had been already contradicted on the ground by the evolution of the Turkish independence war. The replacing peace treaty, negotiated this time with Turkish nationalists, carved out the borders of the present day Republic of Turkey and made no mention of Kurds, who had not been invited to attend the diplomatic conference. The territorial arrangement reached in Lausanne definitely frustrated hopes, if there ever was any, for gaining an independent Kurdish state in a remodelled Middle East. Turkish firm opposition to cede sovereignty in south-eastern Anatolia was echoed by British reluctance to endorse the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Mesopotamia. With

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[1] In absence of official statistics, Kurds are believed to number between 36 to 45 million according to the Kurdish Institute of Paris. Taking this source as a benchmark, Kurds are unevenly distributed in Turkey (15-20 million), Iran (10-12 million), Iraq (8-8.5 million), Syria (3-3.6 million) and the diaspora in Western Europe (1.2-1.5 million). The CIA World Factbook rounds the total down to 30-35 million.

[2] Treaty of Sèvres, art. 62.

the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire and the British occupation of the three Mesopotamian *vilayet* (provinces) of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, Kurds were encouraged to plead the cause of national self-determination in the northernmost Mosul Vilayet, mostly populated by Kurdish tribes, even though "the primary sense of identity [laid] with their clan or their religious order" (Tripp, 2002: 34) and their political outlook was rather local. The *vilayet* corresponded approximately to the southern arc of Kurdistan. However, the British Colonial Office headed by Percy Cox deemed Mahmud Barzanji's clannish leadership to be unprepared for the task. A League of Nations' special commission contested Turkish claims on the Mosul Vilayet; a subsequent resolution adopted in December 1925 eventually agreed upon the annexation of the province to the Kingdom of Iraq, already handed by Britain to Faisal Bin Hussain Bin Ali Al Hashemi (then crowned as Faisal I) in 1921, in spite of concerns for the extension of Arab authority to Kurdish inhabited areas.

As a result, Kurds found their vast homeland broken into pieces under control of four sovereign countries (Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran) and largely deprived of all forms of autonomy: no longer surrounded by multi-ethnic empires, but forcefully integrated in supposedly uniform nation states. Since then the Kurdish question is still pending but took different paths, each of them reflecting the incorporation of the liberation struggle into distinct political boundaries and arenas. Indeed, Kurdish national movements were confronted with context-specific sets of constraints and opportunities unfolding within territories that were suddenly considered riotous peripheries undermining the construction of centralized and ethnically homogeneous states. Hence, notwithstanding the obvious interrelations, it would be more accurate to talk of Kurdish questions, rather than a unitary struggle. In analytical terms, this should not be read as the naturalization of the state system implanted in the Mashreq after World War I, but as the most appropriate way to enquire into the complexities of Kurdish identity through the lens of local histories. Without losing sight of transnational aspects, the present work focuses on the dynamics unfolding in the Iraqi side of Kurdistan, also known as *Bashur* (literally, Southern Kurdistan)[3]. This introduction, which cannot be more than a bird's-eye historical overview, puts into perspective the conflict-ridden journey towards the recognition of a de-facto state inside Iraq. Unless otherwise specified, I draw primarily on two milestones that are familiar to anyone versed in Kurdish issues: Van Bruinessen's *Agha, Shaikh and State* (1992) and McDowall's *A Modern History of the Kurds* (1996), whose anthropological sensibility and historical depth made them great classics in the literature of Kurdish Studies, despite the Western background of both observers.

A long time has come since the British mandate and negligence towards the fate of Kurds in the postwar period, but the strained relations between Arabs and Kurds segmented the Iraqi state from the

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[3] Conventionally the Greater Kurdistan is presented in the four sub-regions fitting into the boundaries of so-called host countries: Bakur, in southern Turkey; Rojava, in northern Syria; Bashur, in northern Iraq; and Rojhelat, in eastern Iran.

beginning. Whereas Iraq acceded to independence in 1932, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji had launched insurrections against the Hashemite rule and the British protectors for more than a decade before being forced to exile in that same year. Unrest burst also in Turkey and Iran, but retaliations were tougher than revolts. Anyway, it must be borne in mind that *aghas* (the title used for Kurdish landlords and tribal chieftains) were not united against Anglo-Iraqi administration under a dawning nationalist cause. In fact, a national sentiment was yet to rise. Moreover, just as Britain had successfully played on the feudal lineage of Kurdish society to obtain collaboration of the upper class, central governments dealing with Kurdish 'minorities' fanned the flames of tribal divisions to weaken popular mobilization. It was not rare to find *aghas* forging temporary and tactical alliances with Baghdad to prevail over rivals. Van Bruinessen (1994) reckons that collaborators (known derogatorily as *Jahsh*, 'mule') were the same number of liberation fighters (*Peshmerga*, 'those who face death'). Even Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji's self-proclamation of "King of Kurdistan" was resisted and defied by many. During the 1930s, Mulla Mustafa Barzani replaced him as the most prominent and charismatic leader of the Kurdish nationalist movement. He mobilised the tribal base from his eponymous town (Barzan, on the banks of the Greater Zab south of the Turkey-Iraq border, where the Barzanis were revered for fighting prowess and as religious authorities of the Naqshbandi order) and led an intermittent guerrilla in northern Iraq for over half a century, which made him a legendary nationalist figure. In 1946 Barzani was offered the presidency of the newly founded Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and participated to the short-lived experiment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in Iran, which fell to the Shah after barely a year. Barzani and his 500 fighters were forced to an epic march across the mountains to find shelter in the Soviet Union. However, for his many internal opponents Mustafa Barzani was rather a power-hungry warlord, seeking to subdue Kurdish tribes to his will. Tribal warfare, indeed, was not secondary to the revolt against Baghdad and anti-Barzani positions soon emerged inside the KDP, in particular from the faction (known as the Politburo) headed by Ibrahim Ahmed and his son-in-law Jalal Talabani. Antagonism broke out in armed conflicts from mid-1960s onwards and delineated a full-fledged socio-cultural rift: Barzani embodied the traditional, landowning, and conservative elites of Kurmanji-speaking rural tribes in the north-west; the Politburo, instead, gathered the intellectual, Marxist, and urban-based wing from the Sorani-speaking areas in the south-east, who at first had left the door open for Barzani to come in as the most authoritative spokesperson of the liberation struggle. In fact, Kurdish society was anything but cohesive. After all, despite the nationalistic aura, Barzani's leadership was never able to secure the allegiance of non-tribal Kurdish peasants: fearing to lose grip on his resource base, he took up arms against the land reforms of central governments, with the result that "Kurdish nationalism in Iraq (…) never developed into the peasant-proletarian, leftist mass Kurdish movement epitomized by the PKK in Turkey" (Romano, 2006: 189). It is worth noting that these same features – i.e. personification of nationalist mobilization, party factionalism, tribal infighting, and the mass-elite cleavage – have survived until today as noticeable markers of Kurdish politics.

Abd al-Karim Qasim's military coup and the overthrown of the monarchy in July 1958 commenced a new phase. The Interim Constitution of the Republic of Iraq recognised Kurdish national rights, the KDP was no longer a clandestine political organisation, and Barzani returned after a decade in exile. However, peace gestures were not meant to be lasting and Kurds-Arabs relations worsened soon upon mutual recriminations. Already in September 1961 shots were fired again. From then on a similar pattern would have recurred several times: the withdrawal of central government from offers of regional autonomy ignited armed hostilities until either political change in Baghdad or a severe military defeat coaxed one of the two sides to resume negotiations. Throughout the 1960s the Iraqi-Kurdish war killed tens of thousands people. Meanwhile, Barzani kept on removing dissidents to his hegemony, inside and outside the KDP. On the other side, the rise of the nationalist Ba'ath Party, which had toppled and executed Qasim in February 1963, laid the ideological foundations of a more pronounced persecution against Kurds. Nonetheless, in March 1970 Ba'athists initially put forward an ample agreement, which accepted in principle most of KDP demands (e.g. recognition of Kurdish as official language, proportional participation in state affairs, unification of Kurdish areas into a self-governing region). Already in the 1940s the KDP had abandoned secessionist intentions moving to the milder goal of self-administration. The so-called 'March Manifesto' was "the best deal the Kurds of Iraq had been offered" (McDowall, 2003: 327), but it was negotiated by General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr's deputy, Saddam Hussein, out of necessity since the Ba'athist regime was coming off costly military campaigns and was in need of consolidating an unstable position. For the new regime the very idea of Kurdish national rights was a blow to Arab unity and a military solution remained the first option. No wonder, hence, that the manifesto was never implemented. Disagreement over the demarcation of the autonomous area – due to a deadlock on the inclusion of the oil-rich Kirkuk and Khanaqin – was the harbinger of further distance, which became apparent with several assassination attempts against Barzani and mutual arms race. As Romano sums up, "both sides were preparing for war" (2006: 193), which eventually erupted in 1974 as Barzani rejected the Autonomy Law. However, by that time the wind had turned: the nationalization of petroleum industry and the heavy weaponry supplied through the 1972 Iraqi-Soviet Treaty of Friendship provided Ba'athists with the means of crushing the much lighter Kurdish forces. These were aided by Iran, with CIA and Mossad also dispensing weapons, but the military imbalance suggested the Shah to reach out Saddam Hussein in secret. At the margins of the OPEC Conference in Algiers in March 1975, they announced the settlement of border disputes between the two countries. The unexpected pact also implied the cessation of the Iranian support to Mustafa Barzani, who was left with no other option but to accept a ceasefire that was tantamount to a defeat.

In such a manner Saddam Hussein cleared the way for exacerbated policies of ethnic assimilation. With the Kurdish resistance in disarray, the regime forged ahead with the firm purpose of "Arabizing" Kurdish inhabited territories. The bitter time of ethnic cleansing began. The following fifteen years

would have been seared into memory for the escalation of Ba'athist oppression: the systematic destruction of villages within a forbidden zone along the Turkish and Iranian borders and the resettlement of deportees anticipated far harsher measures, which Ali Hassan al-Majid (the Secretary of the Northern Bureau of the Ba'ath Party disgracefully remembered as "Chemical Ali") led to the extreme of genocidal campaigns. The codenamed *al-Anfal* (Spoils) onslaughts started in February 1988 with the siege of the Jalafi valley and the massacre of Halabja, where the Iraqi air force dropped chemical bombs on civilians, resulting in thousands deaths (Hiltermann, 2007). It was neither the first, nor the last time Ba'athists used chemical weapons against Kurds. Around 700 to 1,000 villages were razed to the ground and between 50,000 to 100,000 people were killed during the *al-Anfal* operations (though some estimates go up to 180,000-200,000 casualties)[4]. Within two decades (1970-1990), Ba'athist's scorched earth policy tore down about 4000 villages, bringing down "an economy, a culture, a way of life, a moral order" altogether (van Bruinessen, 2000). Amid displacements and slaughters, the Peshmerga resumed guerrilla from the mountains. Inside the Kurdish national movement, after the death of Mustafa Barzani in 1979 his son Masoud took the lead of the KDP; instead, Talabani and closest associates (including Nawshirwan Mustafa and Fuad Masum) had founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) following the Algiers agreement in 1975. The scission sanctioned a well-established duality.

From insurgents to state-builders

The Gulf War(s) changed the course of events. If the authoritarian excesses of the regime had gone unnoticed to Western powers, the invasion of Kuwait and its large oilfields could not be forgiven. The US-led military campaign drove out the Iraqi army in a few weeks. Right after the defeat, a popular uprising broke out in the Kurdish north, which matched a parallel uproar in the Shiite south. The mobilisation was not an initiative of Kurdish parties, which instead remained on the sidelines at first. Indeed, protests were staged by "the numerous urban Kurds who had long stood aloof from overt politics or who had even collaborated with the Baath regime" (Van Bruinessen, 1992: 44). Saddam Hussein suppressed the revolt with an iron fist and few qualms, but this time in full view of the international community. When almost two million Kurds fled to the Turkish and Iranian borders hunted by Iraqi helicopters, the Operation Provide Comfort belatedly enforced a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel under resolution n. 688 of the UN Security Council. In October 1991 Saddam Hussein pulled back his forces and the administrative apparatus from the governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, which were sealed off from the rest of the country. Despite protection against a military

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[4] One of the best evidence-based sources on the al-Anfal genocide is the Human Rights Watch's report *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (1993; for a more recent one see Leezenberg, 2004). Within this thesis, chapter 5 briefly returns on it.

intervention from Baghdad, Kurds were not in peace: the KDP-PUK enmity soon plunged into a bloodbath that locked up in civil war an already devastated and impoverished region. What is remembered as the "brothers' war" lasted from 1994 to 1998 and left a heavy trace on Kurdish society. However, the internationally established safe haven created the conditions in order for Kurdistan to take the first effective steps towards self-rule and national integration. During 1992, parliamentary and presidential elections were held ahead of the formation of a central administration, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which more properly reflected the sum of the KDP-PUK parallel administrations. The KRG was a landmark achievement: the Kurdish insurgency turned into a civilian government and "Kurds practically ceased to be a minority in Iraq" (Voller, 2014: 68). These developments were obviously condemned by Baghdad (and regional neighbours) as an illegal drive towards secession, but the commitment to democratic values gave a credit line to the institution-building process. While Iraqis were still under the yoke of tyranny, Kurds were experiencing democratization. As a result, the KRG became an interlocutor of Western powers and even more importantly a recipient of substantial foreign aid (mainly delivered through the UN Oil-for-Food Programme), which sustained postwar reconstruction and accentuated economic differentiation with the rest of Iraq (Natali, 2010).

Hence, by the time of the ousting of Saddam Hussein and subsequent regime change in 2003 the KRG had already acquired and practiced the attributes of statehood: a military force exerting effective control over a certain territory, separate authorities from the parent state, a stable leadership embodied in the Barzani and Talabani's clans, institutional structures providing services to local population, diplomatic missions and consulates in Erbil and representative offices abroad, social cohesion and internal legitimacy built upon the identification with the nationalist cause for independence[5]. Added to these are the softer aspects of nation-building (Kolsto & Blakkisrud 2005, 2008): a national flag, a national anthem, a capital – Erbil, Hewlêr in Kurdish – that is home to KRG bodies and the Parliament, an education system, a stock market. Therefore, it is generally accepted in the literature that the KRG is a prominent example of a de facto state lacking in international recognition (Kolstø, 2006; Caspersen & Stansfield, 2011; Caspersen, 2013; Mansour, 2014; Voller, 2014; Gürbey, Hofmann, & Ibrahim Seyder,

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[5] These criteria are in line with Pegg's definition of de-facto states: "In essence, a de facto state exists where there is an organized political leadership which has risen to power through some degree of indigenous capability; receives popular support; and has achieved sufficient capacity to provide governmental services to a given population in a defined territorial area, over which effective control is maintained for an extended period of time. The de facto state views itself as capable of entering into relations with other states and it seeks full constitutional independence and widespread international recognition as a sovereign state. It is, however, unable to achieve any degree of substantive recognition and therefore remains illegitimate in the eyes of international society" (Pegg, 1998). Pegg distinguishes de-facto states from Jackson's quasi state (Jackson, 1987, 1993), which Natali (2010) attaches, incorrectly in my view, to the KRG. The distinction is based on the criterion of internationally accepted legitimacy: whereas "the de facto state is illegitimate no matter how effective it is, (...) the quasi-state's juridical equality is not contingent on any performance criteria".

2017; Riegl & Doboš, 2017)[6]. The Kurdish case is quite unique in that support of the international community was a decisive factor for state formation (Kingston & Spears, 2004). As noted, the external military intervention had unleashed great opportunities for Kurdish self-determination, though within a hybrid institutional framework that legally recognises the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as autonomous and constituent part of a federal country. KDP and PUK militias enthusiastically backed the Anglo-American invasion and broke the 'Green Line' within which Ba'athist officials had confined Kurdish aspirations. Kurds were then in the unprecedented position to play a leading role in the stabilization of post-Ba'athist Iraq. In this sense, the federal arrangement enshrined in the 2005 Constitution aimed to bring together decentralisation at the regional level and centripetal incentives to national integrity, most notably financial dependency and proportionate representation of all Iraqi components in central government. However, what was designed to be the main guarantee of pluralism – a quota system based on ethnic and religious criteria – went the opposite way: the ill-advised "one Iraq policy" laid down in Washington ended up heightening sectarianism and communal violence. As a result, the tentative implementation of federal dispositions raised mistrust and strengthened hardliners across the country. Meanwhile, Kurdish parties deftly maneuvered a two-way agenda, which combined a principled commitment to federalism with a pragmatic nationalist pursuit. On the one hand, Kurds raised to the rank of power brokers involved in drafting the new Constitution and divvying up government posts with Shi'a parties. PUK's leader Talabani was appointed President of Iraq in 2005, a position retained until 2014 when his party comrade Fuad Massum succeeded to him, while Barham Salih (PUK) was nominated deputy Prime Minister and Hoshyar Zebari (KDP) Minister of Foreign Affairs. On the other hand, the KRG firmly kept military and political control inside the region, where state-building[7] proceeded steadily. In this respect, it has been rightly pointed out that the coalition of Kurdish ruling elites was central for the successful formation of a de-facto state in northern Iraq, though with a relevant specification: "the primary aim of the coalition was to secure access to power and the related profits", not the construction of viable state structures (Jüde, 2017: 849). As we will see, this strategic orientation shaped not only interactions with the international community and the tug of war with the central government, but also internal power dynamics, with the KDP-PUK oligarchy swinging between revenue sharing and fierce competition, according to the circumstances.

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[6] The proliferation and overlap of alternative prefixes (de facto-, unrecognised-, quasi-, pseudo-, informal-) to describe state-like entities that does not fully comply with the requirements of customary international law, as codified in the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, reflects scholarly disagreement over the separation between empirical and juridical statehood (for a review of the literature see Pegg, 2017).

[7] For the sake of clarity I draw on Kolsto and Blakkisrud's (2005; 2008) definitions of state-building – "the establishment of the administrative, economic, and military groundwork of functional states" – and nation-building – "the construction of a shred identity and a sense of unity in a state's population, through education, propaganda, ideology, and state symbols". In this terminology, statehood and nationhood are understood as intimately related but distinct processes. While state-building focuses on the role of political elites, a broader array of actors including intellectuals and civil society participate in inventing the nation.

Kurdish self-determination has accelerated over the last decade to culminate in the independence referendum held on September 25, 2017 (Crisis Group, 2017). In so doing Kurds questioned the very basis of what was perceived a stillborn federal order and claimed to exercise an inalienable right, but such premature move came at great cost given that the call for an independent Kurdistan backfired catastrophically. Emboldened by the acquisition of an international standing upon the crude supplied to the global markets and the blood spilled in the war against the Islamic State[8] (ISIS) on behalf of Western partners, Kurdish leadership underestimated the constraints limiting that role. Despite international objections and the crossfire of regional neighbours who feared a chain reaction in the respective Kurdish-inhabited provinces, and notwithstanding a severe financial crisis and economic recession, the KRG staged the referendum. Not surprisingly, it was a "yes" vote: 93% of voters agreed with the yearning of making the KRI and Kurdistani areas outside the region an independent country[9]. The referendum, immediately banned as unconstitutional by Baghdad, took places also in contested districts then controlled by Peshmerga. The tear was too deep to sew it up. After clearing the last ISIS stronghold in Hawija, on 16 October the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered a military attack on the breakaway region, as a result of which Kurdish forces handed over all the disputed areas including the symbolic city of Kirkuk. Without dwelling on the recent events, which are addressed throughout the empirical chapters, we will see that the geography of oil was both trigger and context of the escalation.

1.2 Out of the map

When approaching the petroleum industry one gets familiar with technical maps illustrating the location of "fields" underground, with spots of bright colour, and the ramification of energy infrastructures aboveground. The grid of lines and dots (displaying subterranean deposits, proven and probable reserves, pipelines, pumping and metering stations, transhipment centres, storage facilities, processing plants and refineries) gives a first impression, visually, of the political economy of energy production. That spatial configuration, however, can be at odds with legal jurisdictions and political borders delimiting the same areas. It is certainly the case with Iraq, where long disputed territories are soaked with oil and traversed by energy operators. This volatile combination is even more apparent with regard

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[8] Also referred to as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or with the acronym Da'ish (which stands for "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa al-Sham", literally Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), the insurgent militia rose from the ashes of al-Qaida in Iraq and the convergence with former officials of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime. ISIS asserted itself as a proto-state over a contiguous area stretching between Syria and Iraq by taking control of informal economies and securing a stream of cash flow to financially support the proclamation of the so-called Islamic Caliphate in June 2014 with the seizure of Mosul. After the loss of the city in July 2017, ISIS lost momentum and reverted to covert insurgency, which is still active at the time of writing.
[9] See the primary results released by the Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission on September 27, 2017: http://www.khec.krd/pdf/173082892017_english%202.pdf

to KRI. It will be pointed out later that the KRG drew exploration blocks for foreign investors to conjure up the image of a legitimate national treasure and, at the same time, challenge the Iraqi official demarcation of Kurdish autonomy. This is not isolated: Kurdish nationalists have been crossing swords with central governments over map-making since the post-WWI territorial settlements and the advent of the liberation struggle. Indeed, the foremost conflict being waged on Kurds is precisely around the cartographical representation of Kurdistan itself, which is the reason for supporting the historical introduction to the Kurdish question with a digression on the politics of space.

Maps exert a territorial function in making visible and legitimising rule over space: the act of representing translates the relationship between land and power into a legal order binding territory to authority[10]. In a nutshell, representation establishes a political fact. In the case of Kurdistan, the fact is rather its absence from the political atlas of the world. Far from being a limitation, this expresses, instead, the unfulfilled potential of Kurdish aspirations. After all, as Herman Melville suggests in Moby Dick, a novel with a strong geographical hue, "true places" are not down on any map. Therefore, maps are not descriptive in the sense of replicating a static geographical reality, scientifically. Rather, maps assert particular "geographical imaginations" (Gregory, 1994) by naturalising into supposedly rigid and unchangeable spatialities a political world that, in fact, is fast-paced, mutable, and riven by contestation[11]. This implies that what cannot be found on the map either does not exist or is a violation of the status quo: a myth in the former case, an illegitimate defiance in the latter. In this perspective, cartography is an exercise of dominance historicising an order while eradicating all other possibilities. However, the contingent nature inherent in such practice of discrete objectification of space is routinely denied insofar as the visual representation of borders needs to be socialised as faithful to reality, which is to say purified from partisan interests and somehow adherent to the "natural" distribution of equivalent units on the earth's surface. On the contrary, the subliminal influence of mapmaking on the reproduction of geographical knowledge sustains power-laden narratives. In this regard, postmodern thinking has deconstructed the discursive formations embedded in and enacted through maps (Harley, 1989; Edney, 1993, 2009; Black, 2000). It is worth noting that cartography as practice came into being in the context of military and commercial ventures, just like the establishment of geography as academic discipline in the second half of 19th century was integral to the colonial expansion of European empires. The struggle over geography, Edward Said wrote, "is not only about soldiers and cannons but also

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[10] Only passing reference is made here to these concepts, which nevertheless are addressed in the theoretical chapter, with particular emphasis given to the territorialisation of power and identity through extractive regimes.
[11] By the way, Masoud Barzani himself agrees on the contingent nature of cartography, as he said: "First of all, they are man-made maps, not natural. Look at the trials of other peoples in Czechoslovakia, Balkan, and the Soviet Union. Why people think only Kurdistan is committing a crime because we want to express our opinions and our people want to determine their fate?". "Barzani: What al-Maliki committed against the region exceeds Saddam's al-Anfal Operation; no one spoke up", al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 31, 2017; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (Said, 1993: 7). Said meant that the production of geographical knowledge has long been the ideological foundation of imperialism insofar as it separated a metropolitan core from subaltern peripheries to be conquered, controlled, and "civilized" by the force of arms. Imaginative geographies of distant places and primitive cultures supported the construction of "other" subjects, thus setting the stage for their hegemonic incorporation. Said's reflection on power and representation, however, has not lost explanatory breadth over time. Rather, it casts a long shadow on how discursive practices are infused in any spatial ordering. Along these lines, recent work in the sub-field of critical geopolitics stressed that geographical representations are tacitly involved in the reproduction of a colonial present (Gregory, 2004) and power hierarchies more generally (O'Tuathail, 1996; O'Tuathail & Dalby, 1998; Agnew, 2004).

Despite the central role of geography in framing the Kurdish imaginary, it was rightly noted that there is a dearth of spatial studies about Kurdish issues (Gambetti & Jongerden, 2011; Kaya, 2012). In fact, Kurdistan appears to be a fascinating example of the unsolved struggle over geography mentioned above. As noted, the post-Ottoman state system has borne the mark of deception and dispossession for every Kurd. For this reason, the map of an extensive Greater Kurdistan (*Kurdistan Mezin*) straddling over present-day state boundaries and reuniting the lost homeland is "the most visible weapon in the Kurdish nationalist arsenal" and "the most visible form of discourse about Kurdistan" (O'Shea, 2004: 7). Yet, a pan-Kurdish state was never even close to being attained, if not claimed as such (van Bruinessen, 1992). The Mahabad Republic established in Iran was the only and ephemeral attempt. In the past, autonomous Kurdish principalities or emirates were allowed to rise under the Ottoman indirect rule from the 16th century onwards to mould a security belt along the war-torn open frontier with Persia, but were annexed after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in late 18th century (Izady, 2015). Although the Ottoman's "unite and rule" policy had encouraged Kurdish ruling clans to exercise significant authority over their territories, no principality was strong enough to emancipate fully from imperial control (Ozoglu, 2012). Moreover, tribes were often at loggerheads with each other over local supremacy. The Safavid dynasty was less malleable, a result of which many Kurdish principalities made their oaths of allegiance to the Ottomans. Thereafter the provision of garrisons at the frontier in exchange for land would have set the basis of center-periphery relations, but Persians would have remained wary of Kurdish autonomy and opposed the formation of large tribal confederations (ibidem). Hence, Kurdish-inhabited borderlands ended up being choked in the power struggle between Sunni Ottomans and Shi'a Safavids. Kurdish tribes exploited to some degree their strategic location, lying across overland trading routes: support to one side or another was often fickle and easy to switch. Nevertheless, poor imperial control and marauding armies crossing the region were amongst the reasons why the "tribal nomadic mode of life [continued] longer than in surrounding areas" (O'Shea 2004: 81). It is not accidental that the Greater Kurdistan is devoid of a center, politically. Furthermore, despite the image of a prosperous nation deprived of its rightful position at the heart of the Middle

East, it has never been a homogenous region – economically, religiously, and even linguistically (van Bruinessen, 1992: 2). Quite tellingly, there is no agreement on its geographical extension even amongst Kurds themselves.

This vagueness notwithstanding, the cartographic representation crucially anticipates and gives substance to an explicit political project. In other words, the "mental map" (Gould & White, 2012) of Kurdistan carries with it "a real geopolitical and national existence" (Culcasi, 2010: 107) for advocates and deniers alike. In this perspective, the relational process of sensing and constructing the Kurdish homeland raises a few points that are worth commenting on. First, the coexistence of mythical and practical interpretations of Kurdistan (McDowall, 2003: 3) reveals that the unifying and powerful idea of the Greater Kurdistan has been practiced along different trajectories in the host states. Despite the partial disconnection of sub-state nationalist parties, pan-Kurdish identity binds the four major quadrants of Kurdistan to cross-border solidarity and a deep sense of brotherhood, which becomes tangible especially in times of trauma, as shown recently by reactions to the ISIS insurgency and the pivotal event of the siege of Kobanî (Gourlay, 2018), when the KRG sent military reinforcements regardless of antipathy with the TEV-DEM coalition governing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Second, depicting an ideal Kurdish heartland on an alternative canvas of the Middle East has a normative function: stylized on a map, contiguity becomes continuity, and continuity creates the impression of cultural homogeneity (Farinelli, 2009). In so doing, mapmaking has the same effects of logical inference since it upholds a political argument for an independent Kurdish state. It is tied to a "historical myth of continuous inhabitancy" that could not be found in past legal or political institutions (O'Shea, 2004: 57). This is the clearest illustration of what is argued at the beginning of the paragraph: maps do not make intelligible outer edges and internal lines of a given world, but fill it up with arbitrary and thus contestable meanings. From the side of Kurdish nationalists, filling the void of their geopolitical marginalization with a rival geographical knowledge has been the primary discursive tool to build up legitimacy, tighten the diaspora, and gather support from the international community in order to pressure regional governments for more favourable conditions to develop autonomy.

Farinelli argues that Kurdistan is exception to the geographic pattern of the modern state that subordinates mountains and depressions to the domination of plains – the epicentres of the spatialisation of territory (ibidem: 90-93). In fact, Kurds somehow fell victim of the historical evolution of the notion of territory, which from the 17th century onwards came to be increasingly identified with the state jurisdiction. In contrast to previous models of political control, territory was given with an active role: no longer the recipient of authority, but the source itself of authority. Just as the frontiers that had marked for centuries indefinite areas of encounter and friction between empires (the Ottoman to the west; the Safavid and Qajar to the east; the Russian to the north) solidified into borders outlining the perimeter of sovereignty, the high-lying mountains locating the Kurdish collective memory were

elected as the ultimate physical barriers to delimit and define national homogenisation within emergent nation-states. The Treaty of Lausanne sealed that ontological shift: "Southern Kurdistan becomes Northern Iraq" (ivi). Even nowadays, labelling the region with different geographical referents connotes contrasting territorial claims[12]. Hence, the irreconcilable tension between Kurdish tribes and surrounding flatlands lies in the transformation of the condition of peripherality at the end of the 19[h] century. McDowall shares that understanding:

> "Except to its own inhabitants Kurdistan must be considered a peripheral region, lying along the geopolitical fault line between three power centres of the Middle East. Until the beginning of the twentieth century no one cared very much about the boundaries of Kurdistan, or the numbers of people who lived there. (…) All that changed in the twentieth century. One reason has already been given: the anxiety of the new states to impose their identity on all peoples within their territory. Another reason is strategic: the mountains certainly provide Iran and Iraq with a defensible strategic frontier; to move the boundary either west or east of Kurdistan would not make strategic sense to either state. Turkey's attitude to its frontiers in Kurdistan is special. It has an emotional and ideological view that its frontiers (except with Iraq) cannot be changed without threatening the foundations of the republic." (McDowall, 2003: 7)

The epochal transition from periphery of transnational empires to periphery of nation-states, and from porous frontiers to militarized borders, explains much of the genesis of Kurdish nationalism, as it is explained in the following pages. What is notable for the purpose of this research is that the fulfilment of the geological potential enabled Iraqi Kurds to counter their cartographical elimination and reach the goal of becoming a true place also on the map of global energy transactions.

1.3 In pursuit of nationhood

Despite the many Kurdistan-s and separate strategies to pursue self-determination, nationalists in the region and the diaspora have been nurturing the semblance of a culturally cohesive and politically united people also through the cartographic discourse. These claims of territorial continuity embody subjective ethnicist views exaggerating extent and consistency of Kurdish-inhabited areas to the disadvantage of other ethnic groups (Kaya, 2012: 14): Kurdistan is presented, indeed, as a distinct ethnic territory through a discursive process of symbolic manipulation, which equates the history of the region to the history of the Kurdish nation (ibidem: 125). Without taking into account this foundational element Kurdish nationalism cannot be understood. As noted by van Bruinessen (1994), Kurdish leaders had

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[12] For a much recent example, the draft of the 2018 federal budget law sent to the Iraqi parliament for approval, which inter alia proposed a reduction of the KRG share from 17% to 12.67%, labelled the autonomous KRI as "Northern Iraqi Provinces", to the fury of Kurdish MPs.

clear in mind that the dream of a unitary and independent Kurdistan primarily served the purpose of stitching up internal divisions and raising a stronger ideological flag, but sub-state nationalist movements in practice "refrained from openly embracing pan-Kurdish ideals" and restricted the scope of self-determination to the boundaries of the host countries. In short, nationalists fell back to the more feasible solution of distinct paths to autonomy. In this light, cross-border cooperation with "sister organisations" in Turkey and Iran during the 1970s "was to support the struggle of the Iraqi Kurds, not to organise pan-Kurdish activities" (ibidem: ?). This notwithstanding, the Greater Kurdistan has remained the ideal long-term image to which any Kurd would aspire.

As seen, correspondence between a people definable in ethnic terms and a bounded territory is a logical stretch for the sake of creating a specific political subjectivity (the Kurds) vis-à-vis other collective subjects. Among the various criteria upon which the 'us' vs. 'them' dialectic relies, territorial rootedness is found to be one of the most persuasive markers of differentiation, whereas the multi-religious and multilingual heterogeneity of Kurdish tribes diluted, instead, the significance of other identity markers. As a consequence, nationalist myth-making insisted much on the immanent identification with the mountainous homeland in order to ground and substantiate legitimate aspirations for self-determination[13]. Whether or not the homeland is possessed alters none of the symbolic potency: as Anthony Smith points out, territory is relevant to ethnicity "because of an alleged and felt symbiosis between a certain piece of earth and 'its' community", so much so that "a land of dreams is far more significant than any actual terrain" (1986: 28). The passage seems to be tailored to the Kurdish case. After all, the full effort of the Ba'athist regime to de-territorialize Kurdish settlements provides a strong counterproof of how relevant the sense of place is for ethnic belonging, or rather its construction. Practices of displacement and resettlement were not an Iraqi prerogative: in comparable ways, the de-Kurdification policies enforced by all the other regional governments targeted the emotional bond with land "to dismantle the tribal structure and crush Kurdish resistance" (Gambetti & Jongerden, 2011: 377). It is therefore surprisingly, academically, that Kurdish nationalism has not been explored extensively through the lens of territorial identity, with the exception of O'Shea's anatomy of Kurdish imagined geography and few other studies that are mentioned in these pages. The present work moves towards further integration of this line of research from the angle of resource geographies and resource ecologies.

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[13] It should be clarified that acknowledging the importance of myth making is not to say that Kurds and Kurdistan are historically baseless, nor more artificial entities than the surrounding nation-states. Being sameness and difference social constructs that are transmitted over generations, ethnicity and nations are invariably fictional and contingent in any case, though carrying an actual meaning for those who define themselves by reference to such categories (cf. Smith 1986: 4). Therefore, it is not a matter of true or false communities, but of how these are imagined, to use Benedict Anderson's language (2006: 6). In line with a constructivist approach this research rejects any ontological foundation for the concepts mentioned above. Rather, attention is paid to how such concepts are practiced in context and are employed purposefully to fabricate political realities. I return on this point in both theoretical and methodological chapters.

Scholars in the field of Kurdish Studies typically devote much space to the explication of who the Kurds *are* – that is to say upon which elements the common in-group identity is premised, what are the boundaries of ethnic inclusion, and whether a Kurdish nation exists or ever existed. Scholars have long debated around the core characteristics underneath the divisiveness of Kurdish society. It is no wonder that such literature has frequently being used for ideological purposes from one side or another, if not outright politicized[14]. For a collective actor denied of ethnic distinctiveness that "did not begin writing their own history until the sixteenth century" (Ozoglu, 2012: 41), ethnographic and historical inquiries were fundamental to reclaim political agency and validate liberation struggles across the region. It is a twist of fate that one of the first anthropological studies on Kurdish tribes owes to Sir Mark Sykes (1908), the English diplomat who would have later shaped with François Picot the geopolitical equilibrium that shattered the Kurdistan homeland into pieces. To look back for a moment to the tremendous influence of geographical knowledge in dictating and gauging the Kurdish question, Ünver comments that since Sykes' early ethnographic account "identifying and predicting Kurdish politics through the use of geographic designations has become somewhat of a regular practice" (Ünver, 2016: 66). The previous section corroborates this view.

However, ethnic consciousness (referred to as Kurdishness) should not be conflated with national identity (*Kurdayetî*)[15]. If ethnicity is "a matter of myths, memories, values and symbols" (Smith, 1986),

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[14] Given the contested and sensitive status of Kurdish issues, it is not unusual for scholarly works to be blamed for supporting partisan interests and, hence, be discredited as political. For instance, in response to criticism about a biased position on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Joost Jorgenden replied that making sense of any group requires taking the perspective of the actor itself and translates into "listening to what those active within the organisation have to say about themselves [and] engaging with how they see the world and how they explain themselves and their actions" (2016: 97). The same epistemological perspective underpins this dissertation too. Jorgenden was well aware, of course, that half-hearted reception to his work is due to the political circumstance for which the PKK is commonly labeled (and thus delegitimized) as terrorist, being the organisation blacklisted by several Turkey's NATO allies because of the threat it has posed to Turkish national integrity and security. Hence, accusations of embodying a sympathetic position with the party's doctrine or otherwise being apologetic of violent acts easily fall on those researchers whose analyses distance themselves from a strictly defined counter-terrorist framework. Without entering into the substance of these objections, which would entail a separate treatment of the PKK's profile without taking inaccurate lexical shortcuts, a general point can be made concerning the researcher's autonomy. In this regard, Jongerden's rebuttal reminded me of Kaplan's pioneering study on right-wing extremism and religious radicalism (1997), which received even worse charges since Kaplan's participatory fieldwork raised the suspect that he shared somehow the radical and racist arguments of his interlocutors. It is worth saying, to use Kaplan's own words, that the difference "between 'seeing through the eyes of the other' and buying into the world view of the other" (Kaplan, 2015: 4) should be clear and understandable enough to any reader approaching a scientific contribution.

[15] Kurdayetî generally describes pan-Kurdish patriotism, or "the idea of and struggle for relieving the Kurds from national oppression by uniting all parts of Kurdistan under the rule of an independent Kurdish state" (Hassanpour quoted in O'Shea, 2004: 131). Contrary to Arab nationalisms it is characterised as secular, despite the historical importance of religious affiliations within Kurdish society.

the appeal to the nation[16] evokes a richer universe of meaning than a narrative of the origins or the belonging to a culturally-defined group: it asserts the collective aspiration to achieve political rights to govern itself. In other words, when self-represented in national terms, an ethnic community strives to get recognized as polity. Ethno-nationalism, both an ideology and a movement, bridges the "leap of imagination" in between (Strohmeier, 2003: 3). In a few lines I touched many concepts that would need a separate dissertation given the ever expanding literature and the puzzling conceptual nodes they entail. Therefore, I do not provide here a comprehensive treatment around the notions of nation, nationalism, and ethnicity. The reader might find much better companions in the works that are cited here and there throughout the chapter. My interest is empirical, so to speak: I look at the contextual manifestations of the concepts above, meaning the ways these collective referents are framed and socialized in the case at hand, especially in connection with the petro-culture that has become the guiding light of KRG policies.

In this sense, I follow Brubaker's crucial recommendation on not taking a world of nations for granted (1996: 21). By that expression, Brubaker means that the substantialist (or realist) approach informing discussions on nationhood "presuppose the existence of the entity that is to be defined" (ibidem: 14). The substantalist view is problematic because it precisely mixes up categories of practice and categories of analysis: the practice of nationalism and its epiphenomenon (the nation) are reified at the theoretical level, as a result of which a political fiction is misconstrued as a real and enduring entity outside time and space. Hence, Brubaker warns against reproducing this process and suggests rethinking the nation "not as substance but as institutionalized form; not as collectivity but as practical category; not as entity but as contingent event" (ibidem: 16). This is key for a number of reasons. In the first place, it frames nationhood as the product of political will and not as a matter of fact waiting for savvy entrepreneurs to pick it up. Kurdish nationalists hold, in fact, quite the opposite belief: the ancient Kurdish nation engendered the nationalist cause. The narrative of a great awakening that gathers force from historical continuity and rediscovers a glorious past is understandable, of course, but inaccurate from an analytical point of view. It makes explicit the tension between the objective modernity and the subjective antiquity of nations (Anderson, 2006: 5). As Brubaker puts it plainly, nationalism is "governed by the properties of political fields" within which such ideology is induced to blossom and "not by the properties of collectivities" (ibidem: 17). Moreover, the same goes for ethnicity in general and Kurdishness in particular insofar as these constructs should not be intended as fixed and absolute entities. The creation of ethnicity is rather the culmination of a negotiation involving several stakeholders and, from that point on, the "ground for a hegemonic struggle between internal groups" (Tekdemir, 2018: 2).

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[16] Anderson's definition of nations as imagined political communities is now customary and, consequently, overused. According to his view, nations are cultural artefacts that are imagined, limited, and sovereign.

Brubaker adds a seemingly provocative corollary: nations happen, do not develop. This proposition runs counter most of the literature, which posits the gradual emergence of nations on the breeding ground of ethnic solidarity or as a consequence of long-term structural trends. Nevertheless, he argues that an eventful perspective is better equipped to chase the processual dynamics of nationalism and investigate how a certain national vision suddenly crystallized in a specific context. We will see that this assumption proves to have a heuristic added value for the case-study given that the genealogy of Kurdayetî shows, indeed, that the claim of a Kurdish nation was not the result of a linear process. Prior to WWI, most Kurdish leaders were coopted within the Ottoman high bureaucracy. However, their "political and military activities (...) reflected the desire of powerful Kurdish lineages to consolidate, expand, or recover their regional influence"; only after the disintegration of the Empire it "seemed unavoidable that they actively promoted nationalism" (Özoğlu, 2001: 383). Therefore, the rise of Kurdish nationalism is much closer to the idea of a rupture. In methodological terms, Brubaker's course of action refrains from large generalizations and focuses on contingent and contextual factors with the purpose of getting a richer understanding of a specific case. I wrote these pages in that spirit.

Tribalism and the late emergence of Kurdish nationalism

Bearing the considerations above in mind, an epistemological warning is in order. Writing of Kurds and Kurdistan fixes in a literary sense a people and a place with mutually reinforcing ethnic and territorial anchors. This is unavoidable to some extent, but it is worth reiterating that these signifiers are not self-evident objects of study, but categories of belonging through which a community describes themselves, just like any other social construct. The point is not inconsequential in that it cautions from naturalizing categories of practice, as Brubaker says, and in the case at hand suggests decoupling Kurdish ethnic self-representation from the far recent graft of national projects onto that basis. In this regard, van Bruinessen details the concurrence of two competing processes of incorporation occurring during the interwar period and "involving the same peasant, lower-class urban and marginal tribal populations":

> "incorporation into the emerging Turkish (or Iraqi, or Iranian) nation-state and incorporation into the Kurdish ethnie (which by the 1920s and 1930s cannot yet be called a nation because it lacked integrating structures). The peasantry was late in actively opting for an identity, but among the Alevi tribes of Turkey there was in the 1920s a lively debate on which identity to choose, Kurdish or Turkish. Some of their chieftains threw in their lot with the Kurdish nationalists, some opted for the secular state against their long-time hostile Sunni Kurdish neighbours and declared themselves to be "real Turks", and many others went on considering Alevism as their only relevant identity. The Yezidis, Kaka'is and other similar communities in Iraq faced analogous choices, although they were not subject to great pressure to declare themselves Arabs before the Ba'ath party came to

power. For several decades, the process of nation-building in Turkey, Iraq and Iran continued quite successfully, without however being capable of preventing the gradual incorporation of peripheral groups into the Kurdish ethnie." (van Bruinessen, 1994: ?)

This long passage is presented here in full since the picture of complexity that emerges out of it gives an insight into the kaleidoscopic composition of Kurdish ethnos, whose core of Kurmanji- and Sorani-speaking Sunni tribes blends with an assemblage of various religious and linguistic groups. Looking at the Iraqi side in particular, van Bruinessen specifies: "we find not only speakers of all Kurdish and various Gurani dialects, Yezidis and Shi'is as well as Sunni Muslims, but also Assyrians (sometimes called "Kurdish Christians", a concept that would have been unthinkable a few decades earlier), and even some Arabic-speaking Faylis" (ibidem: ?). With reference to Smith's concept of ethnie[17], he argues that at the beginning of the 20th century Kurds resembled the ideal type of an aristocratic-lateral ethnie given that the Kurdish upper stratum began incorporating the subaltern peasantry into a common ethnic category, though this interpretation is disputed by other scholars who have preferred the opposite notion of demotic-vertical ethnie (cf. Maxwell & Smith, 2015). Either way, it is crucial to note that ethnocentrism had no nationalist connotations at the time. McDowall agrees that we can talk of ethnic consciousness only from 1918 onwards. Nonetheless, at that time the Kurdish ethnie had yet to be translated into some form of nationalist mobilization.

Besides the cultural variety mentioned before, such delay has much to do with the tribal system and social stratification[18]. It has been noted, indeed, that tribal allegiances to *aghas* and *sheikhs* were inconsistent with and worked actively against the development of nationalism (Gunter, 2009: xxx). McDowall (2003) explains that group solidarity within Kurdish tribes was based upon two elements: kinship, rooted in a myth of common ancestry that usually traced back to the early Islamic period, and territoriality. Kurds with no tribal connections were for the most part peasants subject to landlordism. Tribe is an imprecise and broad term, he notes, which covers social structures of different size and shape, "from tribal confederation down to clan, sept or section, and to a tented encampment of probably about 20 tents" (ibidem: 13). A major consideration to be highlighted is that tribal chieftainship is described as incompatible with the expansion of state administration because the latter overwrote the role of local leaders in the arbitration of disputes and the allocation of resources - that is to say the roots of authority over tribesmen. Interestingly, McDowall suggests that the "conflict between the role of the tribe and that of the state [makes] one sceptical about tribal chiefs whose utterances are apparently aimed at a Kurdish state, as opposed to an independent tribal entity" (ibidem: 15). Although urbanization and migrations have changed the face of Kurdish society and eroded the

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[17] In his reflection on nations and ethno-cultural communities, Smith briefly defines *ethnie* as "named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity" (1986: 32).

[18] On Kurdish tribalism see also Yalçın-Heckmann (1991), Koohi-Kamali (2003) and Ozoglu (2012).

feudal lineage, tribal affiliations and allegiances have remarkably persisted over time and still retain a considerable influence, according to McDowall because of the failure of regional states to address the needs of peripheral communities that were marginalised on the grounds of ethnic discrimination. In line with a long tradition of archaeological research on Kurdish descent, Izady provides a list of all major tribal organisations for each of the four geographical axes of Kurdistan and specifies that in most cases "these tribes have been in existence - with the same names - for several thousand years" (Izady, 2015: 74). The traditional social texture of Kurdistan allows to better understand why such "primordial loyalties do not suddenly cease to function" with the emergence of modern notions of nation and class (van Bruinessen, 1992: 6). On the contrary, coexistence and interaction between primordial and modern loyalties have permeated Kurdish societies to this day. And what is more, the evolution of Kurdish nationalism into mass movement was precisely driven by general obedience to tribal and religious loyalties given that local leaders capitalised on that relational base to maintain or take a prominent political position against central governments (ibidem: 7). This ambivalent interplay brought tribal rivalries into the magmatic formation of nationalist mobilisations, with the adverse outcome of undermining unity. The endurance of tribalism in Kurdish politics is quite obvious when looking, for instance, at the patrimonial and territorial constituencies of KDP and PUK, which McDowall equates not by chance to "contemporary neo-tribal confederations" (McDowall, 2003: 16).

This excursus deepens the understanding of Kurdish nationalism at the historic juncture in which neighbours took the form of modern nation-states and vehemently embarked on the plan of forcefully assimilating Kurdish communities. A second element that can be drawn from van Bruinessen's long quotation is that Kurds as a whole underwent the impact of the three hegemonic cultures (Turkish, Arabic, Persian) upon which the state-based national identities in Turkey, Iraq and Iran were established (Sheyholislami, 2011), as a result of which Kurdishness was later subordinated or denied altogether. In all these contexts, nationalism came to be the ideological hallmark of urban bourgeoisie and new classes ascending to power, while slow integration into the capitalist market at the turn of the 20th century was shifting the loci of economic activity and thus expropriating landowning classes of their traditional social status (cf. van Bruinessen, 1992; Tripp, 2002; Vali, 2014; Marr, 2018). In parallel to socio-economic changes, a new hierarchy of values and obligations came into view. This is a point well worth bearing in mind because it indicates the reactive character of Kurdish nationalism. As seen above, the rule of tribal chiefs did not extend beyond the reach of kinship relations, territorial identification, and tribal customs; hence, leaders were not seen, nor considered themselves as representatives of the Kurdish people (McDowall, 2003). It is widely held, instead, that a shared sense of ethnic consciousness properly emerged in the wake of the postwar punitive settlement. Yet, that fledgling spark went further to sketch the contours of ethno-nationalism, strictly speaking, at a much later stage only. Although Kurdish notables and intellectuals had already sowed nationalist sentiments at the turn of the century

(Ozoglu, 2012), Sheyholislami clarifies that a mass movement came to prominence not earlier than 1960s in Iraq and the mid 1980s in Turkey (Sheyholislami, 2011: 202).

Then, the late emersion of Kurdish nationalism happened due to the traumatic encounter with ideologies and practices that accompanied the political and administrative centralisation into newly founded states[19]. Ethnic pluralism that was distinctive of the Ottoman and Persian empires gave way to the reconstitution of citizenry upon core exclusive nationalities defined in ethno-cultural terms. While the suzerainty model faded away, center-periphery relations were modified to accommodate the rise of sovereign nation-states, whose logic could not be reconciled anymore with state-tribe relations, such as in the heydays of Kurdish principalities: the consolidation of national armies and central bureaucracies marked, indeed, the end of military outsourcing and tributary decentralization. These processes of homogenisation levelling multicultural societies were anything but linear and conciliatory. Rather, the integration of culturally undifferentiated nation-states leaned on the violent denial of ethnic minorities in order to prevent any rival claim to nationhood to rise. Any community identified as such was meant to melt down coercively into a national body moulded on the primacy of the ethnic majority. The collective self-image of national identity was believed to override any other group identity. Hence, the modernization of traditional institutions was invested with authoritarian traits insofar as decentralizing tendencies and local autonomies were targeted as anti-historical and backward relics of the past (Vali, 2014: 5).

It is against this background that Abbas Vali describes Kurdish nationalism as "a modern phenomenon, an outcome of the socio-economic and cultural dislocations" foisted on Kurds (Vali, 2014: 1). Although he refers in that passage to the birth of nationalism in Iranian Kurdistan, Vali made it clear that the same holds true elsewhere since central governments equally pursued the suppression of the ethno-linguistic Kurdish difference. Therefore, "opposition to the denial of Kurdish identity and resistance to the imposed national identities" (Vali, 1998: ?) came to be the fundamental link between otherwise divergent nationalist movements[20], which nevertheless have proved to be unable to overcome the innate fragmentation of Kurdistan, let alone a crippling geopolitical partition. Vali attributes this failure to the chronic weakness of Kurdish civil societies, as a by-product of which nationalism turned to "abortive regional autonomist movements" depending on foreign patronage and internal clientelism – two features that still characterize the present days. It might be said in retrospect that a unitary platform bringing together Kurdish nationalists across four sovereign states was very unlikely, to put it mildly.

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[19] One of the many paradoxes surrounding the Kurdish question is that one amongst the most influential theorists of Turkish nationalism, Ziya Gökalp, was of Kurdish origin and came from Diyarbakir, the would-be capital of Bakur (North Kurdistan).

[20] Likewise, Ozoglu stresses that in its early phase Kurdish nationalism was affected by rivalries between Kurdish notables, and competition "continued in the form of opposing factions in Kurdish nationalist politics". This notwithstanding, hostility against Turkish-Kemalist nationalism was unanimous (Özoğlu, 2001: 383-384).

Furthermore, the varying intensity and forms of incorporation policies were additional hurdles setting Kurds on discontinuous tracks and timelines. However, Vali points out that the paradoxical outcome of these unfavourable conditions is local autonomist movements without a political culture beneath – in short, nationalists without nationalism.

This interpretation falls under the modernist theories of nationalism following the foremost contribution by Ernest Gellner (1983), whose conceptualisation sees nations and nationalism as modern phenomena tied to the transition from agrarian to industrialised societies in Western Europe. Nationalism, in particular, is understood as an ideology forging the nation based on a principle of congruity that commands the readjustment of political boundaries. Through such discursive operation ethnicity may serve as the benchmark to legitimize the political rights of a given community. If we accept this argument, we also accept "by implication [that] ethnic relations in their pre-political mould were no more than a means of individual identification, essentially devoid of historical significance" (Vali, 2014: xiv). Quite the contrary, the dominant discourse resonating among Kurdish nationalists holds the existence of a Kurdish nation from time immemorial. In this sense, the nation is essentially pre-modern and conflates with the idea of a "real biological ancestry" (Smith, 1986) abstracted from historical forces. The debate between modernist and primordialist views has been at times particularly heated since it goes to the heart of Kurds' troubled legitimacy[21]. It is obvious that the appeal of the latter ones backs up more effectively the image of foreign occupiers subjugating Kurds and quartering

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[21] Most of the authors cited in this paragraph converge on modernist readings of Kurdish nationalism, though with different accents. For a brief but incisive review of the debate see Sheyholislami (2011). Izady, instead, is among those scholars that uphold an essentialist recounting of a Kurdish nation based upon a "long common historical experience, their common worldview, common national character, integrated economy, common national territory, and collective future aspirations" (2015: 183). His position places emphasis on discourses and techniques used by sovereign powers to erase Kurds: "They have glossed over the Kurdish past, denying the originality of this ancient culture, and preventing original research on any topic of national importance to ethnic Kurds. They have created and foisted false identities onto the Kurds—such as the labels "Mountain Turk" in Turkey, and "Umayyad Arab" in Syria and Iraq for the Yezidi Kurds. They have simply denied the Kurds separate ethnic existence in Iran, Soviet Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. In doing this these modern nation-states have done plenty to confuse even the Kurds themselves. It is an astonishing fact, if not an outright embarrassment, that not a single archaeological object has ever been identified as "Kurdish" in any museum anywhere in the world - not even a broken arrowhead, a pottery shard, or a piece of mosaic. This omission is made more glaring by the fact that every other ethnographic grouping of people, including the stone-age cultures of pre-Columbian North America, Australia, the Pacific islands, and Africa, has had historical artifacts identified for it in museums" (ibidem: xiii). The stereotype of primitive bandits from the Zagros Mountains plundering the plains predates the formation of nation-states and was typical in both Western and Muslim accounts (O'Leary, 2018). O'Shea rejects Izady's work as "one of the most outstanding [and] astonishing attempts to create a complete Kurdish history by using a combination of remembered, recovered, invented and borrowed history" (2004: 59). The critique is severe, but fair. In her view, the fundamental flaw lies in the professed coincidence between a geographic area and a chosen people. Izady follows a syllogism for which the communities inhabiting Kurdistan that "are not unequivocally connected with another identifiable nation" are Kurdish. Pushing the argument to extremes, Kurdish ancestors are lost in the mists of time. O'Shea rightly reproaches the widespread influence of a mythological theme disguised as the "accepted version of events".

their homeland. Yet, advocates on both sides share a basic assumption: whether an offshoot of modernity or a timeless entity, the pre-national Kurdish ethnos "is isomorphic with the nation it eventually becomes" (Maxwell & Smith, 2015: 778)[22]. As problematic as this statement may be, it should be said that any correspondence between such unstable catalysts of collective identification – ethnos and nation – cannot be other than unstable too, which leaves the discussion open to diametrically opposite ways of looking at them, though primordialism – "a long-dead horse that writers on ethnicity and nationalism continue to flog" (Brubaker, 1996: 15) – is generally dismissed nowadays (Eller & Coughlan, 1993). In accordance to an anti-essentialist perspective, I find myself in line with such critique.

Nationalisms under the same sky: otherness and segmentation in modern Iraq

Unraveling the knots that tie ethnos to nation, however, brings out the very essence of Kurdish politics. Vali finds it – and I subscribe to the same view – in the heavy-handed suppression of Kurdishness by central governments:

> "The perpetual suppression of Kurdish identity is the condition of the Kurds' "otherness" in these societies, their positions as strangers in their own homes. That the Kurds remain unrepresentable is the fundamental cause of their obsession with their identity" (Vali, 1998: ?)

This condition of otherness defines Kurdish unity in the same way as Kurdistan is located by its absence from the contemporary political map. Kurdish nationalists reproduced otherness in their ideological platform to such degree that what I called above the traumatic encounter with sovereign powers (and their official national identities) was actually constitutive of *Kurdayetî*. As identity formation is a relational process, Kurds' national self-reflection stemmed from the fact of being degraded to an ethnic minority not entitled to act or speak as such. With the late and 'mandated' nationalization of Mashreq during the 20th century, when national self-determination was emerging as the critical principle of political legitimation, Kurdish elites imported the same repertoire of their stronger interlocutors. Hence, a diluted sense of ethnic belonging was gradually socialized along national lines – an equal and opposite reaction to the aggressive formation of nation-states on the doorstep. Put it differently, confrontation with central governments in Baghdad, Ankara, and Teheran engendered a type of

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[22] Maxwell and Smith produced an excellent meta-analysis of Kurdish historiography pointing out the predominant influence of Anthony Smith's model of singular transformation from non-yet-national ethnie to national community, so much so that the terminology offered by other renowned theorists of nationalism – Benedict Anderson's imagined community (2006) or Eric Hobsbawn's proto-nationalism (1990) – is cited interchangeably to actually resemble Smith's conceptualization. They explain convincingly that for Kurdish experts and sympathizers the concept of ethnie "fulfils a deeply felt longing for national antiquity", which better sustains a narrative of national awakening, thus resolving tension between a modern nation and its primordial roots (2015: 784). Despite that, there is no consensus on the historical point of departure of Kurdish nationalism.

resistance that gave emphasis to nationalist rhetoric and overtones. Older communal ties and solidarities were thus reconstituted to accommodate pragmatically with the logic and the boundaries of the state.

In Iraq the same happened to Shi'a and Sunni Arabs, whose local histories and social strata were equally at odds with the idea of politically cohesive sectarian communities and were urged to remodel their self-image to capture the state apparatus and fit with territorial nationhood (Tripp, 2002). Unlike Turkey and Iran, the Iraqi monarchic and then republican institutions did not rest upon imperial foundations: loyalty to and identification with the state was a matter only for the upper segment of urban elites and local notables co-opted by the Ottomans (Marr, 2010). As masterfully illustrated by Hanna Batatu, Iraq "consisted to no little extent of distinct, self-absorbed, feebly interconnected societies" (Batatu, 1978: 6). In a monumental work on the evolution of the Iraqi social structure from the birth of the Kingdom until the rise of the Ba'ath Party, Batatu underlines that stratification was not limited to conventional vertical and horizontal divisions based on ethnicity, religion, prestige, or wealth, but also found expression in different imprints of social forms and historical periods within the same class[23]. This was due to the overlap between the recent expansion of private property and commercial ties with the world market on one side, and "older social forms attaching value to noble lineage, or knowledge of religion, or possession of sanctity or fighting prowess in tribal raids" on the other side (ivi). While consolidation of statehood occurred at the intersection of these somewhat contradictory tendencies, social plurality implied that localism was still the dominant pattern of political aggregation. The urban-rural divide, tenuous bonds between cities (often disconnected physically and economically), sectarian or tribal differentiation in separate *mahallahs* (neighbourhoods) inside the same city, and even the variety of currencies were striking evidence of many subnational realities (ibidem)[24]. Each of these retained inevitably distinct visions about national integration (Lukitz 2005: 73). As a consequence, in the "formative years" (Kirmanj, 2010) following the British occupation, Iraqi statesmen (Sunni Arabs for the most part) resorted to Arab nationalism – in the outward-looking Nasserist version invoking a larger pan-Arab polity (*qawmiyya*) – as the most promising and legitimate ideological carrier to consolidate the state-building process. Pan-Arabism was not attractive for non-Arab segments, but also Shiites contested its secular orientation. Evidence of the Iraqi divisiveness was the lukewarm reception to Faisal's appointment in Kirkuk, whose denizens voted against the Amir and the prospect of centralization he embodied in the countrywide referendum wanted by Britain to get an imprimatur on the Hashemite ruling family (Bet-Shlimon, 2012: 917; Natali, 2008). Throughout the country, loyalty was given in view of benefits and resources the state apparatus promised to distribute to better off

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[23] On the divisiveness of Iraqi population and the process of national integration see also Lukitz (2005).

[24] "The journey from Baghdad to Basra took a week, and traveling was in itself an adventure. Partly as a consequence of this, the cities differed in their economic orientation. The ties of Mosul were with Syria and Turkey, and those of Baghdad and the Shi'a holy cities with Persia and the western and south-western deserts. Basra looked mainly to the sea and to India" (Batatu 1978: 16).

groups, regardless of an overarching ideology. By 1958, when the Free Officers led by General Qasim overthrew the pro-British monarchic regime, an alternative nationalist version has come to light. Resentment against Western domination prompted the Army, who acted as the bulwark of sovereignty, to propound a patriotic discourse (*wataniyya*) that insisted on the Iraqi specificity (Lukitz 2005). Both variations – *qawmiyya* and *wataniyya* – coexisted, but the latter took hold under the Ba'athist autocracy. Saddam Hussein, in particular, forged an Iraqi-centric doctrine to incorporate Shi'a and Kurdish components into a unified political community by appealing to a common Mesopotamian legacy (Baram, 1983, 1994), but the incipient sectarian segmentation of the state revealed the rather ambiguous nature of the operation. In fact, as Sunni Arab elites already entrenched in the former Ottoman administration had managed to keep the reins tight of key institutions such as the military (which, indeed, deposed the Kingdom), the judiciary, and the bureaucracy, Ba'athist officials had a pragmatic vision of what was at stake. Iraqi nationalism was never meant to be plural and inclusive under the skin. As stressed in paragraph 1.1, the Arabization of Iraqi identity was the ultimate goal of the regime, whereas short-lived alliances with Kurds were reached out of convenience.

The irradiation of a new political space confronted Kurds themselves with a thorough reconsideration of ideological and organizational challenges to exercise their political agency. Although Kurds had never been assembled in some sort of state-like institutions, statelessness became, almost overnight, the symbol of their inability to cope with an already changed reality around them and acquire full political subjectivity. In this light, the dialogue with central governments eventually defined both purposes and strategies of Kurdish national movements (Kaya, 2012). This interaction can be read through Brubaker's distinction between the ideal-types of nationalizing nationalism, which reconfigures and owns the state through the institutionalization of a core nationality defined in ethno-cultural terms, and national minority, "a political stance, not an ethno-demographic fact" whose national self-understanding heads towards the demand for state recognition and collective rights (Brubaker, 1996: 4-6). Albeit mutually antagonistic in their horizons, these endeavours are mirror images and feed off each other. Therefore, the clash between Iraqi and Kurdish nationalisms reflects irreconcilable instances showing the composite reorganization of several political communities within the same polity. Nonetheless, the Kurdish one adds a layer of complexity since nationalist frames remain deeply entangled with the kinship texture. In this sense, nationalism has become the prism through which various Kurdish groups and parties have often articulated parochial interests.

Reactive, factional, ethnicist – these are some of the attributes given to Kurdish nationalists in the overview above. Then, what is missing to guide the reader through next chapters is addressing how the transformation of Iraq into a petro-state refracted on its Kurdish 'other'.

1.4 Crude power: the political geography of oil

If nearly a decade (2003-2011) of US military occupation had already made inroads towards Kurdish autonomy, when in 2014 Iraq found itself once again on the brink of collapse under the blows of the Islamist insurgency raging across large swathes of the country, Kurds were prepared to seize the opportunities and rewards coming their way. As happened few years before, the enfeeblement of central authority afforded Kurds with the chance of challenging the status quo to their advantage. Taking control of hydrocarbon reserves and developing the oil industry, unilaterally, was the brightest opportunity. This is hardly surprising when considering that Iraqis sit upon the world's fifth largest proven reserves of crude, with estimated 148 billion barrels according to BP[25]. Throughout the modern history of Iraq, the oil economy has moulded state making and statecraft to a significant degree. Furthermore, it largely defined the environment in which foreign relations have often taken place, let alone the involvement of external actors in the country's affairs. What is less intuitive, perhaps, is that, albeit a tangible tool of power, oil has exerted an equally tremendous influence on the mechanisms of identity formation. In this sense, the transformative reach of oil goes beyond the monetary rent and the circuits of rent circulation it generates, as well as a simplistic opposition of interests between corporations and governments: it goes to the point of restructuring politics as a whole, from local to national. As illustrated in the empirical chapters, this occurs through a variety of spatial and cultural processes that call into question, dislocate, and remake the social fabric. Following this line of thinking, it might seem that some sort of agency is attributed to a rather material substance. On the contrary, I will make it clear later on that a contextual analysis of the oil complex brings into sharp focus how the seemingly impersonal commodification of crude is woven instead into a dense milieu of relations and power asymmetries. Taking a step back for now, these last pages serve the purpose of explicating what oil has meant for the evolution of Kurdish nationalism.

Floating upon a sea of oil: energy interests and the foundation of the Kingdom

Applying a Marxist worldview, Batatu guessed that being pulled into the capitalist industrial system was the greatest transformation that modern Iraq came through. It had far-reaching structural consequences on every aspect of society[26]. Albeit not the single factor of change, of course, the petroleum industry

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[25] British Petroleum, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, 67th edition, June 2018.

[26] "old local economies, based on the handicraft or boat-building industries and the traditional means of transport (camels and sailing ships), declined or broke asunder; a tribal tillage, essentially self-sufficient and subordinate to pastoralism, gave way to a settled, market-related, tribal agriculture; the communal tribal land and extensive tracts of state domain passed into the hands of ex-warring *shaikhs* and *aghas* without ground of right or any payment whatever; tribes, guilds, and mystic orders lost cohesion or disintegrated; vast masses of people moved from the country and provincial towns to the big cities to enrol in the new army, bureaucracy, or police force, or to find employment in the new businesses that supplied the needs of these institutions, or to swell the ranks of unskilled

played an overwhelming role in that. He noticed that "the outpouring of oil money (...) made the government to a great extent economically autonomous from society, and thus increased its possibilities for absolutism" (Batatu, 1978: 1116). Furthermore, I would add, it also sizeably enlarged the bureaucracy and forged loyalty to the state through the uneven distribution of material benefits. Batatu himself reports that the huge build-up of bureaus and constant increase of public employment meant that in late 1970s one-fifth to one-fourth of Iraqi population was dependent on the emoluments paid with the oil income (ibidem: 1123). In the same vein, Charles Tripp (2002) argues that the oil economy is one of three interlinked factors shaping modern Iraq, being patrimonial ties and the use of violence the other two – which, at a closer look, both thrived upon oil wealth. As noted, the oil income has guaranteed the survival of regimes in Baghdad by funding patronage networks and enabling coercive power.

Even more, petroleum was the glue to the artificial creation of Iraq as envisioned by Britain. It is under British intentions, indeed, that Faisal Bin Hussain Bin Ali Al Hashemi was rewarded with the areas lying along the shores of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, from which the etymology of the word *al-Iraq* comes from[27], for the role he and his father Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca, had played in leading the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans. The three *vilayets* were united into the Kingdom of Iraq, a pro-Western client state ruled by a royal family from the Hijaz with low popular acceptance, particularly amongst Kurds and Shiites who made up most of the Iraqi population. Britain was keen to secure an additional passage to the Suez Canal for shipment routes from colonial possessions in India: then, the fall of the Ottoman Empire was timely for establishing indirect rule over a safe corridor from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, running through the mandate territories of Palestine, Transjordan, and all the way down to Iraq. The second strategic consideration was precisely oil exploitation across a contiguous and prospective area, whereby the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC, later Anglo-Iranian and finally British Petroleum - BP) was already drilling on behalf of the Crown in neighbouring Persia since 1907 (Sluglett, 2007). The First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, was aware of the advantages of oil combustion compared to coal propulsion for keeping naval superiority globally, from higher acceleration to easier refuelling. His proposal for modernizing the fleet was approved by the Parliament in Westminster two weeks ahead of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the outbreak of hostilities (Muttitt, 2011). During WWI, the Royal Navy was all equipped with combustion engines, but at the time Britain was still dependent on the US,

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labourers and noticeably depress their earnings; old ties, loyalties, and concepts were undermined, eroded, or swept away" (Batatu 1978: 1113).

[27] Just like Kurdistan, also Iraq came into being as geographical denomination, although prevalent territorial identities in use were rather attached to locality and were at odds with future national boundaries. For instance, Mosul inhabitants looked more towards Aleppo and Istanbul than Baghdad by means of tribal relations and economic influence in today's north eastern Syria (Marr, 2010). However, such local identities were less politically effective than those built upon kinship and religion.

a potential competitor, for oil imports (Anderson & Stansfield, 2011: 21). Consequently, the British government became the 51% shareholder of APOC, which in 1913 had opened the first oil refinery in Abadan, in south-west Persia on the eastern side of contemporary border with Iraq. The Ottoman entry in the war on the side of the Central Powers threatened British stakes in the area given German rival interests, which the Berlin-Baghdad railway put in plain sight[28]. Therefore, the British strategy for controlling Mesopotamian and Persian oil[29] (along with the imperial communication routes) was far-sighted, but implied the overall political re-composition of the Middle East under foreign tutelage. Put it differently, the mandate system carved up colonial borders in such a way "to accommodate engineered paths of oil" (Havrelock, 2017: 411). In the spirit of the separate agreement signed in 1920 at the San Remo conference by Britain and France to delimit their oil spheres in the Levant, the pair of pipelines departing from Kirkuk and bifurcating at Haditha into divergent routes to reach the ports of Tripoli in Lebanon and Haifa in Palestine[30] on the Mediterranean exemplify that the subterranean map of concessions to be granted to Western-owned oil companies was already implicit in the Sykes-Picot scheme. Indeed, the new elites enthroned by British and French patrons agreed upon the foreign ownership of petroleum resources without objection.

In Iraq, the Hashemites handed over sovereignty on the entire process of commodification, from exploration to pricing, in exchange for a meagre fixed royalty paid to King Faisal's government for each metric ton of output. Through APOC, Britain had pushed for such outcome well ahead of the inception of the Kingdom. Seven years before oil was first struck by the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC, formerly Turkish Petroleum Company) close to the "eternal fire" at Baba Gurgur[31], the concession inked in 1920 had indeed accorded to the company exclusive rights of exploration over most of the country and limited the role of the Iraqi government to the reception of royalty payments (plus minor participation to the development of some key infrastructures), ruling out instead the option of a partnership share. Despite the name IPC was owned in equal shares by APOC, Royal Dutch Shell, Compagnie Française des Pétroles (the forerunner of Total), and a US-based consortium consisting of Standard Oil of New Jersey and Mobil (Tripp 2002: 58). British holdings in the venture showed that national interests drove

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[28] Interestingly, the railway concession included rights of mineral exploration over a 20 kilometres strip on either side of the track (Sluglett, 2007: 3).

[29] The strategic importance of setting a stable foothold in the Middle East to control a large oil supply at the source is clear from the memos of British officials and advisers. As a way of example, the High Commissioner for Iraq Sir Henry Dobbs wrote in October 1927, few days after the Baba Gurgur oil gusher: "The discoveries of immense quantities of oil (…) make it now impossible to abandon control of Ira without damaging important British and foreign interests" (Muttitt, 2011: ?).

[30] The Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline was operational from 1935 to 1948, when the Iraqi government stopped pumping oil through it in retaliation to the first Arab-Israeli war. A new conduit connecting Kirkuk to Banias in Syria replaced the line.

[31] The "eternal fire" at Baba Gurgur is a natural gas seep that has been constantly burning for over 4000 years and was worshiped as a religious site by local inhabitants. More prosaically, the surfacing indicates the southern dome of the super-giant oilfield of Kirkuk.

corporate ones (Sluglett, 2007). After all, placing concessionary economies went hand in hand with the militarization of the oil geography, as much as "IPC air bases formed the nucleus of the Iraqi, Jordanian, and Israeli air forces" (Havrelock, 2017: 412). Shortly thereafter, IPC shareholders formalized a "self-denying clause" for which future oil discoveries inside the red line demarcating the Ottoman inheritance could be not be done independently (Yergin, 2011). What went down in history as the 1928 Red Line Agreement created a powerful cartel based in London and in control of the bulk of oil production from the Middle East for decades. By 1938, IPC and local affiliates in Basra and Mosul had won a series of 75-year long contracts covering the whole Iraqi soil. The profit-sharing agreement was revised in 1952 to introduce a 50-50 formula, which made royalties dependent on the actual level of production and not fixed ex ante as before, thus yielding the Iraqi government a much higher revenue (Alnasrawi, 1994). Nevertheless, IPC monopolized the scene until the 1970s: Baghdad had no say in determining volume of production and posted prices on the trading market.

Black gold leaking out into ethno-sectarian fissures

As the oil sector was getting traction driven by the booming demand for crude worldwide, Iraqi elites sought the long-term goal of building a national and integrated petroleum industry. Signs of defiance began to appear during the 1950s after the nationalization of Iranian oil, although the removal of Prime Minister Mossadegh at the hands of US and British secret services warned against the consequences of breaking from Western control. The foundation of OPEC in 1960 was a stronger shake against the concessionary regime. A year later, through the enactment of the Public Law n. 80, the Iraqi government assumed regulation of all the areas that had not been exploited yet under IPC concessions (ibidem). The Iraq National Oil Company (INOC) was the second step towards national ownership, which was fully achieved in 1972. The nationalisation of IPC was portrayed as a way to earn sovereignty back: the face-off with oil majors was not only over revenues, that is to say the burning issue in the negotiations with oil majors, but even more so about "control of the country by means of control of its primary sources" (Saul, 2007: 749). However, the decision to make oil wealth the mainstay of the economy eventually "bound rather dangerously Iraq's prospects of economic development to only one sector, the performance of which is ultimately beyond the control of the government" (Alnasrawi, 1994: 13). Whereas nationalists broke foreign domination on oil assets, a "rentier"[32] attribute was nevertheless ingrained in the economic structure underpinning the state. Oil revenue to GDP rose from 16% in 1970 to 50% in 1974 (ibidem: 11). Dependency on exports of a single commodity became

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[32] The rentier state paradigm was introduced by Mahdavy (1970) and later systematized by Beblawi and Luciani (1987). The concept, which gained formidable influence through the oil curse thesis, may be summarized as follows: "in oil-exporting countries the state is paid by the oil rent, which accrues to it directly from the rest of the world, and supports society through the distribution or allocation of this rent, through various mechanisms of rent circulation" (Luciani, 2005: 91).

apparent in the 1974 National Development Plan, the last five-year investment plan adopted by Ba'athists, whereby two-thirds of the budget were allocated to industry and the oil sector in particular, providing INOC with funds to pursue a national policy effectively. The overflow of revenues accruing from abroad had an overall distortive effect, hardening despotism and alienating population from the source of national income. Iraq under the Ba'ath Party is most probably the strongest case of an authoritarian rentier state. As Saddam Hussein rose to power in 1979, the management of natural resources was centralized further. Moreover, the oil calculus drove aggressive relations with neighbours: it was on the background of the invasion of the province of Khuzistan (referred to as Arabistan by Iraqis) in 1980, which began an eight year long war with the Iranian sworn enemy; it was at the root of tensions with Kuwait, whereby alleged slant-drilling[33] in the giant Rumaila field at the southern border and oil production over OPEC quotas were the *casus belli* for the Iraqi aggression in 1990. It goes without saying that also the Kurdish question ended up being soaked in oil.

McDowall argues that oil was not a factor until the discovery of the Baba Gurgur field in October 1927: due to unsatisfactory geological surveys, Britain had offered in 1923 half of APOC's holding in the Mosul Petroleum Company (which was associated to IPC) to the Standard Oil of New Jersey in return for US support against Kemalists' claims on the Mosul Vilayet (McDowall, 2003: 143-146). For its part, also Turkey brought to the table exclusive exploitation rights as a last resort to override the arbitration by the League of Nations, which had subscribed to the British position. In fact, Sludgett (2007) maintains that the "vigorous public denials" of British statesmen, upon which McDowall backs his argumentation, hid in plain that the oil affair was inseparable from the discussion on the northern frontier of Iraq during the 1920s, to the extent that plans about oil exploitation actually depended on the permanent inclusion of Mosul in the new country. Either case, it is undeniable that the huge deposits unearthed in Kirkuk changed the whole perspective and would have dreadfully complicated any future discussion on Kurdish autonomy. The perception of being deprived by occupants (first the British, then the Arabs) of natural wealth Kurds should have been naturally entitled was popularized in the nationalist discourse (O'Shea, 2004). After all, the first exploration well ever drilled in the entire Middle East in 1901 was in Chia Surkh, inside today's KRI (Mackertich & Samarrai, 2015). Mulla Mustafa required ceaselessly the inclusion of Kirkuk, Khanaqin, and north-west Mosul oilfields into what should have been formally recognized as the autonomous region of Kurdistan, plus a substantial share of revenue extracted from those fields (McDowall, 2003: 313-314). Discussions with Ba'athist delegations ran aground precisely on these demands, which were not negotiable for both sides[34]. The

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[33] Also known as directional drilling, it is an extractive technique for drilling non-vertical wells.

[34] Besides the economic weight, Ba'athists also feared that a Kurdish administration in the oil-producing province of Kirkuk would have been a Trojan horse at the mercy of Western powers to regain control on lost assets. Given the strained relations with Iran and the fact Kurds were militarily supported by the Shah, the Iraqi veto was made stronger through a closer partnership with the Soviet Union that was formalized in 1972 (M. Van Bruinessen, 1992).

nationalisation of the oil industry exacerbated such sticking point even more since it allowed Baghdad to build up a daunting war machine, which closed the door to any compromise. Outnumbered and outgunned, Peshmerga fell back to the mountains, while energy facilities in Kirkuk were no longer in their artillery range.

However, oil was more than the baseline resource of the national economy or, conversely, a strategic target of warfare for those excluded from power. It carried a symbolic value, upon which ethnic and religious fault lines coalesced. The perennial crisis over the oil city of Kirkuk bears witness to such unstable interplay. A fascinating mosaic of peoples and religions, Kirkuk has long been shared and contested by Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs – and to a lower extent also Chaldo-Assyrians, Armenians – all of whom see the city as a cornerstone of their ethnic identity. The expression 'Kurdish Jerusalem', for instance, is in the common usage amongst most Kurds, which implies that a Kurdish nation is unthinkable without it as political centre, despite the fact that the city has never been exclusively Kurdish. Kirkuk was also known to local inhabitants and foreign travellers for the many hydrocarbon seeps and bitumen accumulations on the surface that can be found in its environs – retrospectively, one might say the sign for a cursed treasure upon which the city relies. Since 1931, when IPC moved its headquarters and operations there, the oil industry drove major urbanization and modernization trends: the evolution of the urban landscape of Kirkuk is indeed considered a prominent example of oil urbanism (Bet-Shlimon, 2012, 2013; see also Fuccaro, 2013). The abundance of petroleum resources, however, inflamed inter-communal tensions and led the largest ethnic communities to compete with each other in order to grab power over management of oilfields and the distribution of dividends. Despite pressures of outside actors (notably Britain, at least until the nationalization, and Turkey, which exerts influence by virtue of the sizeable Turkmen's presence), Kirkukis (i.e. residents of Kirkuk) have nevertheless maintained a distinct and proud urban identity alongside ethnic and party affiliations (Natali, 2008). In any case, Kirkuk became not only the disputed centre of the Iraqi petroleum industry, but also the blurred frontline between Arab and Kurdish areas, as well as the fuse of inter-ethnic rivalries. Since the Arabs were a minority in the early 1960s, the city (and the oil workforce as well) began to be intensely Arabized under Saddam Hussein, inasmuch as local politics was filtered primarily through demographics. In the middle of expulsions of Kurds and Turkmens, Arab settlers from central and southern Iraq were encouraged to replace persecuted groups. Ethnic contention resurfaced in post-2003 Iraq, when many Kurds returned to the province and the KRG sought to expand the de facto jurisdiction on the governorate, which is just outside its territorial writ, by offering services and paying salaries to officials in Kurdish-populated areas (Kane, 2011: 9). Though aimed at restoring the situation as it was before the rule of the Ba'ath Party and compensating those who were forcefully relocated elsewhere, the re-Kurdification process raised resentment and caused new imbalances that are mixed with feuding political parties, even inside the same community (for instance, Kirkuk is an arena for the KDP-PUK rivalry). Amid much uncertainty about population

figures with the last credible census dated 1957, it is not surprising that the determination of the administrative status is still pending given the non-implementation of the referendum envisaged by Article 140 of the Constitution.

According to Natali (2008), it would be wrong to believe that the apparently insoluble stalemate is sectarian. She eloquently points out that flawed state-building policies and neglect in the current phase have rather emphasised ethno-political fissures over time. Kane summarizes that "the net result is a tangled web of administrative and security arrangements that sit atop poorly defined administrative boundaries amid a toxic legacy of mistrust" (Kane, 2011: 9). Certainly, the lack of a comprehensive arrangement is intertwined with the governance of the oil sector. The 'disputed territories'[35] in the four governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala are rich in hydrocarbons, to a greater or lesser extent. The super-giant[36] oilfield in Kirkuk counts as over three-quarters of total output capacity of northern Iraq, with ultimate recoverable oil estimated in 9 billion barrels. It is the oldest and the second-largest in the country after the other super-giant field in Rumaila, near Basra. Although production is likely to decline in the near future after over 80 years of exploitation, it still retains strategic importance. In addition, oil resources are scattered all across the disputed belt along the border of the KRI, from Zummar in Nineveh to Khanaqin in Diyala. What made the contest between Baghdad and Erbil even more difficult to handle is that Kurdish forces have operated in those areas from May 2003, when KDP and PUK leaders signed with US commanders a memorandum for the deployment of about 6000 Peshmerga outside the region (Crisis Group, 2009), until October 2017, when the Iraqi federal government took back control. Against the backdrop of the sudden downfall of the regime and the

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[35] Article 140 of the Constitution placed upon the Iraqi transitional government the responsibility of concluding the process of normalization "in Kirkuk and other disputed territories" as already stipulated in Article 58 of the 2004 Transitional Administrative Law, which stated the need "to take measures to remedy the injustice caused by the previous regime's practices in altering the demographic character of certain regions, including Kirkuk, by deporting and expelling individuals from their places of residence, forcing migration in and out of the region, settling individuals alien to the region, depriving the inhabitants of work, and correcting nationality". In this regard, Article 140 prescribed that citizens within the areas concerned should have decided on the administrative status through local (district- or provincial-wise) referenda "by a date not to exceed the 31st if December 2007". However, such areas are not defined geographically in the document, and the nebulous wording is evidence for the bitter stand-off over territorial controversies, which remain unsolved. In absence of an official definition, "disputed areas tend to describe an undifferentiated 300-mile-long swath of territory from the Iranian to the Syrian border with oil-rich Kirkuk as its centre" (Kane 2011: 5). The expiration of the deadline to implement the constitutional provision was interpreted as a sign of bad faith by the KRG, which contends that the entire governorate of Kirkuk and thirteen districts in Nineveh, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala should be annexed to the region, though claims are not supported unequivocally by local inhabitants given significant non-Kurdish minorities. The list of disputed districts caught in between federal and KRG control include those of Sinjar, Mosul, Tal Afar, Akre, Shaikhan, al-Hamdaniya, Tuz Khurmatu, Makhmur, Kifri, and Khanaqin.

[36] Oilfields are generally designated as super-giant if the amount of proven or recoverable reserves exceeds 5 or 10 equivalent billion barrels, and as giant if it is more than 500 million barrels. However, in most cases data on the size of underground deposits are scant and estimates may be imprecise. One should consider that the attribute reflects exploitation potential, not actual production.

disbandment of the Iraqi Army, between 2003 and 2006 Peshmerga were precious partners on the ground for the Coalition forces to counter the Sunni insurgency, which gathered Ba'ath loyalists and a broad array of Salafi-jihadist militant groups[37]. After the withdrawal of the US troops, Kurds went deeper in contested areas to protect the local population when sectarian hatred swiftly escalated into the ISIS onslaught. In so doing, they also acquired control and management of Kirkuk's oil, while ISIS insurgents raided Baiji (the largest Iraqi refinery), got entrenched in the town of Hawija southwest of Kirkuk, repeatedly attacked oil wells in Khabbaz nearby, and took possession of the Qayyarah field south of Mosul. Albeit requested and indispensable, the security role was poorly tolerated in Baghdad since it seemingly jeopardised federal authority and invalidated, instead, the Green Line. Indeed, the KRG began expanding its footprint in "Kurdistani" areas and even licensing exploration blocks to foreign oil companies beyond the de jure border[38]. In 2008 and 2009 the climate of tension led to occasional skirmishes in the ill-defined borderlands of Nineveh and Diyala. Finally, the full-blown offensive triggered by the referendum in late 2017 was a new peak in Kurds-Arabs strained relationship. Oilfields and related installations were the primary target of the military move, which demonstrated once more how oil affairs keep mediating federal conflicts. I will explain in chapter V that claiming and practising resource sovereignty is the pivot around which Kurdish autonomy has revolved in the last thirteen years[39]. In order to provide some more background, next section details how in a few years the KRG successfully played on the edge of constitutional prerogatives to attract oil and gas wildcatters.

The KRG ascending on the energy market

On June 1, 2009, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Tabalani opened a ceremonial golden valve to launch, figuratively, the first crude exports from the KRI through the Iraqi pipeline. United in celebration, the

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[37] Such as Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and better known as the branch of al-Qaida in Iraq, from which ISIS later ensued.

[38] See infra p. 151

[39] Contrary to this thesis, Anderson and Stansfield dismiss as implausible and "easy to sell" any link between oil and Kurdish independence, to the point of claiming that the former would be useless to achieve or sustain the latter. This argument is based on the apparently sincere statements of Kurdish leaders and a number of other unfortunate considerations, which in fact have proved to be wrong in all respects. They write, implying that none of the following aspects was likely to happen: "The Kurds have no indigenous refining capacity, so Kirkuk's oil could not be consumed domestically, and the oil could not be exported to generate revenue because Kirkuk is wholly dependent on an oil infrastructure that is controlled by others. For Kirkuk's oil to be of value, an independent Kurdistan would need to be supported, or at least tolerated, by its powerful neighbours. In return for acquiring control over mountains of useless oil, an independent Kurdistan would sacrifice its guaranteed share of income from the Iraqi government" (Anderson & Stansfield, 2011: 236). One could argue that unforeseeable events such as the rise of ISIS led the KRG to adapt its strategy, but the last part of this chapter and the following empirical analysis line up a series of evidence-based points that back up the opposite conclusion that Kurdish elites had long nurtured the idea of building political autonomy and an independent revenue stream upon the oil wealth.

two hegemonic Kurdish leaders inspired a sense of historic achievement, echoed by the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani:

> "In another country, today's event would be only a typical economic and technical achievement. But for the people of the Kurdistan Region, it marks a dramatic departure from our recent past"[40]

In his speech, the Prime Minister presented the monopoly of the energy sector as a crucial component of the unbalanced power exercised by past regimes. Opening the valves and allowing the oil flowing to the international market made explicit, instead, the right way forward for the reconstruction of a democratic and prosperous country for all Iraqis. Revenue sharing would have been a check against power centralization and genocidal violence. I take a deeper look to that discourse in chapter IV. Those optimistic hopes for a fresh start in the making of federal relations were, in fact, a controversial turning point that followed harsh confrontation with the central government on the management of energy commodities. Although the Constitution made a general provision for decentralized decision-making, its Section IV concerning the distribution of powers between federal and regional level is ambivalent on the matter of oil and gas governance, which remains open to multiple interpretations. The articles under scrutiny stemmed from the need of balancing opposite priorities. Since the largest deposits of hydrocarbons are located in northern and southern areas, which are ethnically politicized as Kurdish and Shi'a respectively, it is feared that decentralization in the oil and gas management would mean opening up the Pandora's box of ethnic contention and plunging a fragile country into national disintegration. The uncertain or inconsistent outcome incorporated in the Constitution is "a conception of resource sovereignty that is both national and regional" (Havrelock, 2017). If Article 111 states that ownership of oil and gas resources belongs to "all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates", the subsequent article is at best vague on the role of federal and regional governments:

> "The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields, provided that it distributes its revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution in all parts of the country, specifying an allotment for a specified period for the damaged regions which were unjustly deprived of them by the former regime, and the regions that were damaged afterwards in a way that ensures balanced development in different areas of the country, and this shall be regulated by a law"[41]

The specification *present fields* apparently restricts federal authority over operating fields at the time of the promulgation of the Constitution, while gives regional governments a free hand for new discoveries. The provision was framed in these terms under Kurdish pressure in view of exploiting the untapped

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[40] Speech by KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani at the ceremony celebrating the start of Kurdistan Region oil exports, MNR, June 1, 2009; available at: https://goo.gl/GqfM1q

[41] Constitution of Iraq, Article 112, first paragraph; available at: https://goo.gl/6BahgM

underground resources in the region (Voller, 2013). This interpretation is reinforced by Article 115, which gives priority to the regional level in case of dispute over shared powers. Similarly, Article 121, second paragraph, recognises the right of regional governments to amend the national legislation with regard to matters that are outside exclusive federal authority. Oil and gas issues are not listed among the powers reserved to the federal level, though central government is responsible for "formulating foreign sovereign economic and trade policy" and "regulating commercial policy across regional and governorate boundaries in Iraq"[42]. However, these clauses are silent on a number of crucial issues (e.g. revenue distribution, oil contracting, investment policies, compensation of damaged and deprived regions), hence left to bargaining between levels of government (Al Moumin, 2012). In absence of the federal law prescribed by Article 112, since June 2009 revenue distribution has been regulated bilaterally between Baghdad and the KRG, but not much in the spirit of the "gentlemen's agreement" greeted by Jalal Talabani. In a climate of constant negotiation, all the oil-for-budget agreements have proved short-lived. Both the lack of a clear legal framework and KRG's rushing into independent exports cutting out SOMO from sales caused quarrels, which reached the apex with Baghdad's withholding of the share of the federal budget (17%) to which Erbil is entitled. In October 2016, a new agreement facilitated by the US Envoy Brett McGurk (and opposed by part of the PUK to weaken the KDP, as we will see in chapter V) led to restore exports from the NOC-run fields in Kirkuk through Ceyhan, up to 150.000 barrels per day (bpd) and a 50/50 split of revenues. The Iraqi PM al-Abadi had no other option but to accept since oil could not bet exported without passing through the KRG pipeline. Flows came to another halt in the aftermath of the ISF takeover of disputed territories, Kirkuk included, when pleasing Erbil was somewhat dispensable. The most recent arrangement was tentatively struck in November 2018 after a long standoff. The different positions taken within this confrontation are not reviewed in this research, but it is obvious that each party has worked the existing loopholes to its own advantage. This consideration, moreover, does not apply to the KRG only. Governorates in Nineveh and Basra made similar claims for an independent energy policy, which were rejected outright in Baghdad.

Back to the groundwork of the extractive regime in the KRI, the re-privatization of the Iraqi petroleum industry urged by the Anglo-American military occupation gave Kurds the chance to gain a share in a market whose access had always been closed and to which they have claimed to be entitled. Unlike typically centralized and strong rentier states, the reorganization of the sector in the post-Ba'athist era took place "by accident" in the context of a more diffuse and open process of negotiation with a myriad of actors involved. The development from 2005 onwards of a separate oil and gas complex inside the KRI has been impressive. The KRG triggered an exploration race and became one of the largest and most active onshore oil frontier on the global stage (Mackertich & Samarrai, 2015; Auzer, 2017), despite

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[42] Ivi, Article 110.

a very disadvantageous infrastructural isolation and economic backwardness. Prior to the 2003 war, less than 30 exploration wells had been drilled in circumscribed areas close to Iraqi fields and there were no seismic data covering the rest of the region (Mackertich & Samarrai, 2015). Exploitation of Khurmala and Taq Taq fields was limited and discontinuous, while other formations (such as Demir Dagh and the gas fields in Khor Mor and Chamchamal) were plugged but left underdeveloped. Between 2005 and 2014 around 160 wells were drilled and with an exceptionally high commercial success rate (55-60%), though it has declined thereafter (Mills, 2016a, 2016b). The KRG Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) estimates that the segment of the Zagros fold and thrust belt contains up to the equivalent of 45 billion barrels of oil[43] – that is to say one third of Iraq's total reserves, which is an obvious overestimation. In fact, more conservative and plausible figures published by operators and international sources range in between 6 and 15 billion barrels (Mackertich & Samarrai, 2015; Mills, 2016a, 2016b) depending on how the oil in place is calculated, the amount of recoverable oil, and ongoing reassessments of carbonate reservoirs. Oilfields in Kirkuk would increase the production potential by around 40%. Although a fraction of federal reserves, still the KRG would be seventh-largest oil holder in the Middle East surpassing countries like Oman, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria (Mills, 2016a, 2016b). Furthermore, the KRG persuaded foreign investors to bet on a largely unexplored market in rapid expansion by virtue of safer security conditions and more favourable commercial terms than those offered in the rest of Iraq, which has been mired in protracted instability. Tellingly, while the ISIS offensive paralyzed the Iraqi energy infrastructures, oil exploration and extraction in the KRI continued undisturbed.

In an extremely accurate and comprehensive report on the many dimensions of Kurdish oil politics, Mills (ibidem) divides the regional petroleum history in five phases. I already discussed the first one, from the initial discovery of huge quantities of oil in Kirkuk to the First Gulf War. In the following period of de facto independence under the shield of the internationally enforced no-fly zone, small quantities of crude from Taq Taq supplied local consumption and the newly established KRG sought to create in 1992 a national oil company (KurdOil), but it lacked both financial means and technical knowledge to set it into motion (Voller, 2013). Albeit premature, the readiness to undertake such effort was a declaration of intent. At the time the region was closed to international operators, of course. The crumbling of the Ba'athist order dragged with it any barrier to a foreign commercial presence. This marked the start-up of an oil and gas sector in the Kurdish enclave. The creation of a dedicated ministry – the MNR – in 2006 and the promulgation of the Oil and Gas Law in 2007, which amended national legislation, were key passages to attract small- and mid-tier oil companies. Despite legal disputes with Baghdad, the KRG pushed forward to negotiate and sign production-sharing agreements (PSA) with foreign companies, independently. The entry of an oil major, ExxonMobil, in November 2011 marked

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[43] See statistics reported in the MNR website: https://goo.gl/uVwYRT

transition to a fourth phase: the KRG consolidated its standing as an actor playing on the energy markets and in a successful way inasmuch as it licensed all the exploration blocks[44] by the end of 2012, but on the other hand exports were hampered at the time by necessary reliance on the federal pipeline. Finally, the irruption of ISIS is another watershed that commenced the current phase, with the post-referendum scenario and Rosneft's arrival as additional junctures. This is the broad context in which this dissertation has to be considered. The brief remarks made here are developed in greater depth and detail throughout the analysis.

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[44] The KRI is divided into 57 blocks (30 in Erbil and Dohuk governorates, the remaining in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja). See maps in Appendix II.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

On nature and violence

We call it a grain of sand,
but it calls itself neither grain nor sand.
It does just fine, without a name,
whether general, particular,
permanent, passing,
incorrect, or apt.

Our glance, our touch means nothing to it.
It doesn't feel itself seen and touched.
And that it fell on the windowsill
is only our experience, not its.
For it, it is not different from falling on anything else
with no assurance that it has finished falling
or that it is falling still.
　　　…
And all this beneath a sky by nature skyless
in which the sun sets without setting at all
and hides without hiding behind an unminding cloud.
The wind ruffles it, its only reason being
that it blows.

(Wislawa Szymborska, *View With a Grain of Sand*, 1995)

The three stanzas of the poem convey the idea that we cannot see a world in a grain of sand, to borrow from the opening line of William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*. Szymborska suggests that the human experience cannot emancipate from the irreducible variety of perceptions through which the world is accessed and interpreted. Besides the sense of wonder towards natural phenomena that is perhaps common to every human being, the centrality of meaning making in the representation of the inanimate world implies that no lasting epistemological consensus on reality is achievable in the end. Just like the view from a window looking onto a lake does not view itself, as Szymborska writes in another enlightening passage, the meanings we attach to the objects around us do not recount their ontological status. Our knowledge of them is imperfect, incomplete, and inconsistent. I found her poem quoted in a thorough defence of interpretivism in social sciences by Timothy Pachirat (in Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006: 373). Whereas a discussion of an interpretive orientation is laid down in the next methodological chapter, I propose it here in the same way because in introduces to some decisive questions of scientific authority that, in my view, have plagued the common conceptualization of environmental issues, so to speak, in the field of International Relations (IR).

Overall, the overview of the literature addressing the linkages between natural resources and violent conflicts reveals a preponderance of studies firmly rooted in the positivist canon. As I see it, this large body of research suffers from some theoretical and methodological shortcomings that seriously undermine the claim of evidence-based causal relationships. In particular, the framing of environmentally *driven* or *induced* conflicts assumes a degree of determinism (i.e. the environment as independent variable), which in turn relies upon the typified image of nature as apolitical setting (hence external to human action) that constrains and dictates brutally the range of political outcomes. As explained below, conventional analyses of resource conflicts take for granted Malthusian-like prognoses about the limits of nature, which is another way of saying that there is a separation in kind between nature and society. In fact, the politics of nature, which describes the purposive and anthropocentric transformation of the environment in culturally competent and politically charged ways, is possibly the most striking feature of modernity.

Given the above, this chapter revolves around the acknowledgement of plural environmental and geographical knowledges in order to put resource conflicts into wider perspective. I argue that both the polysemy of nature and the situatedness of its material appropriation recommends a phenomenological and contextual approach, which shall consider natural resources as social constructs embedded in the power relations surrounding the commodification of material substances. From this point of view, which is in line with the epistemic take of political ecology, de-naturalizing natural resources means disclosing their social character and re-politicizing the many ways these are framed, valued, and exploited. As it will be illustrated, this is needed to decouple resource availability (either in form of scarcity or abundance) and the onset of violent conflicts, thus avoiding the fallacies of linear causation that runs through the arguments of most theoretical models. Moreover, and relatedly, the conceptualization of resource geographies as socially constituted fields of power provides a common ground to bridge, creatively, IR theories with fruitful inputs from geography and political ecology.

The implications are not limited to the bounded space of academia. A critical reconsideration of the politics of nature, as this lies at the confluence of knowledge production and policy prescriptions, entails a reflection on scientific practices and their social impact. Indeed, the empiricism informing much IR research on resource conflicts implicitly translates technocratic discourses into would-be unbiased and value-free procedures. The whole debate on the "oil curse" is a pertinent example. In this sense, the matter of nature also goes to the heart of the politics of science.

2.1. Of borders and orders: a critique of the spatial ontology underpinning IR

The need for extra-disciplinary imports calls into question statute and boundaries of IR. It also implies a flat-out judgement of inadequacy with regard to the treatment of some subject areas. While caution is certainly needed when releasing big statements whatsoever, I believe that the reflexive questioning of the discipline in which one's scholarly position is situated is the inescapable starting point for every research. It is not without reasons that trainees of any Ph.D. programme are required to compile lengthy reviews of the existing literature on a variety of topics at the beginning of their journey. In this sense, the critique of what passes in these pages as *the mainstream* is not for the sake of dispute, nor antagonism between schools of thoughts at war with each other. Rather, it comes out from the difficulties I met in giving theoretical direction to fieldwork and harmonizing the themes that are central to this piece of research, as well as describes the routes taken to solve those puzzles. Although these are somewhat tailored to what I have done in the last three years, my hope here is to provide a sound roadmap or, at the very least, indicate a productive terrain of convergence where the cross-fertilization of ideas across disciplines emerges as added value for further research.

In my view, the state of the art in IR is poor with respect to environmental issues, broadly intended. After all, these were brought under the light cone only after the end of the Cold War, but the reflection was heavily influenced by the nervous search for unorthodox threats growing over the new international order that ensued from the long winter of the bipolar confrontation. More accurately I should say that the environment was increasingly securitized, as if the spectre of "resource wars" (Klare, 2001) in the anarchic peripheries of the globe would have replaced the peril of a nuclear war - "the coming anarchy" much feared by Kaplan (1994). Therefore, the language of security adopted by IR scholars steered the debate towards a specific dimension, namely the exploration of the causative or intervening role of environmental stressors in contexts of organized violence[45]. In many ways, that debate has faded away over time because incapable of getting out from some dead-ends that were fixed ex ante. I return in detail on this with a discussion on mainstream theories addressing resource conflicts. Before anything else, however, I would like to point out that those dead-ends have a great deal to do, in my opinion, with the spatial ontology ingrained in the discipline.

The limits of political imagination

Science is always moving, but scientific progress moves unsteadily. Sometimes it advances with big leaps forward, most of times develops at a much slower pace. As Kuhn famously underlines in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), the accumulation of knowledge is marked by sudden ruptures and long periods of continuity once a new discovery solidifies into a customary paradigm. In the case at

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[45] For two early critiques see Deudney (1990, 1991) and Dalby (1996).

hand, the question of a scientific revolution does not arise of course, but the loud silences of IR when confronted with issues just outside the traditional boundaries of inquiry (in essence the problem of war) encourage to enter into a cross-disciplinary dialogue. For that matter, all the turns through which IR has evolved over time (from the constructivist turn to practice-oriented approaches, up to the most recent aesthetic ones) are somewhat the product of theoretical imports from other fields of knowledge. However, the opposite does not hold true, in the sense that IR theories cannot equally claim of driving and innovating tangential disciplines in social sciences. I follow Walker's suggestion that such rigidity owes much to the in-built temptation of determining the horizons of political imagination through the reification of historically specific spatiotemporal understandings, with the principle of state sovereignty on top. This implies that the categories in use are consequential to and reinforce certain spatial assumptions. For a discipline "concerned with the delineation of borders, the inscription of dangers and the mobilisation of defences" (Walker, 1993: 15), the inscription of an inside-outside geometry defines, indeed, the very conditions of political life. The quite problematic outcome is that IR theories may be read as part and parcel of the discursive framing of the modern state and "a constitutive practice whose effects can be traced in the remotest interstices of everyday life" (ibidem: 6), rather than substantive and plausible explanations of world politics.

As mentioned, what Walker warns about is a crucial limitation of contemporary political imagination, for which the ideological baggage of realism restricts spatial horizons in state-centric terms. This is far less provocative than one would expect given that the field of inquiry in IR is isomorphic with the space of relations between sovereign states. Walker argues, nevertheless, that such delineation is more properly the by-product of Western political regulation, than a faithful description. On this point, I agree with Beier (who had the merit of putting a question mark against the notable omission of indigenous peoples from the subjects of study) that IR theories tend to internalize "the restrictive hegemonic concepts, categories, and commitments of the dominating society" (Beier, 2005: 215). Beier coins the buzzword "hegemonologue" to bring to the fore the universalist and selective pretensions of a Western cosmology, whose "disciplinary ears" remain attached to the constant reproduction of the colonial encounter with the rest of the world and are thus inattentive to difference, if not in derogatory or exclusionary terms.

The critique of a paternalistic knowledge system that replicates the colonial logic of erasure or enclosure of other forms of knowledge is not isolated. Inayatullah and Blaney (2004) dedicated a widely-cited book to it. According to them, an original trauma with cultural differences continues to haunt prevalent predispositions in IR since the modern intellectual origins of the field align it "with a legacy of colonialism and religious cleansing" (ibidem: vii). Stuck into a Westphalian narrative, the Western worldview to which it adheres is pervaded by notions of stability, safety, and order that see difference

as "a dangerous aberration" from the norm. As a consequence, the many others outside the empire are either deterred or ignored, but the problems of difference remain:

> "The bounded political community constructs (and is constructed by) the other. Beyond its boundaries, the other lurks as a perpetual threat in the form of other states, antagonistic groups, imported goods, and alien ideas. The other also appears as difference within, vitiating the presumed but rarely, if ever, achieved "sameness". The other within the boundaries of the political community is "managed" by some combination of hierarchy, eradication, assimilation or expulsion, and tolerance. The external other is left to suffer or prosper to its own means (though its poverty or prosperity may be experienced as a threat); it is interdicted at border crossings, balanced and deterred; it is defeated militarily and colonized if need be." (ibidem: 6)

Contrary to some early expectations, in a globalised and interconnected world whose measure is the circulation of goods, capitals, people, and information the divisiveness of political forms has not disappeared into imperial uniformity or superseded by a cosmopolitan order. Despite global expansion of modes of power and control (such as petro-capitalism, which is one of the concepts hinted in the empirical analysis) perhaps differences got accentuated even more with the emergence of a polycentric scenario by virtue of the loss of unitary strategic interdependencies, regional fragmentation, and discrepancy between military, institutional, economic, and social spaces (Colombo, 2010). Yet, as the authors mentioned above agreed upon, realist and liberal traditions appear ill-equipped and rather uneasy to make sense of alternative political imaginings from the "Westphalian commonsense" (Grovogui, 2002). According to critical theorists, this occurs because of unreflective background assumptions and a constitutive theory-practice relationship that idealize a contingent representation of world politics.

To give not a random example, Kenneth Waltz's neorealist perspective (1979) on the self-help mechanics of the international system (a mandatory reading of every IR course) notoriously describes strategic interactions between undifferentiated state-units in terms of the structural distribution of military (and economic) capabilities. Waltz establishes a fatalist theology of power, where politics is defined solely by accumulation and balance of power. Despite the introduction of norms and institutions as intervening explanatory variables, liberal correctives to the paradigm are on the same page since they concede that power and interest are not themselves constructed by ideas. Such a "parsimonious" reduction (to use Waltz's words) sacrifices complexity in name of supposed analytical accuracy: politics is a struggle for survival between rational actors driven by uncertainty about each other's intentions. Equally known is the constructivist reply systematized by Alexander Wendt (1999), who conceptualizes the structure of the international system as a distribution of knowledge about the meanings attributed to material forces, given that "power and interest explanations [always] presuppose ideas" (ibidem: 135). Wendt claims that "much of the apparent explanatory power of ostensibly

materialist explanations is actually constituted by suppressed constructivist assumptions about the content and distribution of ideas" (ibidem: 95). Even the exercise of hard power (Nye 1991), therefore, entails the prior socialization of norms, beliefs, and cognitive maps informing agency and purposes of political actors. Then, variation in the cultural instantiations of anarchy ("anarchy is what states make of it") leads one to be agnostic about the outcome (conflict or cooperation) of the security dilemma. Wendt's reflection, however, does not endorse a radical critique of the ontological and epistemological commitments of positivism that neorealism and neoliberalism embrace wholeheartedly, and on this ground it may be argued that some uncertain passages in his work (such as friction between interactional and structural or constitutive and causal pathways) derive from the unusual assimilation of meta-theoretical heterodoxy into disciplinary orthodoxy (Guzzini & Leander, 2006). It is difficult not to agree that Wendt devised a somewhat familiar theory of the state-system with the addition of a cultural component (ibidem: 86). Nevertheless, the reputation of *Social Theory of International Politics* reflects the successful emergence of social constructivism as a "second language" to IR scholars (Barnett, 2005) and this opened the way, in turn, to more reflective approaches acknowledging the limits of the realist ontology that assumes homogeneity of behaviour and fixed spatial coordinates.

The comparison is a little old-fashioned. Current debates are beyond pure billiard balls models or the assumption that states are the only relevant actors of international politics. Post-modern and post-structural insights have indeed deconstructed key concepts upon which modern political thought was built, such as sovereignty, nation-state, security, and the binary oppositions domestic-international/order-disorder (see Booth, 1991a, 1991b, 1995; Campbell, 1992; Cox, 1981; Linklater, 1998, 1998; Krause & Williams, 2002; Walker, 1993; Wyn Jones, 1999). This critical injection gradually emancipated a broad range of dissenting voices encompassing postcolonial, subaltern, and feminist research agendas, which indicate a strong call for decentred and anti-foundational perspectives.

What does it mean to be critical, anyway? As a manifesto, since the seminal work of those gathered around the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt in the first-half of the 1930s (when the Institute was directed by Max Horkheimer) and then known collectively as members of the Frankfurt School, critical theories refute positivism in epistemological and methodological terms: knowledge is neither objective, nor impartial, but embedded in historical development. Hence, the call for casting a critical eye on "what is prevalent" (Horkheimer, 1972) and de-essentializing the abstractions that represent (read reproduce) the dominant political order. Researcher are thought not as if they were recording facts before them just like a camera does – and cameras always lie by the way (Booth, 1995) – but as engaged in making visible the invisible through the hermeneutical reconstruction of meanings-in-context (Ciută, 2009). Instead of offering generalizations based upon the smallest number of variables and applicable to the largest number of cases, a critical engagement strives for the interpretation of situational understandings – Gadamer's phenomenological "horizon". As illustrated in chapter III, the

distinction requires dropping any foundational approach to social sciences. Marxist in origin, critical theories make also explicit a normative agenda aimed at emancipatory social changes through the immanent investigation of the contradictions lying at the heart of society. Therefore, they stuck to a philosophy of liberation, which is not limited to the description of the world as it is, but seeks to actively improve it. If "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Cox, 1981), critical theories are designed for the oppressed and for freeing space for less exploitative relations. The reader will evaluate the greater or lower adherence of this manuscript to the same perspective.

Applied to the discussion above, a critical approach debunks the axiom of the state as the exclusive actor, referent object, and site of politics. State-centrism is regarded indeed as empirically unhelpful, a justification of the status quo, and a source of structural violence (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2014). More generally, a critical viewpoint takes exception from the Schmittian logics of absolute antithesis that imbues traditional understandings of power and conflict, and also from the spatial ontology I touched before: whilst inside the state is the realm of law and authority, outside its boundaries is the realm of anarchy and violence (Walker 1993). Under the realist paradigm, this fear of allegedly *empty* and *ungoverned* spaces paves the way for a self-fulfilling prophecy[46]. As Agnew and Corbridge observe, this spatial delineation "has led to the definition of political identity in exclusively state-territorial terms", thus obscuring processes operating at different scales and dismissing the "remarkable flowering of alternative political identities of a sectoral, ethnic and regional character" (Agnew & Crobridge, 2002: 86). Next section goes a step further by stressing that positivist accounts sowed the seeds of a static representation of geographical knowledge, which has had a bearing on the ways the *environment* is generally associated with political conflicts.

Before dealing with that, another point worth mentioning is that IR theories are Western-centric (or more specifically Anglo-American-centric) for the most part. This implies a problematization of the sites of knowledge production and the culture beneath (basically, the problematization of the hegemony, in Gramscian terms, of what from time to time has been designated, hastily but effectively, as the Global North). Among others[47], Acharya and Buzan (2009) noted that the Western dominance manifests in IR through overly Eurocentric assumptions. For all the various branches and sub-fields, it is no secret that the intellectual grandfathers of the discipline all belong to the Western political philosophy and historiography – Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant, Clausewitz and all the way up to Foucault and Bourdieu. Moreover, the modern development of nation-states in Europe still is the main historical landmark to which theoretical reflections date back. Despite contributions from

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[46] On the definition of ungoverned spaces or areas in the US policy discourse, domestically and internationally, Mitchell (2010) provides an original comparison on the "conceptual deployment of broken windows and zero tolerance practices" in New York City and Iraq.

[47] See, for instance, Waever (1998) and Tickner & Weaver (2009).

non-Western scholars, these roots remain the canon through which the baseline worldview is articulated.

As is the case for the somewhat arbitrary difference between languages and dialects, the reason for such cultural hegemony is the army behind, to put it bluntly. In other words, the universalist representations of the global order embody the *animus dominandi* of Western powers, who have proved so far to be able to retain cultural primacy despite "the rise of the rest" (Zakaria, 2008). Higher education flows from the Global South towards prestigious universities and think tanks in the North is amongst the mechanisms of incorporation that slowed down the rise of a non-Western IR[48]. The "postcolonial moment"[49] (Barkawi & Laffey, 2006) is a reaction to counter Western-centrism and the imperial distinctions it continues to nurture in social sciences - besides North vs. South, also First World vs. Third World or metropole vs. periphery (Acharya and Buzan 2009: 16). Postcolonial scholars raised the point that the binary constructions of ethnicity, nationality, gender, race, and class are still imbued of colonial legacies and all this persists as tacit knowledge, justifying or concealing contemporary inequalities and injustices. From Fanon and Said onwards, attention has been drawn to how ideologies of progress and civilization are based on the ascription of opposite characters to the non-West (e.g. barbarism and backwardness). The "other" is simultaneously objectified and disempowered. In reflexive terms, postcolonialism interrogates the role IR theories play in the normalization of such hierarchy of values. The critique of double-sided taxonomies of power is valid not only in retrospect[50]. A close look at the imaginative geographies of other cultures born out in the "colonial present" we live in reveals that a colonial praxis never waned, as the recent chronicles of war and subjugation in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq remind us violently (Gregory, 2004). The scope of action drawn under the herald of the "global war of terror" after the 9/11 or the red flags of "rogue states", promptly raised by the US military forces and counter-terrorism strategies, bears witness to the translation of the power-knowledge nexus into ad-hoc spatial metaphors. Next section is devoted precisely to take into account some of these notions.

Finally, to give a sense of circularity and get back to the sort of declaration of scientific presuppositions in the opening, a few comments on interdisciplinarity are in order. Since it is at odds with the increased

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[48] There is a kind of a paradox in the fact that the most coveted programs in African Studies are taught in London, Oxford, or Leiden.

[49] Shohat (1992) notes that the term "post-colonial" has a problematic spatio-temporality which reproduces, linguistically and analytically, a colonial narrative and does not capture continuity and change in systemic forms of dominance. Her call for a "flexible yet critical usage" of the concept suggest reading the complexities of global disparities through "a mobile set of grids, a diverse set of disciplinary as well as cultural-geopolitical lenses" (ibidem: 112).

[50] Neither it is a property of the West only (whose political and cultural boundaries are less neat than one could imagine and are not exempt from internal contradictions). As in the case the Kurdish question addressed in this research, othering processes are constitutive of identity formation.

specialization of labour and thematic differentiation within academia, the crossing of disciplinary walls is a destabilizing exercise. Epistemic communities carry not only shared normative beliefs and theory-driven expectations on how issue-areas ought to be framed, but also bring forward distinctive and routinized standards for generating evidence, assessing validity, and presenting findings (Haas, 1992: 3). As researchers are well aware of, a scientific work is evaluated as legitimate according to the intersubjective agreement prevailing in any given field of inquiry. However, whilst each epistemic community sets its own guidelines for designing and conducting research, the compartmentalization of knowledge also contributes to the formation of hyper-specific professional identities. Lack of communication between disciplines (and even between schools of thought and research paradigms within the same discipline) is much likely then. On the contrary, interdisciplinarity implies overcoming such internal resistance and moving across (if not even erasing) the boundaries of knowledge production. It calls for crafting innovative approach by integrating different perspectives, but without reducing the complexity of multifaceted phenomena to familiar concepts and methods of inquiry. In these terms, it is all about the appropriate codes of translation to ensure theoretical pluralism while not watering down methodological rigor. In absence of solid bridges between scientific languages, the risks of fragmentation or misrepresentation lie in wait. However, I rather feared the opposite situation, namely "being endlessly trapped in [the] narrow, discipline-specific fields of inquiry, reinventing the wheel again and again" (Bourbeau, 2015: 4). As said, my impression is that the orthodox theoretical modelling of so-called 'resource conflicts' is precisely reinventing the wheel again and again. If interdisciplinarity does not necessarily mean greater richness and sharpness, moving away from disciplinary isolation and establishing an open-ended communication with other bodies of knowledge is as much insightful as challenging. Given the solipsistic predisposition of IR, in my opinion it is the only way forward.

Unfortunate metaphors and analytical traps

> "Rather, what is needed is a geographical imagination that takes places seriously as the settings for human life and tries to understand world politics in terms of its impacts on the material welfare and identities of people in different places" (John Agnew, quoted in Dalby, 2002: 101)

Having laid bare the disciplinary closure of IR, it is no surprise that the popular and catch-all metaphors of "the lonely superpower" (Huntington, 1999), "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1989), "the unipolar moment" (Krauthammer, 1990), or the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 2000) - which overall set the terms of debate on the evolution of international politics during the 1990s - offered short-sighted predictions, at a critical time of "temporal accelerations" and "territorial fluidities" (Walker 1993: 2) in which the Western desire for cultural homogeneity has lead instead to raising ideological barriers and razor wire fences to exclude a multitude of others. Against the regularities to which IR scholars were

accustomed, after the demise of the bipolar stability all that was solid seemed to melt into air, so to speak, and the discipline arguably bore the brunt of a static spatial imagination, according to which hybridity and liminality are out of place. This is an exaggeration because the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in fact, was not the origin, nor the catalyst of the many drivers of change that were reordering alliances and power struggles around the globe. It is true, nonetheless, that many commentators in the West apparently realized that a brand new world order was before their eyes only when the Berlin Wall came down. That sense of novelty was influenced by many factors and might be approached from a number of different perspectives, but there are good reasons to believe that the geographical knowledge underpinning mainstream theories explains a lot of it.

From the outset, IR is a reflection on spatiality and violence. Hence, the centrality of geographical orderings in any explanation of international politics, in a threefold sense: i) as background information for the study of systemic interactions between territorially-defined actors; ii) as criterion to assert autonomy of the field from the older companion, political science; iii) as boundary-drawing practice that dictates political projects and spreads cultural understandings. This last subtle denotation matches the discussion about the deconstruction of analytical categories whose usage in the scientific and/or ordinary language conceals hegemonic bearings. As already mentioned, geography has long been "in the service of statecraft – a necessary instrument of spatial analysis in the toolbox of security practices" (Le Billon in Bourbeau, 2015: 63): locating threats, policing borders, or deploying force illustrate the entanglement of geographic praxis with military apparatuses and devices of surveillance. Classic geopolitical formulations - from Mackinder's heartland theory to Kennan's containment strategy - adds strength to the argument. Therefore, any IR writing presupposes or explicitly hinges on a given spatial context in one way or another. However, mainstream scholars do not consider that, in fact, the geographical representation of that context is primarily contingent to political and security agendas. In the words of Ó Tuathail and Agnew, "geography is never a natural, non-discursive phenomenon which is separate from ideology and outside politics; rather, geography as a discourse is a form of power/knowledge itself" (1992: 192). As a subfield of political geography, critical geopolitics in particular has exposed and called into question taken-for-granted geographical categories (Dalby, 1991; Ó Tuathail, 1996), examining how "cultural assumptions about geography and politics constitute the discourses of contemporary violence and political economy" (Dalby & Ó Tuathail, 1998: i). In this light, geopolitical discourses operate as "epistemological enforcers", which enframe all foreign policy practices.

This stands out clearly when weighing up the imaginative geographies of the Middle East. It cannot have escaped that the contours and the label of the region conform to the view of extra-regional powers: the area more properly designated as southwest Asia – encompassing Mashreq, Anatolia, Iran and delimited northeast by the Caucasus and southwest by Egypt – was halfway the British trade routes

in the Persian Gulf flowing out to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal. It was, therefore, a notion of strategic projection used by the Colonial Office in London during the 19th century and then took on by the US, though it has proved to be resilient after the end of formal colonial dependencies and was socialized as a category of belonging by the same people living in the area. All things considered, it is no wonder that IR went after dominant security discourses: the traditional approaches that can be found in both academic textbooks and foreign policy blueprints "invariably define security in the Middle East in terms of the uninterrupted flow of oil at a 'reasonable' price to 'Western' markets, the cessation of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the prevention of the emergence of a regional hegemon" (Bilgin, 2008: 99). In other words, mainstream theories subscribe to a top-down and military-focused geographical conception supporting, not least, the prejudice of an *exceptional* innate instability that sets the ground for the lasting intervention of offshore balancers in the regional affairs. It has been stressed in the previous chapter that energy considerations were not secondary in this regard.

All regions are geopolitical inventions[51], drawn accordingly to the interests and worldview of the strongest actors: to name something is to take possession of it. In the case of the Middle East, the long-term implications are on display, first of all the militarization of the region. Bilgin (2001, 2004) highlights that the ebb and flow of security discourses gave rise to multiple regional perspectives, each of them prioritising different referents and threats: besides the dominant one that subordinates the framing of the Middle East to US (and by extension Western) interests, the contending ideal-types of Arab, Islamist, and Mediterranean visions are also presented. This is in line with the definition of imaginative (or imagined) geographies as "a way of perceiving spaces and places, and the relationships between them, as complex sets of cultural and political practices and ideas defined spatially, rather than regarding them as static, discrete territorial units" (Diener & Hagen, 2003: 409), and also substantiates the view of plural sensibilities and representations, though these often convey oversimplified and stereotypical generalizations. Along these lines, Bilgin argues that regional conceptions and security practices are mutually constitutive. The same applies to the cartographical discourse on Kurdistan, by the way. Culcasi (2010) shows that the maps published on Anglo-American journalistic sources from 1945 to 2002 largely reflect geopolitical and orientalist notions supporting US agendas: Kurds were first portrayed as tribal or Soviet-looking rebels during the Cold War and then as backward victims of

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[51] To take another pertinent example, Ferguson (2006) questions whether we can speak of Africa as a unitary place in any meaningful sense. The incipit of his excellent essay on the shadowy position of the African continent in the neoliberal world order goes straight to the point: "Looking at the range of empirical differences internal to the continent - different natural environments, historical experiences, religious traditions, forms of government, languages, livelihoods, and so on - the unity of a thing called "Africa", its status as a single "place", however the continental descriptor may be qualified geographically or racially ("Sub-Saharan", "black", "tropical", or what have you) seems dubious". Nonetheless, the global discourse about Africa and Africanness is still there. It is so, quite simply, because it offers a radical counterpoint to Western societies. To use another formidable sentence by Ferguson, Africa "has served as a metaphor of absence - a "dark continent" against which the lightness and whiteness of "Western civilization" can be pictured" (ibidem: 2).

Ba'athist persecutions at the time of the Gulf War. Therefore, Farinelli is right in saying that the visualization of space on a map and the circulation of money in a market perform the same function: both devices create value through the symbolic regimes they inherit. Hence, he adds, "the role of maps is not only the localization and individuation of terrestrial features, but their transformation in goods before that" (Farinelli, 2009: 28).

From the considerations above, geography is anything but separate from politics. Political imagination occupies space through its representation. Therefore, geography does not strive for the mimesis of reality; rather, it concurs to its signification and partition. Evidence of this process is the history of colonial expansion, as postcolonial geographers have pointed out in the footsteps of Said (Sidaway, 2000; Blunt & McEwan, 2002; Robinson, 2003), which tells us how the colonisers' impressions were rendered factual knowledge and how those facts, in turn, were translated into geopolitical resolve. Whereas colonialism as historical phase tied to the European empires ended, colonialism as practice of domination is certainly not consigned to history. As long as the cultural hegemony of global powers is backed by sufficient military capabilities and/or economic infiltration, the external re-imagination of places and regions can get the upper hand on local imaginings.

The persistence of the Mercator projection as the most influential cartographical rendering of the globe is tellingly: centuries after its publication in 1569, still it is the reference for the most widely used mapping services (such as Google Maps, though with some adjustment), hung on the wall of every school class in every corner of the planet, printed on textbooks, journalistic, and artistic works. Contrary to what the all-purpose usage would suggest, the projection is nevertheless a misrepresentation of no little significance of the relative sizes of geographical objects on earth's surface: the higher the latitude, the more inflated the size, to the extent that the two poles cannot be shown fully on map. Truth be told, any world projection is inaccurate to greater or lesser degree, but the astonishing success of the Mercator's one is at odds with its distortive properties, even more so when considering that there are less flawed alternatives available[52]. In fact, the apparent distortions are exactly the reason for the over usage of the planisphere because it conveniently exaggerates the political West. In a nutshell, it is Eurocentric: geographical disproportions tacitly support cultural disparities at the expense of historically subjugated areas. After all, the map was designed for navigational uses and, therefore, was well suited for tracking the European commercial routes in the peripheries of the globe. To take a small leap forward for a moment, it should not be underestimated that the Eurocentric constructions of the Middle East and North Africa were enriched with environmental narratives also: the portrayal of a desolate and exotic landscape prone to ecological degradation provided sound justifications for

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[52] The most famous one is probably the Gall-Peters projection, which is explicitly aimed at decolonising cartographical knowledge and, not surprisingly, was source of controversy. This notwithstanding, it is not exempt from problematic distortions, though less notable. Out of many other options, the Winkel tripel projection is also of note.

hydraulic projects, agricultural policies or reforestation activities on behalf of administered populations – in brief, for a paternalistic intervention "to improve, restore, normalize, or repair" a fragile environment in need of care (Davis, 2011: 4)[54]. Although questionable and inaccurate for the most part, it is hard not to see such an imaginary in contemporary techno-political and popular accounts, in a way that silently communicates a message of cultural subordination, political ineptitude, and dangerous spillovers. This being another practical consequence of the knowledge-power nexus.

The postmodern critique reverses the relationship between representation and reality, and debunks universalist worldviews that refers to a part for the whole. I focused on geographical discourses and mentioned environmental ones, but the same is true for the notion of equilibrium in classic economics, which is said to lead (upon certain conditions) to Pareto efficient allocations, regardless of whether a distribution of wealth is equitable or not. Generally speaking, the naturalization of social constructions involves the reproduction of order and privilege; one can see this mechanism at play in every domain of social life. This theoretical chapter is not intended to deepen these insights further, but to provide an intellectual itinerary channelling research into some directions. In this respect, I put forward the idea that the interplay between knowledge production and diffusion on one side and the foundation and preservation of the Western liberal order on the other side has three repercussions at the analytical level, which are briefly listed below. These are all bound-up to the modern concept of sovereignty and are, in my view, incorrect to the extent that constrain IR explorations to epistemological uniformity.

- state-centrism, or the methodological treatment of the state as the central and defining unit of analysis of international politics. As said, first and foremost IR is the study of relations between states. According to critical scholars, this tendency does not bespeak of field of inquiry in descriptive terms, but is instrumental in creating normatively oriented knowledge. In such a way, state-centric methodologies fall prey to apriorism, embodying statism as a normative position and carving out a space of mutually exclusive sovereign states, while neglecting empirically or devaluing morally other forms of political organization. Then, the outcome is that a broad range of phenomena is poorly intelligible through the lens of mainstream paradigms, from transnational non-state actors to volatile factors straddling the domestic-international divide. For all the emphasis placed on the mythology of the state, the study of its institutions generally lacks cultural depth in the sense that contemporary states are idealized as substantially coherent rational actors upon which the totality of loyalties and decision-making

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[54] "Representations of the Middle East" – Diana Davis writes in the opening of her edited volume *Imperialism, Orientalism, and the Environment in the Middle East* (2011) – "nearly inevitably include desolate scenes of empty and parched deserts, punctuated, perhaps, with a lonely string of camels, a verdant but isolated oasis, or a beach with large dunes of golden sand, sometimes with a pyramid, an oil derrick, or a minaret in the background".

coalesce[55]. The critical rupture with the predominant approach urges to decentre and rethink the political based on the irreducible variety and variance of manifestations. Otherwise, the diagnoses of realism risk becoming unrealistic. Regardless of intra-disciplinary quarrels, the simple question one should ask is whether state-centrism is analytically helpful.

- the "territorial trap", as famously proposed by Agnew (1994), refers to the condition of blindness inflicted by a series of taken-for-granted and ahistorical geographical assumptions, namely i) the reification of territorial states as fixed units of sovereign space; ii) the domestic/foreign polarity; iii) the thesis of states as containers of society. Taken together, these hypotheses deny alternatives, obscure scales, lose sight of spatial practices behind the pretence of uniformity and homogeneity. As a matter of fact, an oil-producing country such as Kuwait – "a node in the network of informational capitalism" (Agnew & Corbridge 2002: 96)– shows that state territoriality and political space do not coincide inevitably. Then, escaping this circular and cumulative trap entails historicizing the mechanisms of state formation, decoupling political identities from the loci of sovereignty, and debunking the fusion of state and society (cf. ibidem: 83-95). It would also entail to distinguish de jure sovereignty and de facto sovereignty, with the latter being "articulated at the scale of the everyday, the mundane and the undramatic" (McConnell, 2010: 764).

- methodological nationalism, that is to say "the naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; see also Smith, 1983), which comes from confusion on the genesis and evolution of modern nations and is somewhat a bedfellow to the couple of points above in so far as commands congruence of political culture, national identity, and territory. Accordingly, individuals and societies are situated by default within nation-states, whereas sub-state and trans-state topographies of power are on the sidelines of the research agenda. In so doing, methodological nationalism turns out to institutionalize a spatial bias (Adamson, 2016: 2). Inter alia, this also implies conflation between the state "as actor (corporate agent) or arena (territorial space)" (ibidem: 3).

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[55] These arguments are well presented in a passage by John Agnew (1994: 54): "Systems of rule or political organization need not be either territorial, where geographical boundaries define the scope of membership in a polity a priori (for example, in kinship or clan systems space is occupied as an extension of group membership rather than residence within a territory defining group membership as in territorial states), or fixed territorially (as with nomads). But the main point of contention inspiring this paper is that even when rule is territorial and fixed, territory does not necessarily entail the practices of total mutual exclusion which the dominant understanding of the territorial state attributes to it. Indeed, depending on the nature of the geopolitical order of a particular period, territoriality has been 'unbundled' by all kinds of formal agreements and informal practices, such as common markets, military alliances, monetary and trading regimes, etc. (Ruggie, 1993: 165)."

The elephant in the room

As already alluded to, it is apparent that sovereignty is the elephant in the room. After all, it is the conceptual root of Western political theory. Walker's dissection of the inside/outside dichotomy goes into a critique of sovereignty – "the crucial modern political articulation of all spatiotemporal relations" (1993: 6). It is equally well known Foucault's call for cutting off the King's head, which is somewhat required, metaphorically speaking, to realize that the locus of sovereignty (the State) "for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and further because the State can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations" (Foucault, 1980: 122). Sovereignty expresses the legitimate practice of power over land and people - a "principle of spatial exclusion" (Agnew 1994) that rules out any external authority within a territory, which is in turn the area for the exercise of jurisdiction. The origin and the evolution of the concept in late medieval Europe is known, as well as the fact that violations of the norm are more illustrative of international politics than the norm itself (Krasner, 1999). To return to Foucault, acknowledging that sovereignty is a historical product not covering the whole space of power relations does not amount to adopt a position in favour of the progressive decline of the state in contemporary world order. For one thing, instead, it means to "[bear] witness to the irredeemable plurality of space and the multiplicity of possible political constructions of space" (Dalby & Ó Tuathail: 2), as critical geopolitics does.

The disjuncture between authority, legitimacy, and territoriality that have characterized state-formation processes in the Middle East during the decolonization phase are perhaps the most vivid illustration of that. As Del Sarto observes very appropriately, "[considering] that the Westphalian state model never fully corresponded to reality - not even in Europe, where it originated - its conceptual strength for analysing past and current developments in the Middle East remains questionable" (Del Sarto, 2017: 770). It might be argued, then, that the assumed exceptionalism of the region[56] is predicated upon the mismatch with the one-fits-all benchmark represented by liberal democracies. Anything that falls short

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[56] The debate on the endurance of authoritarianism in the Arab world – the "region's political hallmark" (Bellin, 2012: 127) – is a clear indication of a presumed anomaly. Anticipated in Huntington's comment (Huntington, 1991) on the exceptional resistance of the Middle East and North Africa to the third wave of democratization unfolding during the 1970s, according to many area specialists the exception still stands, to borrow from Diamond (Diamond, 2010). Cronyism, corruption, colonial legacies, oil rents, weak civil societies, coercive apparatuses, tribal norms, religious factors are some of the often interrelated explanatory factors to which the debate has resorted, especially after the so-called Arab Springs triggered by the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia. However, I agree with Achcar (2016) that the theories of Arab exceptionalism resonating in Western media and scholarly works embody culturalist understandings, which take the pulse of regional politics based on its distance from the liberal model. The juxtaposition "spring" to the unrest crossing several Arab countries is meaningful. By contrast, Achcar aptly reminds that the upheaval started in 2011 "[was] not – or not only or even primarily – a democratic transition", but "a thorough social revolution that seeks to overturn a whole socioeconomic order after a protracted state of developmental blockage" (ibidem: 5-6).

of the threshold is accounted as vulnerable and conflict-prone, whilst deviations from the model as dangerous and ungoverned dis-orders. The discourse of fragile and failed states, upon which the international community moves flows of "aid" globally and urges donor-driven adjustments to targeted developmental requirements, shows that the bifurcation has a normative focus indeed, meaning that the Western design of sovereignty keeps together "an ethos of hierarchy and privilege, on the one hand, and corresponding mechanisms of subordination and discrimination, on the other" (Grovogui 2002: 323). It is precisely in this sense that Ferguson has suspicion that the dark picture about Africa – with all its emphasis on lacks, failures, problems and crises that somehow recycles old clichés of savagery – insists much on what the many African realities *are not*, thus "in negative relation to normative standards that are external to them" (2006: 7-10).

The way political theory, more generally, and IR, in particular, have traditionally looked at borders "as passive territorial markers" (Diener & Hagen 2010: 9) is another interesting corollary. While presenting the indefinite boundaries of Kurdistan some pages ago I flew over the distinction between frontiers and borders. It is generally agreed that inside empires and feudal lands authority faded gradually into vaguely defined frontier zones. What in the Roman Empire was the *limes* bounding the outer provinces shall be understood as a fortified garrison or line within, not the last bastion of imperial rule. It should also be kept in mind that territorial control was discontinuous. Modern borders, instead, are exact territorial demarcations enclosing a supposedly dense and tight polity and, historically, are associated with the rise of nation-states. Though performing different functions, borders preserve intact the same military dimension of the *limes* insofar as they act as the extreme defensive bulwark against a hostile, alien, and anarchic outside. The separation is as much territorial as ideological: the exclusive sovereign space is predicated upon a cultural divide for which the distinction between what is kept safely inside vs. what threatens from the outside follows criteria of sameness and difference. Without a border there cannot be a state: the exercise of sovereignty (i.e. the legitimate power) and the right to citizenship (i.e. the political subjectivity) within the territory it delimits are unthinkable otherwise.

This is obviously a quite idealized representation. Although a borderless world is a misnomer (Newman & Paasi, 1998), static and neat borders exist only on the canvas of a map, whereas they are in fact crossed, blurred, and transcended in the everyday reality. Nonetheless, albeit cognizant of the historical processes of boundary drawing, IR pundits tend to frequently lose memory of the artificiality of all borders[57]. In so doing, empirical reference easily shifts into an ordering concept. It would not be possible otherwise to get caught in the analytical traps listed before. It is not a matter of permeability, porosity, or openness; not even of how the outer edge of the state (wherever it may be found) is

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[57] "All borders, whether they appear oddly contrived and artificial, (...) or appear to be based on objective criteria, such as rivers or lines of latitude, are have always been constructions of human beings. As such, any border's delineation is subjective, contrived, negotiated, and contested" (Diener & Hagen 2010: 3).

renegotiated by flows, networks, and translocalities. Rather, the crux of the matter is to acknowledge that borders are always contentious (Del Sarto 2017), being "tied up with the politics of identity" (Newman, 2003: 124). Of all the many type of boundaries giving shape and dramatizing politics, within and beyond the state, borders are perhaps the most apparent manifestation of how identity formation strives to seek a territorial base upon which taking roots. This is congruent with the definition of politics as the attempt of creating a centre of gravity for the self-representation of a given group. Nevertheless, the institutional nature of any border (Müller, 2013) is frequently forgot. To wind up this long remark about the lack of reflexivity in IR, the ossification of borders in the prevailing theoretical-practical usage is integral to the affirmation of the modern political imaginary (Vaughan-Williams, 2009). As a consequence, I share the concern that "there is a real danger of a growing disjuncture between the increasing complexity and differentiation of borders in global politics on the one hand, and yet the apparent simplicity and lack of imagination with which borders and bordering practices continue to be treated on the other" (ibidem: 7).

The need for a "spatial turn" has been claimed from various sides (e.g. Adamson 2016). The way forward I see and I advocate for is not a new one - namely, the post-structural deconstruction and decentring of all the binary abstractions that stabilize power hierarchies. In my view, what is recommendable, then, is embracing an anti-essentialist post-statist framework so that the analysis of spatial configurations of power and rule other than the state is not precluded a priori. This means removing a bit of the ideological baggage that marked the foundation of the discipline. In this respect, post-structural and post-modern geography[58] is certainly well ahead IR. Besides those already cited, the works by Ed Soya, David Harvey, Doreen Massey, Nigel Thrift and many other critical geographers offer grounds for a much beneficial reconceptualization of key themes of inquiry, most notably the spatial texture of contemporary modes of domination and the corresponding practices of resistance. If we accept that the epoch we live in is the epoch of space (Foucault, 1971), this will sound all the more necessary. In this sense, my small contribution is basically to point out some of the blind spots that make invisible where, by whom, and for what purpose an "environmental" conflict is fought.

Gifts and curses: a not-so-sympathetic review of resource conflicts

"The problem is that the good Lord didn't see fit to put oil and gas reserves where there are democratic governments". The statement should sound unreasonable to many, hopefully. It is not so when it turns out that Dick Cheney pronounce it while addressing an energy conference in 1996. He was at the time CEO of Halliburton, one of the largest services company in the oil industry worldwide and a top contractor of the Pentagon during the Operation Iraqi Freedom, when Cheney was the influential US

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[58] For a very good summary see Murdoch (2005).

Vice President and Halliburton was awarded with a billionaire no-bid contract to restore and then operate the many oil wells set on fire during the military intervention[59]. The portrait of the American superpower as a "garrison state" (Lasswell, 1941) whose foreign policy objectives are steered by a bulky industrial-military complex is fairly commonplace (see the early works by Mills, 1956; Lens, 1970; Melman, 1970). Energy is frequently added to the equation as well. In actual fact, the history of petroleum intersected with the history of Western imperialism on several occasions: I already pointed out the reasons for the British strategic partnership with APOC at the beginning of the twentieth century and I will make reference later on to the American petro-culture as constitutive of the US geopolitical identity. Cheney's words bring to mind the bare and oblique rationale behind the twin invasions and occupations of Iraq under Bush Sr. and Jr. presidencies, beyond the official justifications mixing up alleged stocks of weapons of mass destruction, linkages with international terrorism, and the urgency of implanting democracy at the barrel of a gun. However, Vitalis' remarkable inquiry (2007) into the US-Saudi "special relationship" through the eyes of the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) – which stands out as one of the densest illustration of how private business in the oil sector, foreign influence, and local ruling systems evolve into a conglomerate of interests in a nonlinear fashion (as well as an empirically sound exposition of the racist practices that followed the creation of an American enclave in the Arabian peninsula)– invites not to rush into simplistic arguments.

That being said, this section reviews mainstream theoretical approaches connecting resource scarcity or abundance to the likelihood of armed conflict at the intrastate and interstate level. This is how IR theories have typically framed environmental conflicts – a geopolitical scramble for valuable natural resources. The limitations of this entry point will be discussed also in paragraph 2.2 while putting forward an analytical framework that is sensitive to the critique laid out by political ecology. This overview is by no means exhaustive, but it shows well-known lines of research and, most importantly, justifies the choice of an alternative approach.

As mentioned, security studies started dipping into environmental issues after the Cold War (Barnett, 2001, 2003; Dalby, 2002; Buzan & Hansen, 2009). According to Gleditsch (2003), two opposite perspectives emerged: a "neo-Malthusian" model and a "Cornucopian" response. The former (resource-pessimistic) view claims that decreasing supplies of key commodities induces the onset of conflicts. The latter (resource-optimistic) view, instead, appraises that notwithstanding environmental stressors there are options on the table to cope with short-term scarcities (such as international trade, technological innovations, multilateral regimes). Whereas neo-Malthusians stress the potential for conflict, Cornucopians point out the adaptive capacity of human societies. Despite most recent

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[59] "A Closer Look at Cheney and Halliburton", New York Times, September 28, 2004; available at: https://goo.gl/4xybwh

contributions can be found in a middle ground, Gleditsch's distinction is quite useful to browse out the literature and it clearly follows the lines of the old realism-liberalism debate.

Homer-Dixon's work at the University of Toronto paved the way to the neo-Malthusian perspective in IR. In his view, resource scarcities (be they demand-induced, supply-induced, or structural) may turn sour into violent conflict by virtue of resource capture by elites and/or ecological marginalization - with migration, economic hardship, social segmentation, and institutional weakness as intervening social factors in the causal chain (Homer-Dixon, 1991, 1994). Although the model was criticized as deterministic, the underlying argument about the salience of environmentally-driven conflicts became somewhat conventional wisdom and stimulated a sizeable number of studies. Overall, however, there is little evidence supporting a direct causal relationship. Rather, "the effect of environmental changes on violent conflict appears to be contingent on a set of intervening economic and political factors that determine adaptation capacity" (Bernauer, Böhmelt, & Koubi, 2012). This remark is now well accepted in the literature (Barnett & Adger, 2007; Gleick, 2014; Raleigh & Urdal, 2007). Therefore, violence is thought not to be inescapable, nor environmental degradation is addressed as the primary cause of civil strife and, even less, inter-state warfare. Adaptation and resilience are the buzzwords: the lower the institutional, economic, and technological capabilities to cope with environmental threats, the higher the exposure to instability and the likelihood of violence. With reference to climate change, Barnett and Adger posit that "the extent to which system-wide impacts transpire will be determined in part by the degree to which any given national economy is dependent on climate sensitive natural resources, and the robustness and resilience of social institutions to manage change" (2007: 642). Nevertheless, the black box of intervening factors remains out of reach and sight, meaning that inconclusive and contradictory empirical results left the impression that everything under heaven is in utter chaos.

Another strand of literature replaced scarcity with abundance as independent variable and sought to demonstrate that resource-rich countries are more prone to violence. Collier and Hoffler, in particular, argued that "the extent of primary commodity exports is the strongest single influence on the risk of conflict" since resource-dependent economies reward rebel movements with the opportunity of securing a stream of cash by taking control of resources (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998, 2002, 2004). In other words, the "greed" for financial and military wealth are more pressing than social "grievances" in the onset of inter-communal violence. The greed vs. grievance dichotomy got the attention of several scholars (De Soysa, 2000, 2002; De Soysa & Neumayer, 2007; Fearon, 2005; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Humphreys, 2005; Le Billon, 2001, 2008; Mildner, Lauster, & Wodni, 2011; Ross, 2004). More generally, the theory by Collier and Hoeffler was conceptualized under the eye-catching heading of the "resource curse", which is somehow specific to high value non-renewables resources (raw materials, precious metals, and energy sources). The oil curse is perhaps its more successful variation and it is given separate treatment in the next paragraph, also because of the relevance for the present research.

I lost count of how many times my interviewees spoke of oil as a curse or, conversely, a blessing. Before presenting flaws and virtues of this theory, two questions beg for attention: at the conceptual level, how the mainstream notion of security is prejudicial to the whole understanding of environmental conflicts in IR; at the methodological level, what are some major limitations of quantitatively-oriented analyses.

Starting with the first one, from the previous discussion on the pitfalls of sovereignty follows that within an overwhelmingly state-centric IR theory security takes on a quite peculiar meaning, namely defending integrity and autonomy of the territorial state from a range of external threats. Using the language of the Copenhagen School of security studies (Buzan, Waever, & De Wilde, 1998; Buzan et Waever, 2003), the sovereign state is the one and only referent object (besides securitizing actor) of the speech act. Realism and liberalism are partners in crime in this regard; the distinction makes little difference. Much ink has been spilled over the un-settled and slippery meaning(s) of security, and I do not go here into the debate, but making a brief reference might be helpful. As known, critical approaches caution against static conceptualizations. More specifically, the reification of the concept – its objectification in de-contextualized, stable, and unproblematic ways – is staunchly opposed. According to Booth (Booth, 1991a), a negative and minimal understanding of security as absence of threat falls short of clarity. Since threats are inter-subjectively constructed, security results from processes of negotiation and contestation in which ideational factors play a constitutive role. In other words, danger is unthinkable outside a "category of understanding" (Campbell, 1992). The definition of what is to be secured in opposition to something perceived as threatening is always contingent and context-specific. Hence, there cannot be a universal idea of security; instead, the derivative character of security becomes tangible whenever different group identities within the same political community are taken into account. In this sense, security defies uniformity of meaning. Therefore, what is acknowledged to be the *objective* one derives in fact from deep-seated assumptions of political theory, which need then to be critically restated (Wyn Jones 1999: 103). I will explain later on that this restatement largely revolves around the spatial dimension of identity, which is the axis of any power relation.

For all the different voices and perspectives in the literature on environmental conflicts, the state-centric conceptualization of security is taken for granted. This has a knock-on effect. Take, for example, the politics of water. Common to the many formulations circulating in policy and academic discourses (Cook & Bakker, 2012; Gerlak et al., 2018; Jepson et al., 2017), water scarcity is thought to undermine the very survival of power, thus suggesting that water resources "should be appropriated, annexed, secured" (Lankford, Bakker, Zeitoun, & Conway, 2013: ix). No wonder, hence, that most analyses on water disputes systematically look for a relationship between volumetric estimates, on one side, and conflict events across contiguous countries, on the other side. What is more important, however, is

that this notion of security, which organizes natural resources into the sovereign boundaries of the state by definition, is at the very least incomplete since it neglects the socio-ecological value of water for human beings, which is reduced to an object of contention in the game of high politics only (Burgess, Owen, & Sinha, 2014). Water is constructed, then, as an integral part of the homeland: not only a strategic resource, kept inside the territorial boundaries of sovereignty, but also a figurative element imagined to belong to the national community (Allouche, 2005). It is precisely under such a contestable premise that the management of shared water bodies becomes the equivalent of a zero-sum-game with identities and interests in collision. The standstill of hydro-diplomacy in many international basins (the Tigris-Euphrates one included) basically comes from the centralization of water governance in the hands of national governments. As underlined elsewhere with regard to the deconstruction of other tacit facts of political life, that was a historical process. There is nothing to prevent alternative notion of security to rise. For instance, a human security model would focus on individual and social vulnerability to water supply and quality, and that framing would be associated with an entirely different set of threats (Burgess et al., 2014). Arguably, mainstream research paradigms got mired in a narrow framework conflict-cooperation because of the lack of an expanded vision of what security might signify[60].

The second consideration is a methodological one, as anticipated. A meta-analysis of the literature tells that evidence of clear-cut causal relationships connecting natural resources to violent conflict is ambiguous (Gleditsch, 2012; Selby, 2014), to say the least. Then, the aforementioned theoretical models are under distress. Although I am not particularly versed in quantitative methods, my scepticism is not plucked out of the air. Without opening a methodological digression, some remarks are instead appropriate. Most quantitative articles addressing the topic drew on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, spin-offs of the Correlates of War Project, or other datasets[61]. These works basically used the already available explanatory models for domestic and international armed conflicts introducing a brand new array of independent variables on climate change and environmental degradation. Even assuming that inferential statistics is good method for determining such a nexus (and it should be clear now that it is not so in my view), panel data analyses appear to be very sensitive to the operationalization of variables, data collection, and regression techniques to the extent that the juxtaposition of different findings makes it difficult to rule out spurious relations or even reverse causation.

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[60] There are exceptions, of course. Within international development circles, for instance, the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report acknowledges environmental security ("protecting people from the short- and long-term ravages of nature, man-made threats in nature, and deterioration of the natural environment") as one of the crucial areas of human security. In this formulation, significantly, the safety of individuals is given primacy.

[61] To name one more, the Transboundary Freshwater Dispute Database (TFDD) developed by Aaron Wolf and associates at the Oregon State University – an event dataset measuring water-related cooperation and conflict among riparian countries of 263 international river basins in the period 1948-2008.

In greater detail, some troublesome and recurrent flaws are: i) lack of issue coding in conflict data; ii) imbalance in favour of high-intensity event (e.g. what about frozen or latent conflicts?); iii) collection and coding biases in event data (e.g. coverage, sources); iv) endogeneity; v) state-centrism (e.g. would it make sense to choose the state as unit of analysis in a transboundary river basin whereas governance of shared waters is socially dispersed? what about transnational and non-state operators running the oil industry that are instead omitted in almost any article on the oil curse?) ; vi) data collection at different temporal, geographic, and social scales (Salehyan, 2014); vii) elusiveness of key concepts (e.g. what do we mean by conflict or cooperation? what if power asymmetries translates into coercive cooperation? on the other side, what do we deem to be a relevant "change" in climate patterns?) and indicators (e.g. is the "body count"[62] a proper measure for the intensity of a conflict? how to account for the inequalities engendered in the folds of global commodity chains?).

The list is a tentative one, and it is supplemented with only a few open questions that would deserve definitely a careful examination; yet, it is meant to convey a sense of limitation coming from the epistemological choices upstream, which undermine an effort that nevertheless is much needed in view of its political implications. Selby (2014) gave a deeper overview of the same problematic. He levels a criticism at the research agenda – quantitative in methods, positivist in epistemology – dominating the study of the conflict potential of anthropogenic climate change and identifies three shortcomings making such framework "particularly ill-suited". First, spuriousness of results. The plasticity of statistical procedures is held responsible for that: indeed, correlations "always rest upon coding and causal assumptions which range from the arbitrary to the untenable", which makes hard to reach a consensus on the subject. In this sense, findings are found to be "more product of choice, judgment and artifice, than of actual causal relations between nature and society". This implies, in the second place, that any sort of prediction on that basis (even if it were consistent) would be built on the sand because anchored to discretionary and abstract modelling assumptions (such as fixed effects). Third, attention should be paid to the conservative orientation that ensues from "problem-solving knowledge" insofar as this leans towards some policy choices and reproduces certain cultural stereotypes[63]. The last shortcoming is in tune with the argumentation above. As far as the other two points are concerned, quantitative scholars are conscious that robust correlations do not constitute explanations by themselves, and that even the most nuanced and sophisticated inferential model is inevitably reductionist, missing much of what lies in between. Nevertheless, Selby is quite right to stress that

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[62] The Uppsala Conflict Data Program gives this quite narrow definition of conflict: "a conflict episode is a period or armed conflict that results in 25 or more battle deaths in a calendar year". Hence, it is obvious that many contentious situations fall outside the scope of analysis.

[63] Selby notes: "populist and policy representations of looming climate-driven chaos (...) are highly speculative, are informed by contemporary stereotypes and preoccupations, and tend to support the securitisation or even militarisation of climate policy" (2014: 2).

apparently strong associations disappear from view when applying different operationalization or models.

Hence, saying that "oil predicts civil war risk" (Fearon 2005: 483) is actually an empty statement, which does not explain anything and much less read the future[64]. As Arezki and Brukner set forth with reference to the oil curse, "most of the literature has been either anecdotal or is plagued by endogeneity biases related to difficult-to-measure (and often unobservable) cross-country differences in institutional arrangements, culture, tastes, or other deep historical factors that are often neglected in cross-country analysis" (Arezki & Brückner, 2011: 3). It is a long way then to infer the occurrence of violent spillovers from raw data about climate shocks (e.g. floods) or long-term variations (e.g. sustained droughts). Even if there was a discernible *statistically significant* effect at a precise point in time and space, looking for general patterns out of a large-N sample of countries looks like a big leap of faith in the exactness of the chosen analytical method, not much the advisable line of inquiry. From a positivist point of view, Salehyan warns that the purpose of this still "immature" sub-field of conflict research ought not to be to prove or falsify such direct causation, "but rather, to assess how, in particular contexts, weather and climate variables influence a number of contentious actions" (2014: 4). Whereas a more limited target is certainly desirable, the baseline epistemological position and the resultant methodological pathways are not secondary nonetheless. The discussion below put some more irons in the fire.

The rentier-state paradigm and the oil curse

I mentioned the oil curse here and there. The popularity of the theory, which dates back to the 1980s, makes a dedicated paragraph somewhat necessary. Even more so given that it has been applied to Iraq extensively. According to the formulation, sitting on a sea of oil is actually conducive to economic and political pathologies: countries that depend on oil exports are more likely to suffer from economic stagnation (Auty, 2001; Leite & Weidmann, 1999; Sachs & Warner, 2001), authoritarianism (Ross, 2001; Wantchekon, 2002), and civil war (Collier & Hoeffler 1998, 2000, 2002; Fearon 2004; Ulfelder, 2007). What might be seen at first sight as a blessing (the oil endowment) turns out to be a curse, which affects prospects of democratization and development. Otherwise known as the paradox of plenty, the theory elaborates on the rentier-state paradigm, already introduced in the previous chapter[65].

A rentier state derives the largest share of GDP from the export of a single commodity. Contrary to production states subtracting resources from the economy and re-allocating them for the common interest, the mammoth size and the external source of income makes rentier states autonomous from

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[64] Speaking of predictions (or perhaps mathematical divination), Collier goes even further in a World Bank report providing very precise thresholds: "The most dangerous level of primary commodity dependence is 26% of GDP. At this level the otherwise ordinary country has a risk of conflict of 23%" (2000: 6).
[65] See infra p. 41.

society (Luciani, 2005: 92). Being revenue distribution the primary function of the state, the fiscal social contract binding citizens to elected governments pales into insignificance: taxation is no longer the traditional source of political legitimacy, while generosity replaces accountability as the essential virtue of the ruler. Therefore, if revenue accruing from abroad finance central institutions and a substantial fraction of the economy, in absence of check and balances, ruling elites are encouraged to earmark welfare subsidies and bolster up a position of primacy recklessly. As a result, there is no need to promote political participation, nor build a national myth since the rentier state "[asserts] its legitimacy by reference to a constituency that is larger than its own population - Islamic in Saudi Arabia or the Islamic Republic of Iran; Arab in Iraq and Libya; technocratic in Dubai" (ibidem: 97). Consistently, oil dependency hinders democracy (Ross 2001)[66]: even if does not derail democratic regimes, in non-democratic contexts enable autocracies to remain in power and forestall protests, and it may even influence the patterns of state-building towards authoritarian and patrimonial practices. As Luciani points out, "rentier states inherit a political order from history; they do not create their own political order" (2005: 93). Among other things, elites have no interest in reforming the economy as long as they can extract surplus from oil royalties; investments in other sectors are less remunerative and less controllable, which make them politically risky.

With reference to oil producing countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the argument goes on: the longevity of autocracies, economic underperformance, and instability are all wired to (if not explained by) oil, simply put. After all, five Arab petro-states across the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE) hold together more than one-third of total oil proven reserves globally, and as a matter of fact the stream of oil (which is also of the highest quality and the cheapest to extract) has bankrolled draconian policies and patronage, thus strengthening autocratic leaderships. However, many oil producing countries have not been doomed to going through the perverse effects of the resource curse, this being the case of both mature democracies (US, Canada, Norway, UK) and countries in transition (Mexico, Indonesia). The many exceptions to the rule indicate that variation is too large to generalize a curse effect. And, actually, not only outside the Middle East (otherwise this would have shored up the discourse of exceptionalism). If one takes the Human Development Index as benchmark, it can be noticed that some petro-states in South America such as Ecuador and all the Gulf monarchies have actually improved more than resource-poor neighbours in terms of literacy rates, life expectancy, and other indicators (Rutledge, 2014). Luciani himself, the most

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[66] Ross delineates three causal effects. The first one, the rentier effect, has been already presented: "governments use their oil revenues to relieve social pressures that might otherwise lead to demands for greater accountability" (Ross 2001: 328), deploying low taxes and spending programs as tools of statecraft, as well as thwarting the formation of independent social groups. A second repressive effect emphasizes the entrenchment into ubiquitous military-security apparatuses. A third effect relies, instead, on Inglehart's modernization theory and assumes that "if resource-led growth does not lead to higher education levels and greater occupational specialization, it should also fail to bring about democracy" (*ibidem*: 337). All these are complementary and may occur simultaneously.

influential theorist of rentierism, admitted that recent evolutions in the Gulf and the broader region run counter the thesis: "several rentier states engaged in the road towards wider political participation, while the non-rentier states have further barricaded themselves behind their security apparatuses" (Luciani 2005: 94). Therefore, this trend urged the revision of the concept in a four-volume publication (entitled, tellingly, *Resources Blessed: Diversification and the Gulf Development Model*[67]), which reconsiders rentierism in light of the diversification undertaken by GCC countries, which were the "archetypal candidates" of the paradigm (Niblock & Malik, 2007) and are all approaching a post-oil setting. In accordance, Ross also commented that the original version of the notion is too general to be analytically valid, suffering from a "bad case of conceptual overstretch" that fundamentally derives from the absence of variation on the dependent variable and the lack of specification in falsifiable terms of the causal chains (Ross 2001: 331).

Validations of the theory go along with a growing number of rebuttals[68]. Hence, the debate over the paradox of plenty and its side effects remain unsolved. In any case, the curse is empirically weak and not a reliable explanatory model since it does not stand the test of evidence, which means one of two things: there are some errors or misspecifications in the argument, which makes room for revision, or the theory is wrong and it should be abandoned. The majority opted for the first option and delivered a conditional theory of the curse that places emphasis on institutional factors. As seen, Luciani is among them. Another one is Barma, according to whom "the overall credibility of inter-temporal commitment and degree of political inclusiveness in a country determine its distinct experience of the resource curse" (Barma, 2014: 257). Based on the disaggregation of the rentier effect into the mechanisms of rent generation (regulatory framework) and rent distribution (government spending), he builds a typology of rentier states (patrimonial, hegemonic, clientelist, pluralist). Hence, similar approaches aim to shed light on the divergent trajectories that can be taken by oil-producing countries, escaping from the

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[67] For a review essay see Springborg (2013).

[68] Michael Ross (2001) provided one of the first statistical confirmations of the oil-impedes-democracy claim. Applying a least-squares regression model to a pooled time-series cross-national dataset, he found that state's reliance on oil and minerals exports have "strong anti-democratic effects". Ross's large-N analysis became a benchmark in the literature, which until then had been dominated by single case studies. Wantchekon (2002) and Jensen and Wantchekon (2004) also found a statistically significant association between resource dependence and authoritarianism, while Smith (2004) and Ulfelder (2007) found that oil-driven economies increase the durability of authoritarian regimes. However, other scholars have contended that with different measures of oil dependency the causal relationship is far from being robust. Among them, Herb (2003) points out that the negative correlation between rentierism and democracy disappears when applying a counterfactual operationalization of the independent variable. Similarly, Brunnschweiler and Bulte (2008) call into question the conflation of the notions of abundance and dependence: whereas the former appears to positively affect economic growth and institutional quality, the latter does not have any impact on growth. Hence, they reframe the resource curse in terms of reverse causation by concluding that weak institutions and poor governance may result in the over-exploitation of and the over-reliance on natural resources. Scepticism on the rentier paradigm emerges from a growing amount of research (Arezki & Brückner, 2011; Basedau & Lacher, 2006; Basedau & Lay, 2009; Haber & Menaldo, 2011; Okruhlik, 1999; Stijns, 2005).

determinism of the theory as it was originally formulated. Developing a more flexible proposition might seem compelling, but it is actually nonsense. If we accept that rule of law and good governance (whatever the definition and the operationalization) are the intervening factors explaining why some countries are cursed and some others are not, then a theory arguing that oil shapes politics (to simplify it brutally) is not needed anymore. As Morrison puts it unequivocally: "Either oil is a curse, and institutions do not matter for its effects (indeed, oil may undermine good institutions). Or oil is not a curse, because institutions can determine its effects" (Morrison, 2013: 1119). If being a compulsive gambler or a responsible investor depends on the institutional environment, it would make no sense to accent the lust for oil, which otherwise would transform even the most judicious investor into an unscrupulous gambler (ivi).

Therefore, the second direction at the crossroad (drop off theory) would seem the right one. After all, should we blame oil for the lack of democracy? Or, should it be more plausible to reverse the order (authoritarianism as the reason behind the dysfunctional over-dependence on oil exports) to unravel the threads of the political economy of oil? There is actually no reason to believe that the endemic corruption plaguing Iraq nowadays goes beyond interests and agency of Iraqi elites themselves, as much as "oil did not produce the regime of Saddam Hussein nor the 'predatory state' of Iraq, nor the tragic conflicts currently being witnessed between its constituent racial and religious communities" (Rutledge 2014: 17). Examining how the petroleum industry was implicated in state-formation and institution-building, as done in the previous chapter, does not entail that "black gold" commanded regime type, economic distortions, or elite mentality, nor pushed the country to descend into violence. Otherwise, that would mean to accord to a material substance the immaterial (magical) quality to do evil (Weszkalnys, 2013). I will return later in the empirical part on the mysticism surrounding the commodification of crude. Why then, despite glaring evidence of the contrary, does this piece of received wisdom still retain such an influence in the contemporary discourse on international politics? The question is not banal. A compelling answer, in my view, is that:

> "the *curse* is really a political and economic construct, a product of a particular constellation of extractive transnational social forces, histories and hegemonic power relations built upon the commoditization of oil for the global market. Oil as a commodity is not the curse, rather it is 'cursed' by the high premium places on it by the world's most powerful and strategic actors for whom it represents a most critical fuel of globalised and industrial power" (Obi, 2010: 489).

Albeit a bit emphatic, Obi takes a snapshot of the rhizomatic connections making up the global energy infrastructure and the embeddedness into the hegemonic world order. He clarifies: if there is a curse, it is not internal to the oil-rich state only, but to a great extent is initiated by transnational corporations and foreign powers. The Nigerian case, with which Obi is most familiar, shows indeed that IOCs fanned the flames of local contentious dynamics (for instance, by making payments to armed groups

and bribing government officials). From this perspective, the curse is false consciousness obscuring the subterranean synergy between domestic and transnational elites that effectively creates a rent-seeking environment, subverts economic processes, and privatizes institutions. Michael Watts calls that corporate-government nexus "the slick alliance".

> "Much of the resource curse analysis runs the risk of imputing enormous powers to oil (without grasping its specificity), conflating petroleum's purported Olympian powers with pre-existing political dynamics, and (...) misidentifying a predation-proneness for what is in fact the dynamics of state and corporate enclave politics. What is striking in so much of what passes as 'resource politics' is the total invisibility of both transnational oil companies (which typically work in joint ventures with the state) and the specific forms of rule associated with petro-capitalism" (Watts 2003: 5091)

The "smoke and mirrors" (Obi 2010) of the technocratic narrative framing the curse prevents from taking these factors into account: nature is instrumentally politicized for the purpose of freeing powerful actors from responsibility of a grievous state of affairs. Obi notes that labelling African wars after natural resources (such as diamond, or timber, or cocoa wars), coupled with the security discourse on weak states, is an expedient to feed an idea of connatural instability, while wider ramifications fall off the radar. The environmental determinism thus reproduced as self-evident truth in the policy prescriptions of global institutions such as World Bank and IMF guarantees the principle of a competitive oil market whose extractive locations are not precluded to IOCs. It is not by accident that the curse theory made its appearance when the nationalization of energy assets by newly independent countries was feared by Western powers. Rutledge (2014) reminds that the call for re-opening the resource frontiers was laid out in the policies of the US National Petroleum Council during the years of the Reagan presidency. Hence, spreading the concern for an inescapable sideslip into underdevelopment and authoritarianism was meant to oppose state-owned exploitation in developing countries and push them to accept the marketization of their subsoil endowments. According to this interpretation, the very declaration of a looming curse served the purpose of liberalising the energy market and encouraging oil-rich countries to relinquish a "proprietorial" role. Since openness and reliability of fossil fuel sources are pillars of the liberal geopolitical order, the argument cannot be discredited on the spot.

Whatever one's sensations about its plausibility, however, the critique puts the spotlight on the specificity – as Watts writes – of the oil industry, which the curse theory fails to capture instead: the multiple core-periphery dependencies crossing conventional spatial separations, a net-like infrastructure of material (e.g. cargos, pipelines) and financial (e.g. capital investments, future contracts) flows, the correspondent geography of power, the head-to-head between liberal norms and resource nationalism (though not necessarily irreconcilable), the glocal configuration of exploitative practices.

All these elements are invisible to raw data and emerged clearly from field research as the effective contentious context of oil politics. All the more reason to approach environmental conflicts from a different set of assumptions.

2.2. The matter of nature

On the intractable line between nature and culture

Any theory of knowledge revolves around making sense of nature, in that it explores how the physical or material reality independent of human action is knowable to human intellect. The assumption of the knowing subject confronting an apparently self-evident external and autonomous non-human world is the foundation of modern conceptions of science, understood as systematized knowledge gained through observable, replicable, impersonal methods representing reality as it is. However, following an anti-foundational line of thinking, the dichotomy human/non-human on which such claim for objective scientific knowledge relies upon can be placed under erasure, in the words of Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. As 'nature' may be associated with multiple and even contradictory formations of meaning, the epistemological line that separates nature from culture – and by extension environment from society, non-humans from humans – is indeed mobile, elusive, and eventually contingent on practices of signification. In a remarkable genealogical excursus on the historical semantics of 'nature' and 'culture' Michael Watts observes that "the two words are often assumed to be opposites – the material and the ideal, the biological and the semiotic, a realm of law and a world of contingency – but on closer examination their polarities are tangled, difficult and intractable" (2005: 142).

Being at the heart of a controversial disciplinary divide between physical and human geography, geographers (as well as sociologists and philosophers of science) have long engaged with and debated on the implications of this unsettling polysemy (Fitzsimmons, 1989; Soper, 1995; Cronon, 1996b; Eder, 1996; Phillips & Mighall, 2000). Based on the often-cited Raymond William's study (1972), nature commonly relates to four main meanings: i) 'intrinsic nature' – the essential quality or defining property of something; ii) 'external nature' – the non-human physical environment separated from human society; iii) 'universal nature' – the entire living world, human beings and non-human entities included; and iv) 'super-ordinate nature' – the primal, immanent force or organizing principle "animating living phenomena and operating in or on inanimate phenomena" (Castree, 2013: 9-10). The variety of definitions, referents, and collateral concepts points out that nature as signifier is quite unstable. Dissimilar yet overlapping to a certain extent, these definitions resonate in the giusnaturalistic and

contractualist traditions underlying Western political theory. In the Leviathan, Hobbes uses *nature* in all of its meanings to describe the innate passions of men, the state of anarchy and misery preceding social covenant and political obligation, and the fundamental laws behind all human and non-human phenomena. Whether subjugated to human mastery or conversely setting absolute limits to society, nature understood as physical environment ('external nature') is then portrayed in terms of ontological separation and epistemological clarity. To speak of 'nature', as Kate Soper puts it, "is to speak of those material structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product), and whose forces and causal powers are the necessary condition of every human practice, and determine the possible forms it can take" (1995: 132-33). In this sense, "culture is nature's other" (Watts 2005).

Against this customary position, critical geographers question the cognitive and spatial distinction between nature and society. Among them, Margaret Fitzsimmons stresses that the common sense of nature is grounded in the historical and geographical transition from feudal relations to capitalism, which marked "the division of labour of those who work with nature from those (scientists) who work on Nature" (1989: 108). As a consequence of urbanization and industrialization processes, "nature [became] one pole of all the great Enlightenment antinomies". Fitzsimmons' path-breaking deconstruction of the nature-culture divide emphasizes how situated social practices implicated in sustaining a specific geographical imagination led to the abstraction of an external, fixed natural domain. Indeed, the placement of intellectuals in spatially organized urban societies and the differentiation of labour carved out a "new epistemological space". If nature is nothing more than a "concrete abstraction" (Harvey, 1985), then the experience of natural world is always discursively mediated. In other terms, "nature cannot prexist its construction" (Haraway, 1992: 296).

The thesis of the social construction of nature includes a wide array of positions, encompassing both middle-ground and radical construction talks (Demeritt, 2002), but all share the programmatic denaturalization of so-called "ideologies of nature" (Smith, 1984). Such argument does not deny the ontological status of materiality; rather it underlines that unreflective understandings of nature are stabilized as object of knowledge by means of discursive practices (Braun & Wainwright, 2001). According to Macnaghten and Urry (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998), these embedded social practices are discursively ordered, embodied, spaced, timed, and involve models of human activity, agency, and trust. Here the implications are twofold. Firstly, representations of nature cannot be outside culture and society since the cognitive process of making something intelligible and valuable inevitably rests upon a cultural background providing intersubjective shared meanings. Secondly, the idea of socially constituted discourses of nature severely challenges the modern conception of science that is predicated on the assumption of a logical consistency between knowledge and existence. As Demeritt points out, if "nature cannot provide an independent foundation against which to test our knowledge claims",

being a historically and culturally specific concept, "the upshot is that scientifically valid knowledge must inevitably be partial, in the sense both of incomplete and biased (Demeritt, 2001: 26). Furthermore, from a post-structuralist Foucauldian perspective on the constitutive relationship between power and knowledge, scientific truth-claims about how nature is and ought to be play out and 'naturalize' aesthetic, moral, and political valorisations. For such reason, Braun and Wainwright warn that we should focus on "what cognitive failures are necessary" to make the nature-society demarcation as a self-evident point of departure in environmental studies (2001: 50). By uncovering the discursive practices involved in the temporary stabilization of meaning, then environmental knowledge(s) are found to be the product of power politics.

The colonial heritage of the concept of wilderness is quite effective in showing how the idea of nature carries specific images of power. Indeed, the representation of a pristine, gendered nature to be tamed and mastered has long be instrumental to legitimise the Western domination on the rest of the world, whereby the labelling ("by nature") of backward, irrational, uncivilized native populations from a colonial vantage point created the rationale of the white man's burden (Peet, 1985; Cronon, 1996a; Howitt, 2001). It should be noted that such a vision of wild, tropical, untouched areas at the margin of human progress and society still subtly characterizes popular and official discourses on international cooperation and humanitarian aid, reinforcing a core-periphery power structure.

The translation of nature into resource

The root of the problem with mainstream IR theories on environmental conflicts is precisely the untenable ontological disconnection between materiality and human society. Jan Selby gets to the heart of it: "Human encounters with nature are not limited simply to consumption or use, but are also productive (...). Rather than merely being consumers of an otherwise discrete nature, human societies are continuously engaged in its purposive transformation and production" (Selby, 2003). This consideration brings the nature-culture excursus and the need for a post-positivist design into light. In the latter sense, distancing research from the naturalistic fallacy of positivism means realizing that the linguistic categories representing environmental issues incorporate historically situated hegemonic discourses. I already wrote several times that the production of knowledge is a value-laden practice of power. This is not a post-structuralist mantra repeated over and over again to get the credentials of a critically-oriented scholar. It requires (in much more concrete terms than one might think) that the critical deconstruction and historicisation of the "common sense" inscribed in prevailing discourses, as well as the genealogical reconstruction of the meanings attached to political reality, have to be the radical point of departure. On this side, nevertheless, in order to avoid the flaw of tautological arguments and escape the discursive trap of "hyper-constructionism", the soundness of a scientific

research comes from the clarity of concepts (Klotz & Prakash 2008: 50) and the exposure of the power-knowledge nexus in contextual situations.

With regard to resource politics, this recommends debunking the environmental determinism that is implicit in the realist emphasis on resource wars. However, it is quite clear from the previous paragraph that making sense of materiality is not straightforward. Bakker and Bridge summarize in a couple of question marks the ambivalence that has characterized the debate in human geography: "should materiality be conceptualized in predominantly physical terms as a raw substrate, a bedrock reality counterposed to the social, cultural and textual? Or should materiality be conceptualized in ways that do not simply collapse one pole of the dualism into the other, or outside of a dualist framework altogether?" (Bakker & Bridge, 2006: 8). Being in-between the human and the non-human, natural resources break out from binary distinctions and their analytical treatment sharpens up the intricacies of the practices of "translation" (Latour, 1993) weaving the two worlds together. IR theories are silent on the issue insofar as resource geographies are not problematized neither in terms of constituent parts and dynamics, nor with reference to the larger metabolic processes involved in the commodification of nature. In a sense, IR made inroads into the study of environmental issues by adhering to natural realism, for which the external nature provides a basket of raw materials to be discovered and appropriated to satisfy human wants. This geographical understanding was certainly the most suitable for a discipline whose overriding concern is war and, by extension, geopolitical competition over strategic commodities.

Yet, geographers, economists, and anthropologists long opposed to a strictly physical frame a relational understanding that recognizes, instead, the constitutive role of knowledge in any determination of resource (Bakker & Bridge, 2006). Erich Zimmerman (1933) was among the first ones to convey the idea that "resource are not: they become". As the history of coal (or any other mineral ore) suggests, a resource is classed as such not because of the physical properties of the substance; it rather "depends on the way it is related to other things, to knowledge, to the opportunity to realize value by exchange, and to other materials that can fulfil the same function" (Bridge, 2009: 1220). Hence, resources are intended as "cultural appraisals about utility and value" of non-human materials (ibidem: 1219) – not something that is discovered, but transformed technologically for the social function it serves. As Le Billon points out, diamonds are a good example: otherwise useless or with limited industrial applications, like all precious gemstones the exorbitant exchange value is economically and discursively constructed "through the manipulation of markets by a cartel and the manipulation of symbols such as purity, love, and eternity through marketing" (Le Billon, 2001: 565). The recognition that value is not encapsulated in objects, but assigned to goods was common ground for modern philosophers, from Adam Smith to Karl Marx and Georg Simmel. Anyway, Zimmerman's functional insight paved the way to approaches to resources with a more pronounced constructivist orientation. Sociological research

explored the discursive construction of nature through semiotic and claims-making practices (Eder, 1996; Demeritt, 2001; Hannigan, 2014). Marxist scholarship, on the other hand, turned attention to the production of nature within capitalistic societies in the folds of commodification processes (Smith, 1984; Harvey, 1996, 2002; O'Connor, 1998), highlighting that the commodity status is not intrinsic to material things.

In summary, two considerations are worth pointing out: i) the attribution of value is a necessary and prior condition for the determination of any resource; ii) value is extrinsic to raw physical properties and, moreover, extends beyond functional utility, encompassing also moral, spiritual, and aesthetic qualities. Opening the fan of the relationships that take part in the process of repositioning and revaluing nature, however, does not reduce complexities, though it exposes to view that natural resources are irreducible to purely physical or cultural lenses. In recent years, then, non-dualistic theoretical frameworks have emerged. As a collective effort, this strand of research addressed the reciprocities between human and non-human domains by infringing core modernist dichotomies (nature/culture, subject/object, agency/structure) in the spirit of hybridity. Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is possibly the proposal that had better luck in terms of diffusion across disciplines. No less important, though, are the works by Donna Haraway (1993) and Erik Swyngedouw (1999) on socio-natural entanglements. Space here does not allow for a detailed discussion. A general remark, however, is that the desire for comprehensiveness often come at the expense of clarity and applicability. Bakker and Bridge comment that these approaches crucially revolve around the redistribution of agency "away from human agents" (2006: 19), thus broadening the spectrum to non-human subjects. Such a move seeks to prevent "the cancellation of the natural by the social" – to borrow from Butler (1993: 5)– which constructionist arguments indeed tend to suffer, but acknowledging agency to material things remains equally controversial.

After all, the agency/structure dialectic is another intractable and burdensome source of disagreement. Studies on material culture have then attempted to re-materialize the apprehension of the "stuff" through and by which social relations take place. Appadurai's perspective (1988) on the circulation of commodities is a benchmark work signalling renewed attention to materiality. The material turn arises from dissatisfaction with the textual critique spanning social sciences and the decreasing returns of "the dominant anti-realist strain of continental philosophy", in relation to which is invoked the primacy of ontology on phenomenology (Bryant, Srnicek, & Harman, 2011); Badiou, Zizek, and again Latour are referred to as key inspirers. To mention one interesting application, Zubrzycki takes back to nationalism through the window of material culture by looking at how the sensorial and everyday experience of mundane objects shapes identity formation beyond human intentions and consciousness. She clarifies that this approach sees materiality neither as "embodiment of values and ideational systems" (following Durkheim), nor "a physical snapshot of social relationship" (following Marx) (Zubrzycki, 2017: 5).

Though woven with discourses and practices, objects shall be understood not solely as reflective of the "national visions deployed by elites and consumed by the masses, but as inscriptive, ultimately *productive* of those very visions" (ibidem: 9). In this sense, Zubrzycki claims that the inner properties of things animate imaginaries independently of human meanings. Whereas I endorse the call for a more complete sociology of the mechanisms of identity formation, I have reservations about the last point since individual reactions are not separate from the cultural frame in which they are embedded. Although contemplation of beauty elicits a range of emotions that is irreducible to a single viewer or unique experience, beauty is not an absolute concept but a fluid aesthetic category changing across time and space. The issue is cumbersome and my discussion is in danger of being overly superficial, but from an epistemological viewpoint I will make a case for a phenomenological approach in next chapter.

A turn towards material culture goes towards a resurgence of natural realism, but criticism that the humanization of nature is blind to the material properties of substances should be taken into proper account. Recent research on resource geographies stressed, indeed, that physical characteristics do matter. If availability does not predict conflict, Le Billon argues that both geographical location (proximate or distant from the political centre) and spatial concentration of valuable resources (point or diffuse) shape the mode of production and the potential conflicts fought over resource geographies. A copper mine or offshore phosphate are obviously different resource environments in terms of extractive regimes, political configurations, and conflict dynamics. In this latter sense, for instance, anyone familiar with the commodification of crude would agree that oil is not easily lootable by rebels or insurgents, unless these prove capable enough of keeping control and running entire segments of the commodity chain. The ISIS war economy – not only enforced militarily, but fundamentally backed by a state-like bureaucracy, smuggling trade routes, and shadow agreements with international traders – gives a good explanation.

In the same vein, Selby (2005) rightly underlines that doomsday scenarios about scarcity are oblivious to the specific political economy of a given commodity, which makes water, for instance, a definitely marginal source of inter-state conflict (not by chance water wars never occurred, whereas attention should be paid to the local level, where water crises occasionally happened to turn violent). It is known Timothy Mitchell's thesis (2011) that the carbon-based economy was a key factor of democratization in Europe and North American because of the connected transformations that coal production set into motion: changes in land ownership, transportation networks, industrial reorganization, urbanization trends, labour relations, and class consciousness eventually leading to the demand for greater political rights. The argument shares the same geological determinism informing the oil curse paradigm, but contrary to the latter derives a resource effect from the production network (and not just the monetary upshot), highlighting that the industrial processes of extraction and commercialization have a bearing on socio-political dynamics. Mitchell suggests in this sense that the different networks of coal mines

and oilfields shape in parallel different configurations of power, which is another way of asserting a curse or blessing narrative, despite the merit of advancing a processual analysis.

As seen, keeping a middle ground without giving precedence to the constructionist or the realist pole is challenging; even programmatically hybrid approaches hardly evade the ultimate question of whether nature acts on society or it is produced by society. Richardson and Weszkalnys recommend adopting, in this regard, a flexible methodological framework based on the premise that "resources are inherently *distributed things* whose essence or character is to be located neither exclusively in their biophysical properties nor in webs of socio-cultural meaning" (Richardson & Weszkalnys, 2014: 8; emphasis of the authors). Distribution is not limited to ontological and material dispersion of a substance, they clarify, but also to "the spatial and temporal extensions" (ivi). The addition is significant: whereas any investigation on resource geographies brings spatiality into focus, temporality is generally overlooked, though ethnographic research noticed instead that temporal rhythms are decisive social markers in the process of resource revaluation, even when extraction (and the resulting accumulation of wealth) has not started yet – we need only think of gold rush or oil futures (Lange et al., 2016; Reyna & Behrends, 2008; Weszkalnys, 2014). Hence, if the relational and distributed characters of resource materiality is accepted, then a thorough analysis cannot be any different from "the combined examination of the matters, knowledges, infrastructures, and experiences that come together in the appreciation, extraction, processing, and consumption of natural resources" (Richardson & Weszkalnys 2014: 8)[69]. This is the reason why it is preferable to use the term resource environments in order not to subscribe to an essentialist understanding of curse-like material properties and rather turn attention to the complex socio-natural arrangements through which substances come into being as resources. Richardson and Weszkalnys' anthropological outlook is possibly one of the more mature contributions on resource making. As Zimmerman would put it, resources are a category of becoming and not of being.

Out of the mainstream

What do we mean by resource conflicts? Given the above, does it really make sense to use such a notion? The quick answer is no. It would be more appropriate to talk about resource-related (Turner, 2004) or resource-linked (Le Billon 2001) conflicts since a line of derivation from environment to violence can hardly be seen and, moreover, would be misleading. An empirical investigation of resource

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[69] They break down the framework as follows: "(...) first, resource ontologies, that is, assumptions about the nature and affordances of the "things that are already" and their participation in making local, regional, national, and global scales; second, the different ways in which specific resources are known; third, the infrastructures designed to extract resources and those needed to refine, transform, and transport them; and fourth, how resources are experienced and embodied by people who work with, transform, or (deliberately or accidentally) ingest them." (Richardson and Weszkalnys 2014: 16).

environments ought to be attentive to the textual and the material, the technological and the natural. The accent on contentious dynamics, nevertheless, insists on the power relations lighting up the commodification of nature. As such, the core chapters illustrating the case study seek to string together in a textured analysis several levels – the discursive articulation of dominant and antagonistic resource imaginaries; the opening up of extractive frontiers by the transnational forces of capitalist expansion; the overlap of the oil economy with the strategies of survival of political actors. Although not primarily centred on violent conflicts, from a theoretical point of view political ecology provides a much valuable research programme, which allows giving a longer answer to the opening question.

Political ecology (Enzensberger 1974; Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Nesmith & Radcliffe, 1993; Sachs, 1993; Peet & Watts, 1996; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996; Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Bryant, 1998; Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1999) came into view during the 1980s and the 1990s as a body of research moving a critique to apolitical views about ecology. Eccentric to disciplinary boundaries, Robbins defines it as "a field that seeks to unravel the political forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation" (Robbins, 2011: 3). Critical geographers from the Marxist tradition gave initial contribution to this intellectual reaction by calling into question the technocratic constructs about nature that underpin environmental governance. Above all, the neo-Malthusian thesis that cautions against crossing the ecological threshold beyond which the carrying capacity of the environment cannot sustain human population: if population growth exceeds natural limits – the argument goes, there will be shortages, starvation, and strife. Against this apparently self-evident statement[70], Marxist scholars such as David Harvey (Harvey, 1979) recast the problem and contended that the nature-society separation is, in fact, an ideological cover to conceal the structural global inequalities of capitalism; in other words, a smokescreen to divert attention from the uneven distribution of environmental goods and suggest population control as the proper policy to prevent ecological crises. Following the rebuttal, the eco-scarcity argument "catches only the delusive appearance of things", to take advantage of Marx's expression about scientific truths. In the Marxian theory, labour mediates the metabolic interaction between nature and society. What we experience is not an external material reality setting limits to human activities, but a "second nature" produced by human activities (Smith, 1984). In this sense, critical geographers warned that neoliberal recipes to environmental problems disguise the actual political reasons behind struggles over resources. Postcolonial, post-structural, and feminist scholars joined the fray in order to dismantle scientific and institutional explanations on desertification (Thomas & Middleton, 1994), forestry management (Hecht & Cockburn, 1989; Peluso, 1992), famine (Watts, 1983), natural hazards (Hewitt & Burton, 1971; Wisner, Blaikie, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 1994), soil erosion (Zimmerer, 1993a, 1993b), conservation policies (Moore, 1993), peasant-herder conflicts (Bassett, 1988) – to mention a few classical studies of

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[70] *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows & al., 1972) is a widely-cited example of neo-Malthusian thinking.

a fairly abundant literature, whose line of inquiry is wonderfully summarised in the fundamental question laid down by Martinez Alier: "who has the power to simplify complexity, ruling some languages of valuation out of order?" (2003: 217).

Despite the disparate heterodox influences that fed into the rethinking of the politics of nature, the premise of political ecology is that nature-society relations need to be understood within the context of the political processes they are part of. From this viewpoint, it is apparent that the analysis of global warming, the melting of glaciers, mass deforestations, species extinctions, or pollution cannot be detached from the anthropic processes of appropriation and commodification of nature at their source. As a broad yet unstructured field of research, political ecology owes its coherence to three commitments, according to Perreault, Bridge, and McCarthy (2015: i): theoretically, to critical theory and post-positivist understanding of nature; ii) methodologically, to the in-depth and direct observation of a context "through intensive, open-ended, qualitative methods"; iii) normatively, to social justice and structural political change. Political ecologists share "the understanding that there are better, less coercive, less exploitative, and more sustainable ways of doing" (Robbins 2011: 20) and explicitly take the side of those groups or populations suffering the price of socio-environmental changes inasmuch as these are disguised as incidental to development and modernisation.

In this regard, Escobar (2006) clarifies that environmental conflicts are not only ecological distribution conflicts over access to and control over natural resources, as stressed by ecological economics (Martinez Alier 2003), but also invariably cultural. This widens the scope of analysis from political economy to the cultural meanings through which communities signify nature. The risk here is of stretching the analytical lens too much, beyond knowledge and competencies a researcher can plausibly achieve in a lifetime. This work runs the same risk too, and the effort of synthesis attempted in this chapter perhaps bears witness to it. Blaikie (1999) noted that over-generalisation or high-level abstractions may undermine the detailed critique to which political ecology strives for. As Castree points out, the problem lies in the fact that "many society-nature relations extend 'all the way down', even to the level of genetic modification" (Castree & Braun, 2001: 1), as evidenced precisely by biotechnology and the hotly debate about patent seeds and land grabs by multinational food companies. Therefore, it is clear that to bridle the ever-expanding complexity of the human/non-human interface is quite a task, at least in the sense of balancing theoretical breadth and empirical detail. Single case studies are certainly one remedy for it.

Back to violence, political ecology moves away from the flawed hypotheses of scarcity or abundance to look into the thick texture surrounding contestation over natural entitlements. Peluso and Watts (2001) gave one of the most convincing reconsiderations of the connections between environment and violence. The starting point is again a critique of Kaplan and Homer Dixon's narrow understandings of environmental security, which see the resort to organised violence as a mechanical response to

(presumed) environmental triggers and disequilibria. Peluso and Watts' approach, instead, combines anthropological sensitiveness to historical and cultural factors with the Marxist dedication to the political economy of resource exploitation. Rejecting reductionist and mechanical correlations, the environment is described as "an arena of contested entitlements, a theatre in which conflicts or claims over property, assets, labour, and the politics of recognition play themselves out" (ibidem: 25), and within which violence then can be expressive of that contention. Environmental processes, hence, should be read through three angles that give us a more comprehensive picture: i) the patterns and regimes of accumulation; ii) the forms of access to and control over resources; and iii) the actors that emerge from the social relations of production. In this light, violence is appraised "as a site-specific phenomenon rooted in local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformation and power relations" (ibidem: 29). The attentiveness to the specific ways in which environmental struggles occur within context re-politicise those same struggles.

Having myself approached a context displaying the overlap of the extractive regime with violent (and nonviolent) forms of contestation, I found Peluso and Watt's framework particularly insightful and somehow ready- to-use. In line with well-established research in political ecology, the environment is not reduced to passive raw matter to regulate for human use, nor to the brutish state of nature befalling society as depicted by Hobbes. Based on the thesis of the humanisation of nature through labour and technology, questions of rights and social justice are instead dragged into the centre. On the other hand, an expanded view is also given to what counts as violence, beyond direct, organised, physical eruptions and to include, for instance, institutional coercion or symbolic violence. In general, political ecologists call for the historicisation of nature-society relations. Accordingly, I look at resource geographies as socially constituted and politically riven fields of power in which discursive imaginaries of resource use and material patterns of wealth accumulation mediate and intersect with the politics of identity.

This proposition has two corollaries. First, it suggests treating energy as a set of social relations situated historically and geographically (Hoffmann, 2018b). An approach inclined to social structures reveals that the "material, calorific, geological or topographic dimensions of energy" (ibidem: 39) alone fail to comprehend the metabolic processes it entails. In fact, energy would be best understood "as a political category, a field of social change and contestation, rather than a limiting biophysical structure" (ibidem: 40). From this perspective, the re-politicisation of energy relations eludes the deterministic arguments amassing in mainstream literature, especially with regard to the Middle East where curse-like theories are interwoven with cultural stereotypes. Second and relatedly, resource environments ought to be analysed within the underlying political economy. I reiterate a point already discussed, but adding a few considerations specific to oil environments. The anatomy of oil conflicts, Selby suggests, brings out and depends closely on the specific characteristics of the political economy of oil. He lists five key features (Selby, 2005: 204-208). To begin with, oil – "the least labour-expensive, most efficient and

hence cheapest energy form" – is the vital fuel for the volumetric capitalist expansion of industrialised societies, and it is set to continue serving the global needs for energy in the medium term (also considering that the overall energy demand grows faster than supply from renewable sources, whose share is residual in comparison with fossil fuels). Albeit cheaper than other energy sources, the underground physical location makes it a relatively inaccessible, unevenly distributed, and technologically-intensive resource. As a consequence, oil is a "primarily internationally rather than domestically traded commodity" at the core of a global web of production-consumption interdependencies. It should be also kept in mind that the oil industry remains characterised by largely private oligopolies generating extraordinary profits: the economies of scale and price volatility create incentives for the vertical integration of industries and their centralisation into cartels, which concur to monopolistic tendencies and the congruence between governments and corporate interests. Lastly, the level of revenues is such that "oil profits have played key roles in empowering and consolidating the positions of a range of political and economic elites". Therefore, the sum of these factors remind that, although rooted in local histories, conflicts fought within oil environments are also embedded into globalised patterns of production and the related modes of enforcement. The following three chapters add some empirical weight to these ramifications.

2.3. Identity formation and resource geographies

I suggested that value capture and value creation processes implicated in the commodification of nature are also at play in the articulation, circulation, and contestation of culturally and spatially defined discourses within the political community. I even mentioned the mechanisms of identity formation, though leaving it pending. In this last part of the theoretical framework, therefore, I wish to provide a few points of discussion in order to clarify in what ways the imaginaries constructed on resource environments are incorporated into broader narratives drawing collective identities. It might be feared here the conceptual risk of overly stretching a theoretical perspective by linking two distant domains of human activity and pretending them to be closely and meaningfully related to each other. Even when accepting in some abstract sense that natural resources are cultural appraisals of the physical world, in much more prosaic terms we experience them, basically, as things – inanimate material objects providing sustenance. Then, why should things be relevant to the feeling of being part of whatever social group? Why personal, social, and political identity should be affected by the interaction with the commodities (more properly than things in this case) that are part of everyday life? The wording of the second question is a bit tendentious since it drives towards the argument I wish to emphasise. The answer, indeed, is that commodities do matter because "people make an identity as they make a living" (Robbins 2011: 224), meaning that identity gets constituted and is socialized within a certain material setting whose characteristics and modes have a bearing on one's subjectivity. Livelihoods, in the widest

sense and with their far from obvious ecologies, mediate the knowledge of the bounded space of relations we inhabit and of the outer world we imagine, thus interacting with other inter-subjective vectors of meaning. Whereas I feel I am Kurd because of territorial and cultural roots and regardless of any other consideration, yet the relevance assumed by oil within the community I belong add new attributes to that sense of belonging. Resource nationalism, for instance, is a concept upon which the literature on resource politics has recently drawn attention and will be addressed in this chapter as well, but it is one among many other doorways through which the interplay between the environment and subjectivity can be explored at the theoretical level. As said, the materiality of resources is inseparable from their symbolism, just like the utility of gasoline for transportation or the gratification of receiving a diamond ring are measured by socially constructed values (mobility and marriage following the example) that have nothing to do with the inner properties of the raw substance and, moreover, are not necessarily and equally shared by all people within a group.

That said, the treatment of identity in political science, though ubiquitous, is problematic by itself. I already wrote about the critique against the realist paradigm in IR, which leaves ideas and norms out of theories of political action and assumes that cold-blooded objective interests define actors' behaviour. Under this theoretical lens, the present research would be useless for the most part. On the contrary, social constructivism refocused the discipline precisely on questions of identity, though for some this repositioning "surrendered" without providing enough methodological attention and an empirical toolbox[71]. Kubic (2013) proposes a distinction between materialist-institutional and symbolic-cultural ways of thinking about politics. The former refers to the Weberian institutional-legal definition of power, which is central in the conventional paradigm of the modern state. The flagship translation of this conceptualization in political theory is March and Olsen's time-honoured definition of politics as competition over resources: "the organizing principle of a political system is the allocation of scarce resources in the face of conflict of interests" (March & Olsen, 1989: 47-48). The problem with this proposition, Kubic comments, is that "the struggle over collective identity, including often deadly contests over the meaning of symbols signifying this identity" is entirely missing (2013: 26), while interests are considered as a given inasmuch as adherent to rationally defined and power-oriented goals ensuing from structural attributes. That is the realist funnel of political action within which we lose

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[71] This research is hardly immune to the same remark. The ubiquity of identity in social science is treacherous. Even sophisticated theoretical elaborations are often of little help for empirical analysis. Brubaker and Cooper warned that proliferation of the concept came to the expense of the analytical purchase. The use and abuse of identity is "riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations". By making a case for more attentiveness to particularity, they noticed instead: "qualifying the noun [identity] with strings of adjectives – specifying that identity is multiple, fluid, constantly re-negotiated, and so on – does not solve the Orwellian problem of entrapment in a word. It yields little more than a suggestive oxymoron – a multiple singularity, a fluid crystallization – but still begs the question of why one should use the same term to designate all this and more" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 34).

sight of agency by privileging macro-level properties and dynamics. For this reason, Kubic recommends abandoning the materialist assumption of fixed (somewhat pre-political) identities and embracing quite the opposite understanding, best illustrated by a striking metaphor from which he draws on: "if identity is decentered, politics is about the attempt to create a center" (Dirks, Eley, & Ortner, 1994: 32). The spatial representation captures the essence of identity politics beautifully, in my view, on the grounds that it conveys the idea of mobilizing and gathering a collective around some core elements defining the extent of a group. In this sense, the center is not only the axis of rotation of the community, but also a point that presupposes a circumference whose outer boundaries set the line between sameness and difference. The assertion of identity entails the distinction of a self from one or many others.

However, why identity is posited as decentered? It is so, in short, because identity formation is inherently unstable and open-ended. It is not disputed in social sciences that identity and difference are specular sides of the same coin: declaring belonging to a group, a class, or other socially recognized categories is equivalent to asserting difference to all the other possibility. As Connolly puts it with clarity, "identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty" (Connolly, 2002: xiv). Reversing the order of conventional definitions, he argues that we first belong to difference (what I am not) in order to confess our identity (what I am). Hence, identity is performed discursively as an utterance that is expressive of alterity (Guillaume, 2002). This implies that identity formation is relational (Somers, 1994), in that connects plural constituencies and criteria of identification (e.g. gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, class, age, and so forth), and dialogical (Guillaume, 2002), given that the figuration of self is constructed upon the other. Framed in these terms, actors behave in a certain way and pursue certain interests according to their own identity.

There is more. Identity is not an immutable or universal essence reproducing itself over time; its relational and dialogical connotations also imply contingency. As regards states, for instance, identity "should be understood as 'tenuously constituted in time (...) through a stylized repetition of acts, and achieved, 'not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition'" (Campbell 1992: 9). Transcending the fixity of essentialist accounts urges, indeed, to locate actor's self-narratives in their spatial and temporal configurations (Somers 1994). McDonald (2012) emphasises the mutual constitution of security and identity through negotiation and contestation, across multiple axes within a community, and not solely in antagonistic terms. In the same vein, Bleiker (2005) argues that the security dilemmas on each side of the barbed-wire fence separating the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel reproduce the defining values and boundaries of both political communities, adding that the ethics of difference can be countered by an ethics of dialogue for which the other's identity may be seen not as incompatible and threatening.

The bunch of examples above is mainly from security studies, but the topic is all too broad and complex for an exhaustive discussion in these pages, which cannot be much insightful or innovative in this

respect. It was important, nonetheless, to specify what I meant by a decentered ontology of identity, as sketched above without digging into each piece of the layout, and why I subscribe to it. I will present in next section resource nationalism as a medium for expression of identity in resource environments. The choice is appropriate given its relevance for the case study as it taps into the first analytical dimension examined in chapter IV and also for the many references to the theories of nationalism in the introductory chapter. Nevertheless, it should be clarified that ethno-national identities are not the only (and not necessarily the primary) relevant identity constructs for the study of resource politics. Although the state often has a fundamental role in the appropriation and transformation of nature, and access to and control over natural resources has been explored in relation to state-formation since Wittfogel's hydraulic hypothesis, post-sovereign forms of resource governance are equally prominent, thus suggesting that territorialisation and institutionalization of natural resources occur at sub- and trans-state scales. In other words, the conceptualization below does not promise a comeback of state-centrism by other means. Rather, it will be shown throughout the empirical chapters that local, national, and global patterns of exploitation are interdependent.

Resource nationalism

Defined as the "tendency for (nation-)states to assert economic and political control over natural resources found within its sovereign territory" (Childs, 2016: 1), resource nationalism comes into play as a narrative supporting state-led extractive development policies. It illustrates a mode of governance aimed at re-imagining nationhood upon extractive processes and, thus, enforcing a particular spatial ordering. The concept emphasises the mobilization of discursive frames by governments to assert claims of ownership over natural resources within the jurisdiction. Economic returns from extractive industries are not the only motivations behind property regimes; ideational purposes are also involved and point towards a recognition of legitimacy (Rosales, 2017). This passes through a notion of resource sovereignty that "imagines an inward territorial focus and a particular sovereign actor with the capacity to control resources in isolation from external relations" (Emel, Huber, & Makene, 2011: 71). In these terms, resource nationalism is conventionally understood in opposition to foreign capital or the interference of third countries and, historically, is attached to the nationalisation policies undertaken by newly independent states in late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. As seen, with regard to the petroleum industry, the foundation of OPEC was a watershed event. Hence, the definition includes all those "efforts by resource-rich nations to shift political and economic control of their energy and mining sectors from foreign and private interests to domestic and state-controlled companies" (Bremmer and Johnston, 2009: 149); in other words, the attempt of changing the balance of global economic power from producers-consumers in the North back to resource owners in the South through a range of policies – typically, as far as subterranean resources are concerned, the re-renegotiation of taxes and royalties (i.e. the rent capture), measures re-orienting benefits locally (e.g. labour participation,

procurement contracts, energy subsidies), public shareholding in extractive projects, proactive social schemes of poverty alleviation[72]. Following this line of thinking, the phenomenon is understood then as a "response by extractive peripheries to the persistence of colonial control or the domination of foreign (monopoly) capital over their rich natural resource bases" (Kaup & Gellert, 2017: 277). Nevertheless, despite the spate of nationalisations reversed ownership in favour of public actors, a series of factors (e.g. price volatility, high capital expenditure, inter-connectedness of global markets and production chains) have prevented the demise of private actors. In fact, the assumption that public and private interests are incompatible is blind to the economic reality of extractive processes. Joint ventures and mixed capital companies are actually very common in the petroleum industry. Resource nationalist policies and discourses often coexist with the parallel involvement of private investment and foreign enterprises: while resource nationalism is a powerful tool to exercise self-determination, state governments (the landlords) pragmatically seek partnerships and agreements with external actors to access and manage resource wealth effectively. It has been pointed out that:

> "[after] a period of more inward looking "national" development based around sovereignty and self-determination, the majority of independent postcolonial states commenced a widespread liberalization of their economies that, rather than seeking to keep foreign capital outside, actively constructed a set of legal, fiscal and political incentives to attract foreign direct investment toward the development of internal resources." (Emel, Huber, & Makene, 2011: 71)

From this perspective, the assertion of state authority by legal and fiscal measures is designed to create more favourable conditions of capital accumulation, not to exclude private entities. It is advisable, therefore, not to bound resource sovereignty to legalistic terms, but to investigate how governance is materially practiced and territorialized into specific resource geographies (ibidem). Empirically, extractive monopolies are embedded into multiple and contentious relations encompassing a variety of actors. Perreault and Valdivia (2010) specify that struggles over hydrocarbon governance involve transnational oil and gas firms, local governments, labour unions, social movements, and regional elites – all intervening in the re-configuration of the imaginative geographies of the nation. This further corroborates the critique of the environmental security perspective in IR. The crucible of resource politics shows, indeed, that conflict "imbricate not only the spatiality of resources and populations, but also the particular histories and geographies of resource governance, and the broader political economies that connect resource producing zones with centers of resource processing and consumption" (ibidem: 690). Processes of material transformation, flows of capital, and practices of signification meet in extractive localities.

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[72] For a typology of resource nationalism see Bremmer and Johnston (2009).

Hence, the concept explores the immediate relevance of resource imaginaries for the articulation of nationhood practices – i.e. the "acts to create nation-space and nation-time, the projection of imaginary community, the homogenization of nation-space and pedagogization of history" (Dalby & Ó Tuathail 1998: 3) – and geopolitical visions – "concerning the relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy" (Dijkink 2002: 11). Resource nationalism offers a thematic angle to problematize the nexus between the political economy of natural resources, on one hand, and the nurturing of nationhood, on the other hand. Or, with greater abstraction, how the constructs of nature and nation are re-conceptualized and woven together. Overall, the relevant literature stressed that resource extraction participates substantially in the ideological reproduction and metamorphosis of national communities on the heels of development and modernization programmes. Given the economic scale of activity and the broader repercussions set into motion by extractivism, resource-based imaginaries tend to shape development policy to a significant extent, "infused as they are by cultural ways of under- standing the world geographically, environmentally and geopolitically" (Childs & Hearn, 2017: 4). As an ideological construct, resource nationalism strives in particular to naturalizing the nation, while also giving it both spatial and teleological connotations (e.g. an "oil nation"). Natural endowments are considered a national patrimony to be used for the benefit of the nation (Jaffe, 2012). The subsequent question would concern, then, who can define what is benefit and what is the proper resource use. In fact, resource nationalism is not only a construction aimed at securing a political agenda, but it is also constructed with a multiplicity of imaginaries and images (Childs, 2016). The declaration of national rights of ownership and exploitation, the enforcement of territorial control over subsurface resources, the reconfiguration of economic relations that flow all together into the imaginary of an extractive society are certain to have an impact on borders and values of the polity. As Perrault and Valdivia summarise in one sentence: "the re-making of the nation occurs through a redefinition of the relationship between state, population, territory and resource" (2010: 691).

Since the 1960s at least Latin America, in particular, has been a laboratory for development strategies geared towards the national exploitation of mineral ores and fossil fuels. It is not by chance that most geographers and ecologists working on resource nationalism have an expertise in that world region, though single-case studies and comparisons have increasingly touched African and Asian countries. Instead, the concept has not been used much with reference to oil-rich countries in the Middle East and North Africa, quite surprisingly given the popular and geopolitical representations attached to the broader region. Coronil (1997) and Watts' (2004) ethnographies on the contradictory relationships between oil exploitation and nation-building in Nigeria and Venezuela are milestones in the literature. Perreault and Valdivia (2010) illustrate that left-leaning governments in Ecuador and Bolivia placed hydrocarbon development at the centre of their plans and how, in turn, the ideological construction of the petro-state figures centrally in the articulation of nationhood and citizenship. Childs and Hearn

(2017) similarly examined the resource-based development imaginaries in Ghana and, again, Ecuador (which came to be termed as "*la Patria nueva*"). With regard to the latter country, Rosales (2017) highlighted that the dominant notion of development followed the rise of military elites during the 1970s. The mobilisation of such discursive frames and contestation around resource nationalism are addressed by Kohl and Farthing (2012) in the case of Bolivia. Jackson (2015) analysed the re-definition of Mongolia as a mineral country ("*Mine-golia*"); Lahiri-Dutt (2016) of India as a "coal nation".

As mentioned before, however, the pitfalls of methodological nationalism should be avoided. Land and all the resources within are understood as essential properties of the territorial state, which extends its sovereign jurisdiction on them; in other words, they are central objects of the state apparatus (Whitehead & al. 2007). Yet, at the analytical level attention must be made not to reify such national isomorphism. The public-private multi-scalar partnerships in the extractive sector are a case in point. A brief reference to the nationalization of water resources may be also helpful. For all the impetus given by development circles to the integrated management and planning across several scales, the centralization of water under national governments is usually taken for granted, both in theory and practice. The emphasis on the nation-state as the privileged unit of analysis obviously reflects the central role modern states have had in developing water infrastructures, but this correspondence is hardly historicized, with scant attention on the instrumental delineation of waterscapes to produce governable spaces and make them part of a broader national imaginary. Allouche (2005) points out that the emergence of the nation-state led to the partition of rivers and water bodies into nationalized segments. Through such a process of material and symbolic territorialization from local to the national, which breaks politically and administratively hydrogeological continuity in transboundary river basins, water becomes hardly negotiable. As a consequence, the rights to water are subsumed in top-down practices of governmentality that overshadow the non-state geographical formations of water territories. As a consequence, state-centric or market-centric policies are then often at odds with the needs of local communities (Boelens & al. 2010: 17-19). Back to extractivism, Childs (2016) problematizes the relationship between resource sovereignty and space by discussing the geographies of offshore deposits, for instance.

As anticipated, the first empirical chapter draws inspiration from the literature on resource nationalism. The analysis runs along the same track by focusing on the KRG policies and discourses to mobilise shared consciousness over natural resource governance, and how in turn these material and affective geographies engage with the reproduction of *kurdayeti* in Iraq. Being a sub-state regional government that seeks to upgrade the degree of autonomy within Iraqi federalism through the foundation of a petro-state, the KRG is a very interesting case since it connects resource nationalism to the question of stateless. Nonetheless, the resource imaginary is the fulcrum for an all-encompassing transformation of Kurdish society.

2.4. Conceptual map

This chapter provides a theoretical backdrop for illustrating the empirical material. Relevant debates around epistemologies of nature and post-statist geographies are reviewed at length to motivate the choice for a political ecology perspective on the non-deterministic relationship between political violence and the environment. Accordingly, a novel definition of resource environments drawing on various influences from anthropology, philosophy of science, and geography is presented. In this sense, the theoretical framework sets the boundaries for a syncretic reflection on the materialities and the narratives of resource exploitation. However, it is by no means a rigid scheme declared upfront and later applied to the real world. As it is explained in the methodology, an interpretive research does not infer logical consequences from hypotheses laid down in advance: it is theory-informed, not theory-driven. Analytical concepts, therefore, are developed out of direct observations.

The three core chapters through which the analysis unfolds resume concepts already discussed (e.g. resource nationalism), introduce others (e.g. environmental imaginary), or define new ones (e.g. petro-populism). Without anticipating contents or findings, the diagram below sketches a conceptual map to give the reader an overview of key nodes that are given central consideration throughout the analysis.
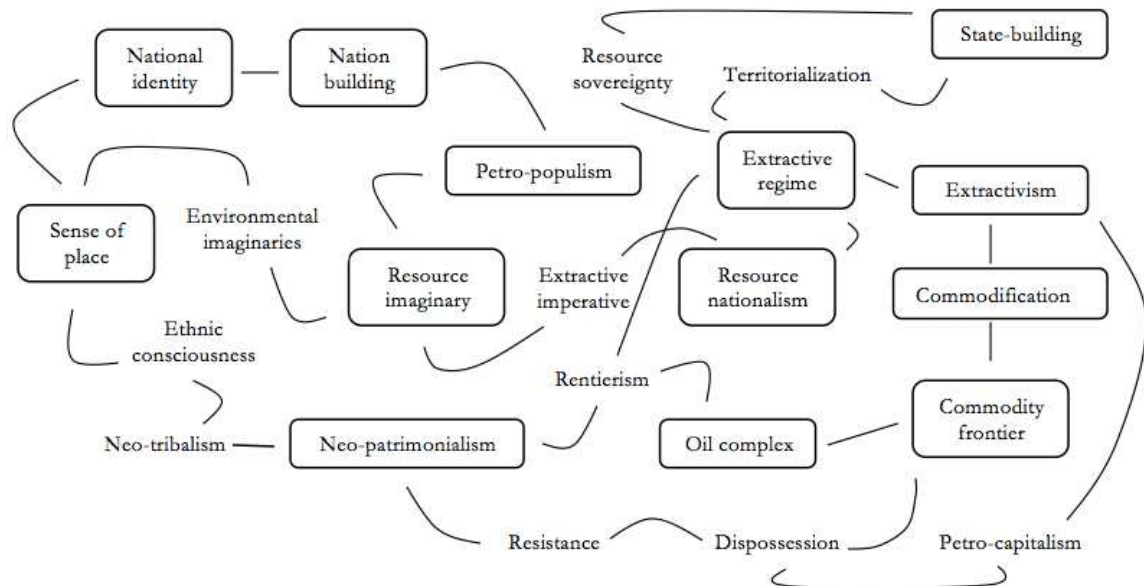
III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The syncretic attitude driving the interdisciplinary theoretical framework set out in chapter II stems from the dissatisfaction with the narrow and self-reflexive boundaries of IR, especially when it comes to matters of identity and geography. As discussed in depth in the previous pages, the post-structural deconstruction of truth claims and binary oppositions turn towards multiple ways of knowing and doing research on social reality. This chapter is intended to shed light precisely on both aspects, illustrating the epistemological and methodological engagement with the subject under scrutiny. Then, it describes the process of designing and conducting the empirical research in all its phases.

3.1 An interpretive approach, or the phenomenological critique of the immaculate perception

The problematization of resource geographies and identities as social constructs favours interpretation over explanation, constitution over causation, and partial knowledge over truth claims. This brief declaration of intent raises many points of controversy in the social sciences by itself, which is not surprising given that the many (often incompatible) ways research can be conducted inevitably bring to surface the a priori epistemological assumptions (Klotz & Prakash, 2008: 2). Methodology does not merely tie the theoretical to the empirical. Rather, it primarily reflects one's understanding of how, and for what purposes, knowledge can be produced. Furthermore, methodological issues are also political in nature as they set standard procedures for the accreditation of knowledge, the boundaries of academic communities, and the terrain for disciplinary battles at once (Hawkesworth, 2015). In this opening paragraph I intend to provide a summary of my epistemological approach to research.

Since its inception this work has been informed by an interpretive logic of inquiry focusing on inter-subjective meanings as they emerge from the relational context, or rather on "how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors" (Schwandt, 1994: 222). Interpretivism fundamentally deviates from the positivist presuppositions that undergird mainstream studies in search of law-like universal generalizations. Far from being a synonym of qualitative inquiry, the interpretive critique to hegemonic scientific paradigms (quantitative and qualitative alike) puts into question naturalistic theories of knowledge upon which a monocular vision of science is built. In this respect, my interpretive bent is rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology and reflexive positioning in line with a

time-honoured epistemological tradition, though still at the margins of IR[73]. By making explicit how such stance translates into a sound methodological roadmap, I wish to show its added value to the discipline. Indeed, interpretivism provides the tools for grounding a context-sensitive analysis of discursive practices empirically, without falling into the trap of either the barren empiricism running through much positivist research or the postmodern radical dismantling of every claim to knowledge.

Having laid out these preliminary considerations, which will be further specified throughout the chapter, what does it mean to embrace an interpretive approach in the first place? According to Weeden, despite the whole variety of voices within the so-called "interpretive turn", interpretivists agree on four features at least: i) the conception of knowledge "as historically situated and entangled in power relationships"; ii) the baseline idea that the world we live in is socially made; iii) the rejection of rational-choice and behaviourist theories of social action; iv) a semiotic practical approach centred on symbolic systems (Wedeen, 2009: 80-81). All these lines converge towards a critical viewpoint that overturns the usual dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity, or at least according to how positivism propounds it.

The first two points in particular are over present in the theoretical part of this work, but a deeper discussion is needed here to point out their methodological implications. Social constructionism as famously introduced by Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge, which elaborates on Schuzt's social phenomenology, emphasizes "the empirical variety of knowledge in human societies" and draws attention to "the processes by which any body of knowledge comes to be socially established as 'reality'" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991: 15). According to this formulation, the heart of the matter concerns the knowability (i.e. epistemology) of social world more than its reality status (i.e. ontology): precisely, it deals with the perception of what exists outside the knowing subject, how that perception is manufactured in manifold ways, and eventually what are the appropriate means to represent those ways. Whereas the Durkheim-inspired classic sociology pretended to study given and observable facts (that is to say, self-evident and independent from human mind) waiting to be explained, social constructionism claims that the "theoretically constituted entities" – to borrow from Hawkesworth (1988)– making up the world around us cannot be accessed prior to any cultural mediation.

This crucial difference breaks down the Cartesian duality between subject and object, which is central to the notion of knowledge as accurate representation. Positivism rests on the belief that if the object is observed scientifically, representation equals replication. Then, the whole issue of objectivity boils

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[73] Although prevailing methodologies in IR are firmly rooted in the positivist canon, with qualitative ones under the aegis of KKV's influential hallmark *Designing social inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research* (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994), critically oriented books on research methods have blossomed in recent years (see, for instance, Ackerly, Stern, & True, 2006; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, 2012; Salter & Mutlu, 2013; Aradau, Huysmans, Neal, & Voelkner, 2014)

down to a matter of methods and how to employ them properly. However, if we accept instead that cognition cannot be abstracted from the conscious and lived experience of the reality 'out there', then there is the need, as Richard Rorty suggests, to eliminate the "contrast between contemplation and action, between representing the world and coping with it" (Rorty, 2009: 11). Thinking along these lines, any claim of depicting the world 'as it really is' is a mystification given that an external vantage point is unreachable to human sight. In fact, the world comes into view through cultural and social filters that make it intelligible, and every form of knowledge is necessarily incomplete insofar as it is bounded in time and space.

This epistemological angle owes much to Heidegger's phenomenological erosion of Western philosophy, or at least of the correspondence theory of truth that postulates the ontological accordance between observation and representation. Phenomenology maintains, indeed, that a theory-free observation of real-world objects is not possible since the observer cannot place themselves out of their own categories of representation. Taking an external view from an Archimedean point wherein the knowing subject can see the whole order of things while being detached from it, "keeping the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature and so receiving the images simply as they are" (Bacon, 1620), as positivism purports to do, would be therefore no more than "an illusion, a God trick" (Haraway, 1988: 582)[74]. Put it differently, positivism does not problematize the very conditions of knowledge, reducing social reality to semantics of variables, mathematical modelling, and laboratory-like rules of conduct – showing a fascination for certainty that from the side of social scientists reflects the desire to compete with so-called hard sciences on equal footing.

Quite the contrary, post-positivist research is by definition anti-foundational, meaning that no philosophical principle or belief is thought to ground legitimate claims to knowledge. Rorty, in particular, developed the historicist legacy of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey into a paramount critique of foundationalism, stressing that "the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply apologetics, attempts to eternalise a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image" (Rorty, 2009: 9-10). Consequently, there are no independent and unbiased criteria to assess whether a particular representation of reality is objective or subjective, with this same distinction resting upon a contestable judgement. Even science, Rorty points out, cannot be considered "the mirror of nature". Then, the ways in which knowledge claims are accepted as accurate are value-laden in a twofold sense: they are situated in the specific context in which they arise and also part of the "general politics of truth" structuring and disciplining society (Foucault, 1980: 131-132). This latter

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[74] Denying the existence of "facts of nature" does not amount to endorsing an anti-realist ontology. Phenomenology is rather an epistemological viewpoint on the making and circulation of meanings through which reality becomes knowable. As a consequence, phenomenologists argue with Nietzsche that "[there] are no facts in themselves. It is always necessary to begin by introducing a meaning in order that there can be a fact" (quoted in Jenkins, 1997: 121).

sense obviously takes Foucault's discussion on the power-knowledge nexus into account, which Weeden's first feature of interpretivism implicitly referred to. To quote a well-known passage:

"Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true." (*ivi*)

Seen in this light, what is considered to be a true statement is not only a social construction that gets gravity in the social world through a process of objectification, but also a manifestation of power. In the Foucauldian deconstruction of modern political theory power is impersonal and diffused in society, instead of being possessed and located in the sovereign authority as contractualism maintains. The "battle around truth" is then understood as a power field in which dominant apparatuses organise the social body through the institutionalization of multiple strategies of control. These are most visible in the total institutions (prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, barracks) that are geared to articulate a pervasive disciplinary model. Foucault warns that power should not be thought of as embodied in the coercive Leviathan "giving greater rewards than life, and inflicting greater punishment than death" (Hobbes, 1651). Rather, below the surface of political obligation, power relations reveal themselves out of knowledge structures that organize a political order by drawing the boundaries between the normal and the pathological, to the point of shaping the subject (and even the body) as the history of madness or sexuality or criminality unveils.

What is relevant for this epistemological excursus is that *truth* is not a universal and extra-linguistic account of reality to be discovered, but a historically contingent representation of reality in "which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true" (Foucault, 1980: 132). This is not to say that power and knowledge is the same thing, or that the former intentionally and instrumentally produces the latter. Foucault's genealogy looks into decentred and indefinite micro mechanisms of power that at some points in history coalesce around fragmented sets of discursive practices. Hence, discourses are not to be understood as the ever-shifting mirror of the bourgeoisie, to put it in Marxist terms, but as the necessary epistemic basis for grounding shared knowledge – be it variously typified into norms, institutions or mechanisms of exclusion.

Interpretivism is born out of the encounter between these various philosophical underpinnings (social constructionism, phenomenology, anti-foundationalism, and post-structuralism) that I have briefly touched upon in these pages, without doing enough justice to their complex trajectories. Since the path-breaking anthropological work of Clifford Geertz (1973) the interpretive turn has spread across social sciences (for a summary Rainbow & Sullivan, 1979; see also Denzin, 2008), moving qualitative research towards the purpose of understanding context-dependent meaning "rather than seeking generalized

meaning abstracted from particular contexts" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012: 23). In this perspective, getting into the dynamics of social action in the Weberian sense[75] is interpretation all the way down; an "attempt to clarify the foundation of knowledge in everyday life, to wit, the objectivations of subjective processes by which the *inter*subjective common-sense world is constructed" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; original emphasis). Suggesting that objectivation operates at the intersubjective level implies that meaning-making processes are socially mediated through interaction. Therefore, interpretive research is aimed at grasping the practices of signification of a given social group. Also, intersubjectivity gives direction to the research inquiry: the researcher does not go after the meanings actors explicitly attach to their behaviour only, but also pays attention to the context in which meaning formation takes place (Salvini, 2015).

Reflexivity and validity

Consistently, an ethnographic methodology is best suited for an interpretive reconstruction of the discursive practices that make shared understanding of social world taken-for-granted, objectified knowledge. The next paragraph is devoted to discuss ethnography in greater depth. Before entering into this, however, it is worth mentioning two related and much-debated epistemological issues – reflexivity and validity in interpretive studies – which have had a fundamental impact in devising this research design also.

Alvesson and Sköldberg define reflexivity as "the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017: 10). That echoes Robben's succinct formulation: "the conscious self-examination of the ethnographer's interpretive presuppositions" (Robben, 2007: 443). Critical self-awareness that positionality (one's status in relation to the social setting under study) deeply influences our ways of framing every phase of research is integral to the interpretive endeavour. Indeed, multiplicity and situatedness of meanings imply that a unique and unitary interpretation of what is (perceived as) meaningful cannot exist. Even more importantly, researchers themselves interact with that same context, importing their own personal characteristics, prior knowledge, and professional identity. As Schwartz and Yanow emphasize, "researchers do not enter the field or the archives as *tabulae rasae*" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012: 38). Working reflexively, then, requires being mindful of and transparent about that import, as well as mitigating its influence whenever possible.

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[75] For the sake of clarity, I stick to the definition of action as behavior imbued with meaning: "running in the streets aimlessly is mere behavior, running after a thief is an action endowed with meaning" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011: 5).

This proposition has two corollaries, which are not negligible. First, the researcher always co-generates knowledge with the researched. Interpretation is aimed at making visible the "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) of social action by entering into dialogue with the actors being studied. Even if empirical methods vary in terms of exposure to the field, the attempt of clarifying the basis of tacit knowledge in everyday life, as Berger and Luckmann's quotation above reminds us, never occurs in a vacuum. It entails presence and participation in a relational context, an encounter and a mutual conversation at once that allows the researcher to play (most of times unconsciously) even a transformative role within that scene. As a result, the line between expert and non-expert, as well as between scientific knowledge and common sense, needs to be reformulated "since an essential separation of the *seer* and the *seen* is impossible" (Schatz, 2009: 15), at least in the sense that knowledge claims advanced by rigorous scholars are not to be regarded as epistemologically superior to those experienced by laypeople (Given, 2008: 460). I will make this point clearer later on in this chapter by introducing the notion of emic perspective, which is the one typically adopted by ethnographers. In brief, interpreters are always involved in a play of negotiation between their own subjectivity and the "field" of social interactions in which they are immersed (Bueger & Mireanu, 2014: 127). This is also the reason for writing this piece of research using the first person narrative anytime the passive voice would otherwise conceal the choices I made from the very beginning or reify my own categories of representation[76].

Second, research is never neutral. Whatever one's motivations, it always has political implications. The entire argumentation developed so far might be summarised into such statement. Researchers are at once interpreters and sense-makers of social phenomena, thus taking active part in the constitution of "ways of world-making" (Goodman, 1978). The reverse is also true: carrying out years-long projects and spending much time doing fieldwork abroad, caught in between the evolution of the affective and professional dimensions of one's identity, change everyone's biography in a non-predictable manner. To return, however, on the former aspect, since interpretivism goes after local knowledge(s) incorporated in the social body, a well-conducted study often brings to surface the latent patterns of domination and oppression that usually blend into the social texture. In other words, interpretive research exposes the roots of the power-knowledge nexus in social life. That comes with responsibilities though, which are reflected in the chain of arbitrary choices I was referring to above – such as framing a given topic into selective research questions, adopting the adequate means for generating evidence, choosing relevant interlocutors and gatekeepers, creating categories for making sense of the material

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[76] Though most IR scholars obey to a nameless third person and its explanatory virtues, social scientists should take the use of the first person perspective seriously because of the performative aspect of doing research. It would be always appropriate to side with Thoreau on giving a simple and sincere account of ourselves when we (purport to) share knowledge on other people's actions and beliefs: "I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me" (Thoreau 1854; quoted in Aronoff & Kubik, 2012: xviii).

collected, and lastly delivering findings[77] in written form. Interpretivism pays keen attention to the inherent political nature of each step. In this respect, critical scholars inspired by the Frankfurt School openly take a normative commitment towards emancipation and employ the method of immanent critique to suggest (and discursively enable) social change. Although emancipation is not intended to be the ultimate goal of the present work (which I doubt could free up space to subaltern or marginalised voices), my background as researcher owes a great deal to that influence. If critical thinking is the red line connecting all the dots in the theoretical chapters, it also had a practical side indeed as I started venturing into the field. That side will be addressed in paragraph 4.4 below.

Bearing in mind these considerations on the reflexive orientation of interpretivism, however, this overview left out a thorny question mark. If knowing is the incomplete and contingent representation of other people's representations, and any epistemic agreement is part of a politics of science that is intertwined in a wider battle around truth, how to verify knowledge claims? To put it briefly, how to cope with the "vertigo of relativism" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991: 17)? Answering to this question is obviously out of the scope of this work, which casts only a fleeting glimpse into heated debates in the philosophy of science, but that is no excuse to shy away from taking position, especially since thinking about the validity of one's own research process is itself an exercise of reflexivity (Leander, 2008). In this regard, it is clear that the benchmark criteria in use to evaluate quality in the positivist tradition (validity and reliability of variables, replicability of studies, and generalizability of results) are at odds with interpretivism. Only under the assumptions of a stable and objectively intelligible social world, validity becomes a matter of congruence between theory and empirics, concepts and operational measures (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012: 92-93). In so doing, however, "front-loaded research (…) divorced from the meaning-making of research participants" (*ivi*).

Which are alternative criteria for reformulating and asserting validity in a post-positivist and interpretive research design? Haraway's manifesto for a feminist version of objectivity provides a potential avenue for that. Against the relativist outcome of radical constructionism, which apparently treats all forms of knowledge as rhetorical power moves, Haraway inquiries into the possibility of a "usable doctrine of objectivity", one taking advantage of the much-needed tools of deconstruction *and* not abandoning a theory of science:

> "(…) "our" problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world" (Haraway, 1988: 579; original emphasis)

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[77] It should be noted that the notion of "findings" is misleading since it metaphorically emphasises that *something* is found and pulled out from raw data through research, while an interpretive inquiry stresses the co-construction of interpretations through social interaction

Finding a compromise between almost contradictory instances ("a successor science project" and the "postmodern insistence on irreducible differences and radical multiplicity of local knowledges") shifts the question of knowledge from the epistemological level to those of politics and ethics. Critical scholarship, she claims, is called upon to show the radical contingency of human constructions (and the "unequal parts of privilege and oppression" within each of them), but also offer a more adequate and transformative account of the world. Haraway's way out is an embodied doctrine of objectivity, one of situated knowledges – that is to say, particular, limited, socially embedded, and subjugated perspectives. Haraway resorts to the metaphor of vision to illustrate the value of this critical stance in locating and grounding legitimate knowledge claims:

> "Such preferred positioning is as hostile to various forms of relativism as to the most explicitly totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority. But the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be every-where equally. The "equality" of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity, both are god tricks promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully. But it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests." (*ibidem*: 584)

This pragmatic understanding helps to recast validity in terms of trustworthiness of our interpretations of situated knowledge(s). Hence, interpretive research must be context-driven, embedded, engaged, and self-reflexive to give back a trustable and accountable insight of social reality. From a methodological point of view, soundness (or goodness) is therefore evaluated on the basis of the practical implementation of the research design. Accordingly, next paragraphs take a step forward by illustrating the procedures I adopted to generate "thick" empirical evidence and, at the same time, increase the trustworthiness of my investigation.

3.2 Between encounter and immersion: framing ethnography as methodology

An interpretive approach engages with situated and shared ways of knowing. The interpreter seeks to fathom the meanings actors attach to their actions and interactions in a specific social setting. Clearly, such cognitive endeavour requires deep contextualization and cultural awareness to discern how fluid practices of signification solidified into structures of knowledge, and why some of these objectivations came to prominence and some others not. In so doing, explicating the mechanisms of meaning-making basically implies inscribing social discourse in a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973).

In line with Geertz's recasting of anthropological praxis in heuristic terms, providing a thick description is the goal of ethnography. As both a research practice and a genre of writing, ethnography is an attempt of entering the "webs of significance" in which the individual is suspended and interpreting its inherent system of construable signs (*ibidem*). If successful, Geertz explains, the ethnographer becomes able to distinguish a burlesqued wink, laden with an implicit message and socially established codes, from an involuntary twitch. By separating winks from twitches (and "real winks from mimicked ones"), the description of a given culture from within "turns [social discourse] from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted" (*ibidem*: 38). Without grasping the underlying symbolic universe there is no possibility to make intelligible *meaningful* events, actions, behaviours, and institutions in their social ground. The upshot of all this is that knowledge cannot be generated out of context since it comes from the people within that.

After Geertz, ethnography has been conceptualized as an embedded and holistic methodology for the study of semiotic practices, "an encounter between the researcher and another culture" (Salter & Mutlu, 2013: 3) to capture the elusive in the folds of micro-scale interactions and tap agency without resorting to "thin" (structural or behavioural) deterministic theories[78]. Disciplined, intensive immersion in the field of research and sensibility "to the meanings attributed by those observed to their political reality" are its core principles (Schatz, 2009: xi). As a result, ethnographers are themselves research instruments, acting as participant-observers to get first-hand experience of cultural phenomena in action (Murchison, 2010). Throughout the research process the ethnographer toggles between "involvement and detachment" (Powdermaker, 1966: 9), being positioned to register the categories that are used within a community but at the same time developing analytical categories to abstract that social reality and offer insightful interpretations of what an "insider" embodies as tacit knowledge (Wedeen, 2009). Not a disinterested and aloof observer recording and collecting data until 'mission is accomplished', the ethnographer is empathetically immersed in the local context with the purpose of seeing things from the actors' point of view.

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[78] It should be clarified that ethnography is not necessarily interpretive in nature. According to Aronoff and Kubic's typology, interpretive ethnography is one of five types, and specifically it is based on participant observation of semiotic practices and founded upon three commitments: i) the constructed nature of meaningful actions; ii) ontological realism and an attendant epistemology focusing "on actual actions of real people, rather than variables"; and iii) the inclination to dig into the small scale. They also argue with a hint of boldness (which I endorse wholeheartedly) that "[these] three commitments undergird a research agenda that is indispensable in a world that stubbornly refuses to be rationalized and homogenized and in which the politics of identity is pervasive" (Aronoff & Kubic 2012: 40).

This is what is called emic perspective[79] in the anthropological jargon and generally traced back to the Weberian concept of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*), which provides a corrective for qualitative research in social sciences. Framing research from the bottom, from the native's or insider's perspective, means taking off the desire for an objective and complete representation of social reality as if it were fixed in unmalleable patterns, and embracing one centred on intersubjective interpretations of unstable social constructs instead. As anyone who has been thrown into a conversation on matters of public interest might had noticed at least once, it may well be the case that such perceptions are not "objective" at all, in the limited (yet indispensable) sense of being adherent to some authoritative knowledge[80]. Whatever their degree of adherence, they do affect social action. After all, as the so-called Thomas theorem states, "[if] men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Merton, 1948). Therefore, an emic approach tends to gather a situational interpretation of local modes of thought inasmuch as these are culturally imbued with a distinctive mixture of images, values, purposes, and intentions. This is the reason for treating the actors included in an ethnographic work not as units of observation (e.g. anonym respondents to a questionnaire), but informants or interlocutors talking about their culture and sharing impressions about the community (or group) they are part of, thus allowing the researcher to glimpse the working out of a social scene (Spradley, 1979; Levy & Hollan, 1998). Hence, ethnographies unfolds over a double hermeneutic: i) the actors' interpretations of their lived experiences and ii) the researcher's interpretation "of situational actors' interpretations as we participate with them, talk with them, interact with and observe them, and read (literally or figuratively) their documents and other research-relevant artefacts" (Yanow, 2009: 278). Being attentive to these two interpretive moments, together with a third one concerning deskwork and textwork phases upon returning from the field (*ivi*), is the added value ethnography promises to give.

This notwithstanding, IR scholars have been wary of ethnographic methodologies and narratives alike. Despite the wide range of potential applications to the study of politics[81], Salter is right in saying that there is a dearth of ethnographic works in the discipline, and moreover these are "often confined to a solipsistic concern with the production of knowledge within the IR community" (Salter & Mutlu, 2013: 53). Despite all the turns that have gradually taken place in the field of IR, and among them the Bourdieu-inspired practice turn in particular[82], an ethnographic turn has yet to come. As highlighted in chapter II, this circumstance has a great deal to do with the IR hermetic closure to inputs and voices

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[79] Opposed to an etic perspective, which applies the observer's external categories (which Geertz calls experience-distant concepts) to describe a social group.

[80] In an extensive sense they never are given that a phenomenological epistemology rejects objectivity outright.

[81] As Lisa Weeden points out, "ethnography is an especially good way to gain insight into actors' lived political experiences, to observe how people make sense of their worlds, to chart how they ground their ideas in everyday practices and administrative routines, and to analyze the gap between the idealized representation and actual apprehension of events, people, and political orders" (Wedeen, 2009: 85).

[82] For a review of practice-oriented approaches in IR see Neumann (2002), Adler and Pouliot (2011), Adler-Nisser (2012), Bueger and Gadinger (2018), as well as Ringmar (2014) for a critique of the debate.

from other disciplines. Vrasti addressed this same issue in a very sharp and thought-provoking article. Largely unfamiliar (or unsympathetic) with the change of heart occurring in anthropology during the 1980s[83], which dismissed the "structuralist, Orientalist and masculinist foundations" that had distorted ethnographic representations for decades, she claims that IR scholars brought in selective, instrumental, and timid versions of ethnography as "a safe bet" to counter overwhelmingly text-oriented approaches and bring empiricism back (Vrasti, 2008). In such a way, the "regulatory mechanisms" of IR stripped ethnography from any element that might "perturb the ontological imagination of the discipline" (*ibidem*: 297). As a result, ethnography has been reduced on a case-by-case basis to either a method of data collection or an aesthetic convention or a theoretical sensibility.

Even though there are relevant exceptions to this tendency[84], Vrasti raises a compelling argument. Beyond a poor grasp of anthropological debates, the main reason for such half-hearted reception is that, whilst there is ample room for convergence (Aronoff & Kubic 2012), the "unruliness"[85] of ethnography does not fit the teleological aspiration of abstracting generalizable explanations that political scientists are trained with. Having walked through many departments of political science over the past few years, I heard in several occasions that ethnographies are fascinating and dense, but at the end of the day irremediably unscientific stories that fall short of the minimum requirements to produce relevant academic knowledge – a commonplace remark which echoes the subtle warning 'proceed at your own peril'. Following this line of reasoning, ethnographies have an in-built conceptual flaw insofar as they are tailored to overly local specificities and thus are not able to travel, as Sartori would recommend. On the contrary, the argument goes further, the good scientist ought to offer robust proofs of cast-iron causal relations, applicable to the largest number of cases, through systematic methods in order to spell out the basic grammar of politics. As far back as 1977, Gabriel Almond and Stephen Genko (not exactly the couple of postmodern subversive authors one might expect) expressed concern that political science was losing contact with its ontological base by mimicking the explanatory logic of natural sciences. They stressed that imitation, a "remunerative adventure" to gain legitimation within an incentive system modelled on hard sciences, dragged in "a tremendous drive toward quantification", with the effect that method became "the primary criterion for judging the quality of

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[83] Vrasti indicates 1986 as the pivotal year when the concomitant publication of Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture*, Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, and Turner and Bruner's *The Anthropology of Experience* fully brought to light the critical departure from the colonialist pitfalls of Malinowski–styled ethnography, which Geertz had anticipated with *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

[84] See, for instance, Scott (1977), Aronoff (1989), Gusterson (1998), Weeden (1999), Barnett (2002), Nordstrom (2004), Khalili (2007), Pachirat (2011), Neumann (2012), and Autesserre (2014). Some of these works fall outside the traditional research questions defining the IR field (if this is understood in state-centric terms and closely tied to the problem of war), but are mentioned here as evidence for excellent ethnographic studies at the intersection of political science more generally and anthropology.

[85] "Ethnography as a method is particularly unruly, particularly undisciplined, particularly celebratory of improvisation, bricolage, and serendipity, and particularly attuned to the possibilities of surprise, inversion, and subversion in ways that other methods simply are not" (Pachirat 2009; quoted in Wedeen, 2010: 256).

research" at expense of substance (Almond & Genco, 1977: 47). Against such misapprehension, which fails to recognize the complex and idiosyncratic attributes of social and political data, they advocated for a reversal of perspective: "in 'good' science, methods are fit to the subject matter rather than subject matter being truncated or distorted in order to fit it to a preordained notion of 'scientific method'" (*ibidem*: 50).

In this sense, I view ethnography as a hermeneutic antidote to reductionism and the application of preconceived theories or unified methods of inquiry in IR, rather than a threat to the validation of findings (and the scientific status of the discipline with it). To borrow from Blumer, a founding father of symbolic interactionism, what is needed is a call for a direct examination of the empirical world, which is to say the world of everyday experience (1986: 34). The problem with most research inquiry, he thought, is that it is not designed to pursue intimate acquaintance with the sphere of social life being studied. Researchers are typically outsiders in relation to that segment of society, yet "unwittingly form some kind of a picture" of it, which inevitably rests upon pre-established images – common stereotypes circulating in the public discourse, but also the baggage of theories and beliefs defining one's own professional identity. Every Ph.D. student is confronted with that initial bewilderment and the state of constant anxiety it ensues. However, these pre-established images (whether self-consciously or not) quite often end up becoming a readily available substitute for the lack of first-hand acquaintance, without demanding or encouraging a closer look. Hence, we keep looking from a distance and in reliance to long-tested scientific procedures, which are supposed to dispel the opacity surrounding social reality by themselves. It is not by chance that Western-based IR has frequently engaged with other world regions in terms of difference, implicitly stressing the non-compliance of the latter to "value-free" standards of statehood, good governance, or democracy – to name just a few concepts with a controversial history of normative projection. The whole theoretical body on weak and failed states is a case in point. Instead, what Blumer thoroughly describes as the traits a researcher should have to get closer to the empirical – "creative yet disciplined imagination, resourcefulness and flexibility in study, pondering over what one is finding, and a constant readiness to test and recast one's views and images of the area" (*ibidem*: 40) – is a good exemplification of a reflexive disposition. Moreover, a commitment to intimate knowledge does not exclude the transferability (rather than generalizability) of results to different settings and the elaboration of middle-range theories, *but* it is actually in the reader's capacity and competence to make those results travel to other contexts (Dvora Yanow's "third hermeneutic").

Applied to conflict studies in particular, an ethnographic methodology illuminates the "invisibilities of power" (Nordstrom 2004: 15)[86]: the small facts and stories that lie in the shadows (though speaking to

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[86] Carolyn Nordstrom authored a beautiful ethnography across warzones and beyond frontlines uncovering the interplay between armed conflicts and illicit economies, or to use her striking words "the intersections of power,

larger issues as Geertz underlines), often not inscribed in texts and that cannot be coded in a dataset under a categorical variable. Missing or overlooking those "small" facts – with their dense milieu of emotions, silences, gestures, and artefacts – is a considerable loss for any political scientist. Therefore, an ethnographic injection would be much beneficial to IR in order to balance the current emphasis on textual representations of politics, as well as to overcome the stalemate between discourse-oriented and practice-oriented approaches. In fact, it is worth underlining that knowledge does not play itself out in utterances, documents, and speeches only, which are not sufficient alone to trace internal tensions, latent discursive structures, and acts of resistance against dominant narratives. Rather, knowledge is also bodily experienced and materially practiced through a much broader repertoire of actions. To avoid confusion, often leading to parochial disputes and wall-building within the discipline, discourses and practices are to be considered as mutually constitutive elements, rather than divergent performances. As Neumann helpfully reminds, Wittgenstein and Foucault never thought of a linguistic turn detached from a turn to practices: "the analysis of discourse understood as the study of the preconditions for social action must include the analysis of practice understood as the study of social action itself" (2002: 267-268). The Foucauldian concept of discursive practices, indeed, rejects an ontological separation between discourse and practice. Whereas the former enables and constraints action, somewhat "specifying the bandwidth of possible outcomes" (Neumann 2008: 62), the latter is involved in the fixation and contestation of meanings. In the same vein, though from a more practice-oriented agenda, Adler and Pouliot complement this insight with a rich definition of practice in order to explicitly invite IR scholars to drag themselves out of the text. In their view, practice is: i) a performative form of action, which "[has] no existence other than in its unfolding or process"; ii) patterned, "in that it generally exhibits certain regularities over time and space"; iii) competent "in a socially meaningful and recognizable way"; iv) resting on background knowledge, "which it embodies, enacts, and reifies all at once"; and v) weaving together discursive and material worlds (Adler & Pouliot 2011: 6-7)[87]. Although such definition suffers from conceptual overstretch according to Ringmar (2014), it has the merit of specifying further how the common-sense world is inter-subjectively constructed not exclusively in linguistic terms.

In carving out the methodological borders of the research design, I embraced these views as my own and treated ethnography as a privileged way to give prominence to the discursive practices that enact

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profit, survival, and humanity - in the shot of a gun". She offers a remarkable characterization of what ethnography is: "Ethnography is a discipline sophisticated in its simplicity: it travels with the anthropologist to the front lines and across lights and shadows to collect these stories; to illuminate strange bedfellows, and, if one were to put it bluntly, to care" (2004: 3).

[87] In a nutshell, "practices are socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world" (*ivi*).

identity formation around conflicts: both a research strategy to reconcile overarching narratives to situated practices and a method to gather and interpret contextual data.

3.3 Research design

We have seen that an interpretive methodology goes hand in hand with an anti-foundational inquiry, which does not proceed through the "cascading path approach" of positivism (Aradau & al. 2014: 2). The interpretation of meanings-in-context, indeed, casts aside if-then hypotheses, causal relationships, and a language of variables. Rather than testing a theoretical statement based on a-priori concept formation and using supposedly agnostic methods, the epistemological commitment to situated knowledge(s) insists on reconstructing agency in its conditions of possibility. Even though social facts do not speak for themselves and we always frame (read: manipulate) the empirical through socially mediated understandings (what Kant called categories of thought), theory ought not to assert itself over the direct experience of social reality. On the other hand, imposing rigid theoretical models from the outset reduces complexity and diversity to disciplinary expectations about what we are going to find and eventually prove, thus "limiting what can be said or thought about specific problematizations" (Neal, 2013: 42; see also Malkki & Cerwonka, 2007). By the way, Neal is quite right to point out that IR is caught in this second paradigm, with the spectre of Kenneth Waltz looming large on the horizon, in the sense that the canonical subordination of empirical material to theory has resulted in "clouding out detail" (Neal, 2013: 43)[88]. To further strengthen this critique, it seems that even critical approaches frequently end up portraying a cold-blooded political world emptied of human beings, whose agency is diluted in macro-structures or overarching narratives. What is certain is that mainstream traditions in IR share a scientific approach based on the ex-ante formulation of general postulates to be given priority over data collection and analysis. On the contrary, an interpretive study is theory-informed and not theory-driven: fieldwork takes the lead in guiding the research process. Consistently, variables and

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[88] Neal decouples empiricism and positivism reclaiming a return to the former in order to describe the "rich empirical landscapes, unseen practices, and diverse knowledge systems" populating politics. This is not to say that observation, the sensory experience, brings us the exact view of what counts as political in the "real" world. Post-structuralism cautions against every foundation of knowledge, even those ones resting on a phenomenological basis, and Neal's argumentation can be attacked precisely on this epistemological ground, as he shows to be well aware of. This notwithstanding, I agree with his "methodological plea to elevate the empirical above the theoretical" since it would be reckless to disempower any claim to knowledge and those claims that are empirically grounded in situated knowledge(s) must be recognized as more trustable (albeit contingent and ephemeral just like human beings are) than those based on top-down, abstract, and prescriptive explanatory models with no grip on the context to which they are applied. After all, deconstructing the naturalization of human constructs should not prevent critical inquirers to advance more equitable constructions of social life. This raises the issue of finding an epistemic consensus to be agreed upon. In this regard, I emphasize again that Haraway's discussion on objectivity (see infra p. 101) shines a light to navigate through these troubled waters. That light illuminates this piece of research also.

hypotheses are not formalized, nor the inferential logic of proving causal relations is applied. I designed this study along these lines of thought.

I have presented above the methodological underpinnings of this work, meaning the "coherent set of ideas about epistemology, strategies on inquiry and standards of evidence" (Hawksworth 2015: 28). In the following pages, instead, I will make explicit how I have conceptualized the substantive issue that prompted my interest. In more detail, I will discuss how I came to identify a research question, select the methods to locate and produce evidence, cope with the practical difficulties of doing fieldwork in close proximity to conflict zones, and the subsequent ethical concerns – in short, all the elements that make legible the structure of the project and its carrying out. In doing so, I wish to be as much as clear and transparent as possible to convey the workflow that has accompanied me for three years, with all doubts and weaknesses.

I note here briefly that, in my experience, constraints and adjustments *in itinere* had much more to do with the unpredictable and operational realities of doing research on the ground than theoretical puzzles or methodological question marks: limited funding and time to conduct fieldwork, long delays in visa processing, unavailability of sources, protracted warfare in the country, and the escalation of tensions between central and regional governments were actual hurdles. To give one example, the first draft of the project defended the idea of a comparison between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan, but once arrived in Iraq in April 2017 restricted access to Syrian border crossings and the duty of care set by my institution made that proposal unfeasible in view of on-going instability in northern Syria. Therefore, I had to change the initial idea and the comparison became a single case study, with the advantage of strengthening the in-depth analysis of the Iraqi part but also losing all the related background work on the Syrian part, to which I had dedicated more than one year of study. Likewise, after the referendum held in late September 2017 the local scenario evolved in such a way that kept me from spending more time in the region as planned. Both the embargo on international flights and the overlong procedure to obtain visa a second time undermined the research roadmap by postponing and much shortening fieldwork. Nevertheless, since the very beginning of the project I adopted a flexible and plural strategy to remedy the likely complications that may arise (as they did) when working in countries under particular strain.

To take a step back, I will explain first why a certain contentious dimension of the Kurdish question caught my attention and I will recount then how that analytical framing has evolved over time, particularly after the first period of field research in Iraq. With regard to the first point, resource geographies in the KRI intersect with an elaborate mosaic of tribal allegiances, long-held grievances, territorial disputes, simmering ethnic tensions, a collective memory of repression, and an intimate relationship with the environment. Resource geographies, therefore, are tinged red with identity politics and translated into the making of material and symbolic borders, created not with the stroke of a pen,

but through everyday practices resonating in the public discourse. Such tangible, yet untold intersection at the heart of Kurdistan, even more so in the current historical conjuncture, sparked my interest. Since the original aim of this study was exploring the nexus between resource geographies and national imaginaries, once I started thinking about the research design in practical terms, however, I needed to scale down the level of abstraction towards a readable and clean research question. Scaling down the proposal was anything but a straightforward and linear process; it was rather one of blind spots, repeated revisions, radical take backs, and continuous refinement during and after fieldwork. Adopting an exploratory logic of inquiry, designed to develop concepts out of observation, I found myself asking many times if I was constraining instead the range of possible interpretations in an arbitrary way, even unconsciously as a cognitive short cut to counter my inability to grasp an unfamiliar imaginative universe in full.

As examined before while addressing the complexities of an interpretive epistemology, this is unavoidable to a certain extent. However, it should be borne in mind the analytical distinction between natural facts and theoretical entities; a distinction that calls into question our very approach to research. As a rule of thumb, handling some concepts (such as the one of national identity) does not mean to reify their ontological content, but rather objectify them provisionally in order to analyse their contextual usage. To remain on the same example, national identity is not a stand-alone fact imbued with absolute and timeless attributes; it is a historically contingent construction, instead, even if with "true" effects for real people in real places. If interpretivists seek to reconstruct how people use situated constructions to describe themselves and explain their actions, then they can provide at best second or third order interpretations of those descriptions, with first order ones belonging to the "natives" only[89].

Anyway, still I had to find a starting point. Given that with the fall of the regime and subsequent loosening of central authority in a refashioned federal Iraq the unilateral exploitation of natural resources has been the bedrock Kurdish emancipation from Baghdad, both politically and economically, I focused on the KRG resource-driven policies. Accordingly, among many other possible alternatives, I formulated an exploratory research question as follows: to what extent and how has resource nationalism re-framed and re-territorialized Kurdish national imaginary in Iraq since 2005?

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[89] Once again I owe this lesson to Geertz's influential essay. He wrote a clear-cut passage on this point: "What it means is that descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them. What it does not mean is that such descriptions are themselves Berber, Jewish, or French— that is, part of the reality they are ostensibly describing; they are anthropological—that is, part of a developing system of scientific analysis. They must be cast in terms of the interpretations to which persons of a particular denomination subject their experience, because that is what they profess to be descriptions of; they are anthropological because it is, in fact, anthropologists who profess them. Normally, it is not necessary to point out quite so laboriously that the object of study is one thing and the study of it another".

This meant to be the entry point into the many articulations of Kurdish self-determination in Iraq, and thus understand how resource conflicts are pivotal in the mechanisms of identity formation within KRI and beyond. The proposition, of course, related to a specific set of practices acted out by KRG policymakers and came out of a preliminary examination of secondary sources. Being mindful of that, shrinking the focus down to a pair of concepts anchored in the literature was intended to widen it at a later stage to include other carriers of meaning. In this sense, the research question was conditional, but not causal in nature: entering the field for the first time, I went looking for mutual constitution with the purpose of understanding how a dominant discourse (resource nationalism) at a specific time and space is reproduced, contested, and inserted into a larger structure of meaning (national identity), which in turn belongs to a composite and transnational narrative (Kurdishness). Not surprisingly, after few weeks of data collection I realized that the image I had in mind was off target to my interlocutors and in many respects unable to absorb all the trappings of resource politics in the region. Yet, it had the potential to expose a profusion of symbols, discursive frames, facts, personal stories, and a range of stakeholders I was not fully aware of. Therefore, it put me in touch with a deeper symbolic universe encompassing notions of nationhood, citizenship, statelessness, coexistence, resistance, and solidarity. Testing, adapting, and further developing that initial question then set in motion a learning cycle and a sense-making process as well, which slowly brought me up to sketch a three-pronged matrix to trace how political conflicts across the KRI have remodelled upon the oil dimension.

The following three empirical chapters were structured on that basis, as the outcome of lengthy musings about the first field experience and of reading field notes and interview transcripts once back home. The second stay in Iraq, instead, validated the analytical choice and added layers of complexity. In summary, whereas I had taken the first step inductively with a theory-informed proposition to lock onto a largely uncharted setting, then tension between prior knowledge and direct observation led me to take somehow an abductive reasoning in order to unravel that feeling of "stranger-ness" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012: 29) and provide an interpretation of a much broader and detailed picture. Unlike deductive and inductive logics of inquiry, an abductive one emphasizes the iterative-recursive fashion of the hermeneutic cycle, with the researcher continuously going back and forth from experiential discoveries to theoretical interpretations (cf. *ibidem*: 26-34). Such circularity of hermeneutic moments, as opposed to linear causal inference, characterized the way I tried to generate interpretive knowledge.

Accordingly, I opted for a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic orientation. To be fair, I moved the first steps into research with much hesitation, endeavouring to figure out the most appropriate method in order to develop a vague idea into a project. There is typically little guidance about how to do field-based research. As is often the case, I discovered it by doing, and my encounter with ethnography happened almost by chance. Since I had no previous background in Kurdish studies, during the first months of the Ph.D. it soon became clear that building up cultural competence was a

prerequisite. Besides reviewing the relevant literature on Kurdistan and Kurdish politics, I also started attending events held by the Kurdish diaspora in Italy (mostly in Tuscany, my home region, and Rome) and, occasionally, in the United Kingdom. Although not related to a research protocol at the time, my participation to those political (manifestations, marches, sit-ins) or politicized (film screenings, fund-raising activities) events was fundamental to clarify and soon after reshape some early understandings. Hanging out with Kurdish activists introduced me to a first cultural exchange and, among other things, erased the wrong impression of a unitary Kurdish community. In addition, that reiterated interaction proved to be essential in mapping the field of research before setting foot in Kurdistan a year later. At that point, I kept walking on that path and found in ethnography a compass to give the research direction.

It should be stressed that Kurdistan resembles the image of a "multisite nation" (Laguerre, 2016) by virtue of the connections between a large and politicized diaspora, a transnational network of activism, and a divided homeland eliciting the view of a common ethnos albeit in absence of political cohesion. In a contemporary world of "increasingly globalized webs of influence, dependence, and assistance" (Kubik, 2009: 44), Kurdistan stands out as a virtual and mythical space, which is articulated through disjointed and even opposed national visions, to the extent that a unitary Kurdish state has never been claimed. Even though it would be an overly simplistic reading of a much nuanced and complex concept, I intuitively thought of Kurdish identity in terms of a "multi-locale, dispersed identity" (Marcus, 1998: 63). That apparent insight had encouraged me to design a multi-sited fieldwork from day one. As mentioned above, I have been in close touch with the Kurdish diaspora throughout the study, even if this turned out to be more useful in the early erratic stage than during its concrete development since most Kurds living in Italy are from Bakur (the Turkish portion of Kurdistan) and the Kurdish question has traditionally received attention in leftist circles that are much more sympathetic with the PKK than Barzani's self-rule in Iraq, to put it mildly. When the ambition for a comparison with the Kurdish cantons in northern Syria vanished altogether, I shifted the emphasis to the KRI, where I conducted field research over the course of two extended stays (April-June 2017; May 2018) for 92 days in total. This relatively brief period (yet intense, as I will illustrate further on in paragraph 4.4) did not exhaust data collection, neither my immersion in the field. Further to engagement with the diaspora, I kept in touch with my informants during the long months in between the two periods in Iraq. That gave me the chance to be updated about the local environment, especially in the aftermath of the referendum on independence and the punitive takeover of Kirkuk and the disputed areas when media coverage was noticeably biased in favour of this or that party. Moreover, it strengthened trust (sometimes friendship) on a personal level, and mutual confidence in each other's intentions set the basis for a closer collaboration during the second stay. While in Europe I interviewed the representatives of some KRG diplomatic missions abroad, either in person or via Skype. Supplemented with documentary analysis,

those interviews gave back the official discourse of the regional government, with some relevant accents and silences that somehow sharpened my senses and got me ready for field research.

I have already elaborated on what ethnography is and its contribution to IR, but few more words are needed about why I deemed it to be the most well suited method to fit the case study and sort out empirical problems. The reason, in many ways, is implicit in the theoretical framework, whereby both collective identities (nothing new) and natural resources (perhaps a little less common) are conceptualized as social and mobile constructs that cannot be understood outside their peculiar context. To continue with the first concept out of convenience, collective identities get constituted and actualized through a variety of practices - "such as pledging allegiance to the flag, singing the national anthem, drawing a map, or using the word *we* to talk about a country's foreign policy" (Wedeen, 2009: 89; original emphasis), speaking of national identities for instance. Whatever the ideological roots, the repertoire of practices is performed inside a more comprehensive semiotic space (crossed by other countless symbolic struggles), which may be purposively translated into political resolve. Going back to chapters I and II, nationalism plays precisely this legitimizing role insofar as it strives to fix national identity in a teleological political project, endowing it "with an aura of naturalness" (Kubik, 2009: 37). However, truth-effects –"a doing, an activity and a normalized thing in society" (Brown 2005: 63; quoted in Dunn, 2008: 81)– are always fragile inasmuch as they rest on a contingent basis that differs widely across time and space, as well as among actors. In this light, I found ethnography to be the only tool at my disposal to crack the shell of dominant discourses and chart contestation beneath them. It would not have been possible to getting to know subordinate and rival perspectives, who and what were *really* at stake, ambiguities and inconsistencies, without experiencing that same reality myself.

As stated previously, I adopted ethnography as both research strategy and method. In practical terms, I triangulated several sources of evidence: in-depth and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and texts. Triangulation was key to becoming aware of multiple interpretations of the same event/action/practice and detecting "intertextual links across data sources" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2012: 86). Given that discursive practices may be expressed with linguistic-rhetorical (i.e. speech acts), visual (i.e. maps), and material (i.e. artefacts) devices, intertextuality is a helpful analytical concept to make sense of different layers of meaning and filter out the background noise that might be deceptive otherwise. Telling the difference between regularities, variations, and deviations from a pattern is actually what makes a description thick. Although I chose interviews and participant observation as the primary means of data collection, key texts were also an important source. Besides regular monitoring of media coverage[90], I systematically scrutinized relevant English-translated KRG official documents

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[90] In greater detail, I used the BBC Monitoring Service to explore Kurdish media in Sorani and Kurmanji dialects, and Iraq Oil Report as privileged source to keep an eye on the political and security ramifications of the oil industry in the KRI and the whole country.

over the period 2007-2018. In greater detail, the corpus of texts included: speeches and statements delivered by KRG President and Ministries at national and international summits; press releases and reports published by KRG Ministries (namely, the Ministry of Natural Resources, MNR, and the Ministry of Planning, MoP); laws and legislative documents (such as the 2007 Oil and Gas Law of the Kurdistan Region); oil contracts with IOCs. Though limited, the volume of texts made a substantial contribution to the analysis by setting the baseline KRG narrative. This proved to be both a point of departure for writing down an interview protocol and a fundamental frame of reference for tracing intertextuality in the whole body of empirical material. Paragraph 3.5 illustrates how textual and ethnographic data have been merged and analysed.

Openness to methods and ongoing reassessment of empirical material, then, were the central criteria I followed. Such emergent design led to an abductive analytic process, with ethnography as the engine of both.

3.4 Being there: practising ethnography as method

If "ethnography must be able to bring a people and a place to life in the eyes and hearts of those who have not been there" (Nordstrom, 2004: 14), in this paragraph I will first give an insight of how I negotiated both access to the field and my role as researcher. I cannot pretend (and it is not my desire) to define this interpretive research as ethnographic through and through. In fact, exposure and language proficiency are below the threshold for a good ethnography, at least in the eyes of an anthropologist. I was well aware of these limitations once I undertook the journey, also because of turmoil in the country and the barriers of the academic programme I was enrolled in. Still, with all its imperfections, the results discussed in these pages are based on my presence in and experience of fieldwork. If neither in-depth interviews nor participant observation are immediately ethnographic in kind, I have proceeded ethnographically since the beginning by grounding the empirical research into a long-term and multi-sited immersion in the Kurdish community. Though lacking in time, through engagement with the diaspora and by maintaining personal connections with my informants in Iraq I have kept such epistemological sensibility alive even when I found myself unable to remain longer in the country. I framed the field of research accordingly. What is termed field of research, indeed, may be seen as "a network, a fluid space, a rhizome or an assemblage" (Bueger & Mireanu, 2014), which is deliberately constructed by the fieldworker depending on their substantive questions and what is available to them to provide reasonable and empirically-grounded answers. Hence, the field is an artificial and bounded space carved upon the researcher's own selections. In other words, ethnography is also a spatial practice in its premises. That is all the more relevant if one adopts a postmodern sensitivity about a trans-local, interconnected, and globalized world made up of flows and networks (Kubik, 2009: 44-47; see also Amit, 2003). Especially since there is no reason to believe that cultural and geographical boundaries

ought to coincide. As mentioned earlier, the Kurdish question appears to be a case in point. After all, "where does the field begin and end, if ever?" (D'Amico-Samuels 1991; quoted in Sluka & Robben, 2007: 24).

In this regard, I had two intentions firm in mind when I was planning the first stay in Iraq: i) dig into the political ecology of natural resources as thematic angle; ii) select political elites and civil society organizations (CSOs) as preferred interlocutors. Accessing the field, however, is said to be a matter of improvisation and informal connections one cannot realistically presume to know (not to say determine) beforehand (Gusterson, 2008). My experience is no exception, but my entry strategies luckily were successful beyond expectations thanks to the people who generously assisted me in organizing and conducting fieldwork on the ground. By carrying out a research fellowship at the American University of Iraq – Sulaimani (AUIS) and a voluntary collaboration with the Italian NGO Un Ponte Per (UPP) I managed to keep a foot in the two worlds I was interested and also quickly settle in. Both partners were essential gatekeepers. On the one hand, AUIS (a US-style liberal arts private college implanted in 2007 as the wind changed in the country and well-connected in local and national politics, as well as with IGOs and foreign delegations) enabled me to reach prominent policymakers that would have been hardly available otherwise. In a couple of weeks, I realised that being introduced as AUIS Fellow made the difference and sometimes put interviewees more at ease. This had pros and cons of course, as an anecdote exemplifies below, but was a strong guarantee for the viability of the project. On the other hand, UPP is a long-time supporting partner of the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI) and a leading member of the Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign (hereafter STC), which seeks to bring together local communities and stakeholders in the Tigris-Euphrates river system to protect water resources against the adverse impact of large-scale infrastructures. Fascinated by the bottom-up and basin-wide vocation, I contacted UPP to know more about the campaign and I became an advocate myself. In developing the project I eventually decided to cut off water politics from the analysis[91], but that circumstance provided me with a second identity, the one of an environmental activist. This opened a view onto Kurdish society from below, in a twofold sense. Kurdish activists walked me through the community and shared their hopes for political and social

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[91] The choice is justified on the grounds of providing a more coherent discussion of the case study, also in terms of correspondence with the theoretical body and selected literature. Hence, all the data collected on water politics moved to side projects, which include, *inter alia*, a report on water resources management in the KRI. Nevertheless, that chunk of empirical material was not a separate set of observations and thus had an influence on the analytical process. For instance, in July 2017 I had the chance to participate as observer in a EU & UNESCO-led high-level workshop in Treviso (Italy) about groundwater management with Iraqi and Kurdish delegations at the bargaining table. The two-day event took place behind closed doors and offered me a unique insight into bilateral negotiations, unfiltered. The debate about what geographical scale ought to be given priority in terms of water governance was a major flashpoint in the confrontation. One interesting element coming out, therefore, was the competition between alternative scalar framings to naturalize legitimate claims on natural resources.

change; besides mediating the local context, they gave me also a glimpse of what is smouldering under the ashes of a society strangled by political parties. Furthermore, they introduced me to a broad web of CSOs and social movements, which included many other actors than those involved in ICSSI and the STC campaign.

Fieldwork, then, was an alternation of settings: militarized political headquarters or crowded administrative offices, shiny hotel lobbies in Erbil or cultural cafés in Sulaymaniyah, oil-soaked farmland in Chamchamal or the open dump discharging into the Tanjaro River, to name just a few. Wearing different clothes was an asset, but obviously changed the way I was perceived from time to time, even if I never hid my background and what I was researching on. During interviews with KRG officials I did not mentioned my affiliation with AUIS all the time, being a young and a little clumsy researcher from Italy was enough to arouse curiosity, but it was a risk-averting option to get some heavy doors open. I realized that when I got across the checkpoints that divide the region in two political constituencies – the "yellow zone" in Erbil and Duhok governorates and the "green zone" in the Sulaymaniyah and Halabja ones, under KDP and PUK control respectively. If you drive from the fertile mountains surrounding Sulaymaniyah to the dry plains of Erbil and stare at the changing landscape out the window there is almost a feeling that the geography of power follows suit, chromatically. As the PUK roadside banners in green depicting Jalal Talabani's portrait and those of the many *martyrs* of an endless war are replaced by the same KDP logos and portraits in yellow, military checkpoints somewhere along the way draw symbolic borders between competing areas of influence. I crossed the region almost every week, either via Kirkuk or Koya, and every time (with PUK and KDP Peshmerga alike) I was stopped to check my identity documents for a long while. Being a foreigner and sharing ordinary taxis, these were routine checks of course. However, I started noticing that when I showed checkpoint officers my AUIS badge first, they let me go without further controls, especially at PUK checkpoints. In other words, AUIS credentials "counted" more than my Italian passport, and I took advantage of that since then. To be fair, this has more to do with local politics than the US umbrella, as one might think at first sight, given that AUIS is associated with the well-know profile of its founder, Barham Salih, former KRG Prime Minister, senior PUK member, and now President of Iraq. In the course of fieldwork, I became aware on several occasions that I was on a sort of fast track, though not visible.

This notwithstanding, I was surprised at how top politicians and high bureaucrats were sincerely open to me, with a manner beyond simple courtesy, even when I took them on a sensitive terrain. Most people I spoke with tended to see me as a friend of Kurds and therefore were eager to communicate that a long-awaited historical moment was upon them in spite of all the obstacles and enemies, inside and outside Kurdistan (the blacklist, of course, changed radically depending on the interlocutor). It goes without saying that some tried to educate my view on the basis of partisan interests, especially

given that I was perceived as unacquainted with the local context and thus fairly malleable, but the common desire to communicate the right to have a place in the world was above any calculation. I learned to read in that another side of a sense of loneliness: the feeling of being exiled in their own land, which features prominently in the Kurdish imaginary. I never took side and I was careful not to raise any suspect of having some sort of stakes in the feuds crossing the region, but I must confess that I was sympathetic with that feeling. It was the reason that had brought me there.

My positionality came into play in a different way when dealing with activists. Building trust was much easier: I was welcomed among peers as someone fighting for the same cause and such acceptance set everything into motion. On the other hand, however, I was given an ambivalent identification: at times I was considered an international expert or a well-connected academic or a water practitioner, no matter that none of these labels was correct and I had not encouraged any of them. Sometimes these misperceptions put me in a difficult position because they were integral to some sort of expectations. Hanging out with environmental activists, I took part in several on-site observations around dams, watercourses, or refineries – as I said, part of fieldwork happened to be literally in the field. After one of these missions, I was asked by a local CSO to produce a statement demanding the regional government to adopt adequate measures against the ecological crisis underway in a specific site. I kindly refused, explaining that I did not possess the technical expertise and the position to engage in a similar confrontation with competent authorities, but that refusal put an end to our collaboration. Clearly, I had broken a tacit reciprocity. This is not to say that I was unemotional with regard to what I had seen or refrained from giving whatever kind of contribution, but I preferred to translate that commitment into activities and outcomes that were effectively related to my role[92]. Being there also meant caring about people, to use Carolyn Nordstrom's words.

I conducted 53 in-depth and semi-structured interviews, mainly in the urban areas of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Kirkuk[93]. A few interviews were done in Europe. The total does not include follow-ups with the same interviewees. Apart from that, informal talks, side conversations, and everyday interactions

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[92] I volunteered with human rights and environmental local NGOs involved in the STC campaign and I participated to the organization of the Mesopotamian Water Forum (Sulaymaniyah, April 6-8, 2019), which gathered for the first time in history civil society actors from all riparian communities in the Tigris and Euphrates basin. The forum was aimed to discuss and propose inclusive and nonviolent solutions for the shared management of the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, under the guiding principle that water knows no border. Also, during a visiting research period at the Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and within the ACKnowl-EJ (Academic-Activist Co-Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice) project, I added case studies about the socio-environmental conflicts occurring in the KRI to the Atlas of Environmental Justice. The entries were based on fieldwork previously conducted and filled a knowledge gap given that the coverage on Iraq was very limited. That allowed the dissemination of fact-finding research on environmental issues to a broader audience and also set the groundwork for a network of research-activism in Iraq.

[93] The list of interviews and meetings is available in Appendix I.

with a greater number of people made a decisive contribution to the analysis. Interviewees were selected according to purposive sampling and in a number of cases with the assistance of key informants, whose collaboration was mandatory to access certain sites and contexts. I had already defined a list of relevant voices and arranged some interviews before arriving in Iraq the first time. Then, the initial set of interviews snowballed. Both AUIS and local CSOs helped me out in mapping and reaching knowledgeable people. Overall my interlocutors were: members of major Kurdish political parties (KDP, PUK, Gorran, KIU); KRG representatives and bureaucrats; academics; external consultants in the water and energy sectors; CSO practitioners and activists (paying particular attention to those involved in environmental campaigns). Given these profiles I had the chance to conduct most of interviews in English. Top Kurdish politicians typically pursued higher education abroad (also to fled persecutions during the 1980s and civil war in the 1990s); the existential goal of reaching out to the international community to get support for the Kurdish cause was a strong incentive by itself to master foreign languages. On the other hand, CSO practitioners dealing with international donors and NGOs frequently use English as working language. Therefore, the field of research came to my help and I did not experience a communication barrier, which would have made impossible to establish an interaction beyond the interview moment (since I understand neither Sorani, nor Kurmanji, and I have just a few words of Arabic). In few occasions only I had to hire translators. The lack of adequate skills obviously set a no-go frontier when trying to establish closeness with the Kurdish society in full and this has been a source of regret, but language was never an issue when it came to the professional side of the days I spent there. Even though the results of the analysis depended on my social positioning, if I were fluent in Sorani, the actors I wanted to talk with would not have changed much.

Despite visa delays, timing happened to be right for conducting fieldwork in the end. The first period took place during the final phase of the offensive against the Islamic State group in nearby Mosul, at the height of KRG's grip on the disputed territories and with Masoud Barzani beckoning independence for his people. During the second period, instead, I saw that dream once again in tatters since the political fallout of the referendum severely shrank down the KRG leverage and also reshaped the oil map at the expense of KDP's nationalist fervour. The loss of Kirkuk (and its prized oilfields), in particular, was a blow to the credibility of the establishment, with popular resentment against ruling Kurdish parties bubbling to surface and the KDP-PUK enmity brought back abruptly to its dark heydays. In many ways the referendum was another watershed for Kurdish politics, with the oil game very much involved in that, and therefore I had the chance to make an important comparison. Furthermore, I came back in the run-up to the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections. Everything seemed to gain a political connotation even more, one year on. Still an open wound, the post-referendum fibrillation was palpable in the streets, and not only in the urban aesthetics of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, both covered in colourful flags and candidates' posters at every corner. For this reason, I steered the research towards a more explicit ethnographic approach: while reducing the amount of formal

interviews to targeted interlocutors and on specific issues, I came closer to social activism to fill in the blanks that the previous stay had left behind.

Doing research on resource conflicts in a hotly contested autonomous region within a war-torn country, reflexivity was also a matter of safety, particularly for my informants. That was a major concern in designing, carrying out, and now disseminating the project. Accordingly, I set out a strict procedure to safeguard the confidentiality of participants and make sure not to disclose any information that might harm or stigmatize them. All the interviews were transcribed with anonymous and unique identifiers, encrypted, and stored on a cloud server, with coding sheets uploaded on a separate archive so that no one besides me could identify the interviewee. Even though the appendix provides details about each formal interview and meeting I had, keeping anonymity only when explicitly requested or in those cases I believed to be particularly sensitive, for the most part I preferred to use pseudonyms in presenting and discussing the empirical material. At the same time, I have kept track of all interviews, fieldnotes, and analytic memos in order to provide an audit trail. Without putting anyone at risk, proving authenticity and accuracy of the research process was a complementary goal. Therefore, I wove empirical data in the manuscript as much as possible. Nonetheless, accountability to research participants always came first. Interlocutors were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study and why I had approached them; they were aware of being interviewed and were assured that they could withdraw at any time. In a few cases transcripts were returned upon request: member checking was a requisite of transparency, but also a tool of internal control for validating data. I was rather more concerned about exposing informants to potentially dangerous situations since one cannot really know how someone else might interpret even your best intentions, and I took a step back every time I was not sure about the consequences of my actions. This became real once, during a fleeting visit to Kirkuk, where two assistants (a driver and a fixer) had managed to organize a few meetings with provincial authorities. Kirkuk was a different setting from those I had become accustomed to. For the first time I felt unsafe and uncomfortable. The introduction recalls that day. The planned interviews went bad due to the fact that the politicians I spoke with were evasive and impatient, hiding themselves behind cosmetic declarations and closing off conversation every time I rebutted with some contradictory evidence. A military commander even declined to meet at the very last moment and after several phone calls. That nervous reluctance, of course, was much informative about the local context and witnessed how oil politics is like a spark in a tinderbox. I was cautious, but I also felt excitement about being close to substantial information. However, at some point my assistants asked me to stop making certain questions. "If you live here, you don't enter this kind of things" one of them warned with a worried look, "if you do, you may not live for long". As I knew he had received intimidations in the past, I understood that he was referring to himself in the first place and, moreover, that I had overstepped a line. So, I cancelled all the other appointments without hesitation and changed strategy, spending one hour and a half with a local journalist at a table of an empty café inside an empty mall (it was during

Ramadan), away from prying eyes. That episode occurred at the end of my first Iraqi experience and since then I have set the research on a different path, as I will explain later on. When we got back to Sulaymaniyah at sunset for the *iftar*, my other companion was visibly relieved and told me with a smile he had kissed his child ten times before leaving in the morning.

3.5 Data collection and analysis

Making an effort to achieve (or at least approximate) an insider perspective was a matter of getting acquainted with and entering into a social conversation. Despite an emergent and flexible research design, the emphasis placed on hermeneutic sensibility did not equal at all with loose or improvised procedures of data collection and analysis. In fact, the empirical grounding of the project has been as much as rigorous and systematic as possible, though not prescriptive. This means, for example, that "collecting" and "analysing" were not watertight compartments to be dealt with at separate times. As highlighted before with the notion of abductive reasoning, both phases are interdependent and overlapped for the greater part, illuminating each other through a series of consecutive epiphanies. Reading at night the fieldnotes written during the day and gradually drawing a conceptual map of evidence-based observations and their conjectural interpretations, while preparing interviews for the next day to come, became a ritual.

Also, I used to share preliminary interpretations with my closest informants: cross-checking our scripts and putting myself in a listening position was a kind of reflexive restraint to a first-person perspective (and also quite an enriching experience). After all, if not co-researchers, they participated in co-constructing interpretive knowledge within the artificial space of my inquiry. What from time to time hit their attention or conversely was taken for granted, and at the same time the categories they made use of to talk about the same things, was particularly instructive to read primary data in retrospective, first, and flesh out a more trustable narrative, then. In addition, besides offering a middle ground for validating my interpretive results, such an exchange of views sometimes led to an exchange of roles. One day, for instance, I accompanied Soran, an environmental activist, in an inspection of some illegal oil refineries at the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah. We spent the whole day taking pictures and interviewing local residents, mainly farmers whose land had been relentlessly intoxicated by oil spills. He introduced me as a friend assisting him in conducting a threat assessment in those areas, which was correct. That relieved me of taking the lead and also alleviated a sense of suspicion that could otherwise have arisen. Soran's warm manners and knowledge of the villagers took all the attention, while from the rear I could gradually glimpse that set of despairing stories as a sounding board of silenced power relations, or rather, the sharp end of a violent economy. I will return on this episode.

Although I had developed (and amended many times) an interview protocol, I differentiated sets of questions depending on the background and expertise of each interviewee. The type of interview varied as well: focused and more structured with senior KRG officials or energy professionals; biographical and open-ended with activists. In the second case, a line of separation between interviews and participant observation is actually blurred since free-flowing conversations were diluted over time and resumed on several occasions. Furthermore, conversations frequently went together with moments of socialization, such as having dinner, taking a car ride to Erbil, or going on a hike during weekends[94]. When not conducting formal interviews, I typically followed the daily routines of my informants.

Anyway, interviews conformed to an inverted funnel technique: from specific questions (e.g. "how many barrels of oil are produced from that oilfield?", "which companies are involved in midstream and downstream services?", "how oil revenues are distributed?") to more intimate or theoretical ones (e.g. "how did you feel after the ISF retook Kirkuk by force?", "what are the natural borders of Kurdistan?", "how the oil industry seeped into the social fabric of the region?"). By proceeding in that order I realized that my interlocutors felt generally more comfortable and was easier, then, to take them on a journey of increasing abstraction. I usually gave up control and let the person in front of me to express his or her views on a substantive topic or give back a first-hand account (e.g., "what were your expectations when you laid out the framework for the KRG oil policy?", "why did you become an environmental activist?"), especially when my analytical probes were not clear enough (albeit silence or confusion were often more informative than utterances). Sometimes I also encouraged sketching maps on a piece of paper. I generally asked it to KRG officials with some competence or authority over oil issues so to help me figure out the jagged political geography of reserves and pipelines. I already had very detailed maps of the "energy-scape" in the KRI, but it was an attempt to see which political or ideological features appeared and rose to prominence. I did not get disappointed: indeed, the sketches included many elements of human geography and emphasized the perception of an "unnatural" mismatch between physical and cultural borders, particularly in the disputed areas. Hence, it turned out to be an interesting exercise that further opened the conversation up and also established a more empathic understanding to enter identity issues. Since the debate around natural resources is very much polarised, it is no wonder that my questions often triggered partisan reactions. However, the accuracy of a description or the faithfulness of a statement was not something to be verified on a case-by-case basis. Contextual information was obviously relevant to reconstruct the political economy of oil in its working out and over time I learned to put contradictions in perspective; nevertheless, multivocality with its sheer variety of discursive registers was the terrain of my observations. My role as interpreter was not only to represent those multiple voices, but even more being attentive to the ways those voices were contested and re-negotiated within the social setting.

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[94] All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

The analysis passed through such dialogic process. For the purpose of condensing the empirical material I adopted a grounded approach, which for the sake of clarity may be summarized in terms of a three-step method, even though the iterative and recursive characters of the inquiry would rather suggest the image of a spiral-like unfolding rather than the one of a unidirectional and mechanical accumulation of knowledge. In line with grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 2017), I created analytical categories (or themes) out of a preliminary reading of all the transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents. As data collection proceeded, I began associating inductively pieces of information with a particular code, both to order data and single out the most relevant lines or dimensions. MAXQDA was a helpful software to carry out (and secure) the procedure. Therefore, reviewing and classifying primary data (Corbin and Strauss' "conceptual ordering") was conducive to give a preliminary shape to the material, that is to say determine a pre-understanding of what counted as substantial for the analysis. I am using the verb 'determine' in place of 'find' to throw light on my own agency in the interpretive endeavour. The saliency of categories, of course, was not predicated upon the quantitative occurrences (i.e. frequency) of codes, as content analysis does, nor was imposed somehow from the outset (Salvini, 2015). Rather, codes and categories came to my mind as I was going back over what I have recorded or annotated during fieldwork – be it the exact transcript of an interview, the side notes about the non-verbal communication of the interviewee, or my personal feelings about the circumstances in which that same interview had taken place. Hence, data were weighted and assigned with a label depending on my exposure to and interaction with the actors populating the inquiry. As said earlier, also the "return" to the field was planned on the basis of this selective refinement. Furthermore, open coding went hand in hand with the writing of memos, which intersected in many points my field diary entries signalling doubts, inconsistencies, and discoveries. Those points of intersection were the junctures around which an introspective and heuristic process slowly led to the recognition of patterns linking categories to a comprehensive semantic space, much broader than the narrow slice of reality I had focused on. At that stage, I was able to add more branches to the coding tree and, specifically, generate meta-categories at a higher level of conceptualization. Reading backwards the empirical material through the lens of meta-categories is basically the edge of the spiral: not the end of a road, but another point of departure for the reinterpretation of meaning-making.

IV. THE GATE TO STATEHOOD

Kurdish nationalism and the oil dream

O city of black gold,
this flame of yours does not have a hearth
as though your insides burned
blazingly, bursting forth from a closed heart
that complains with tongues of flame superiorly
and the superiority of the complainers is the greatest glory
and it draws with the lights the clearest picture
of what grief and rebellion it suffers.

(Bashir Mustafa, *Al-Nar al-Khalida*, 1958)

This first analytical chapter explores the KRG oil policy in its discursive and material foundations. In the opening section extracts from my ethnographic diaries track the enmity between Erbil and Baghdad in the ideal substrate of Kurds' collective imaginary and related sense of place. The oil-driven nationalist agenda is then interpreted from the complementary angles of legitimacy-seeking efforts, competing nationalisms, and pipeline politics. Lastly, the journey of a barrel of Kurdish crude is illustrative of the full panoply of actors having a stake in the oil potential of the region.

4.1 Exiled in their own land

"My entire life has been a war". Soran turned to me and smiled. There was no sad inflection in his voice, it was the plain description of a defining attribute, among others, of his life. We were walking through the alley behind his house, in a quiet district of Sulaymaniyah. In those days in late May 2017 the Golden Division, the Iraqi Special Forces wearing skull-like masks, had besieged ISIS militants in three neighbourhoods at the heart of Mosul, the major stronghold in Iraq still under control of the Salafi-jihadist group, and were getting ready for a final operation. The night before a fixer escorting international freelancers in and out of the frontlines had told me that booby-traps and snipers had decimated the ranks of the Iraqi security forces (ISF), halting their advance inside the narrow roads of the Old City. Soran interrupted my agitated reflections about the looming scenario. That phrase stuck in my head and surfaces again as I am opening these pages.

Soran grew up in war times: his family moved to Sulaymaniyah from the town of Khanaqin, at the southern edge of Kurdish inhabited territories and, therefore, one of the epicentres of Ba'athist ruthless

Arabization. He left the country in the early 1990s when the KDP-PUK antagonism ripped through the Kurdistan region[95] and blew up into fratricidal warfare. After years of deprivation and concealment, as well as countless arrests for entering European borders illegally, he managed to reach the UK with the prospect of a better future, but a sense of denial remained with him. For that reason, he came back home when the regime fell down in 2003, though without finding a pacified land even thereafter. Soran's biography is not unique. Many Kurds share the same experience and the same feeling of having come through a perennial state of war, which from time to time has taken different forms. The opening quotation might sound pathetic or at least common to anyone surviving war in any context and, hence, unspecific. On the contrary, it introduces to a series of themes that are deeply infused in the collective self-representation of Kurdish identity: oppression, resistance, loneliness, and exile – to mention only a few. As the ISIS insurgency was on retreat, Soran was looking further into the next threat to come the day after the liberation of Mosul, wondering about the imminent face-off between ISF, backed by the Hashd al-Shaabi militias[96], and Peshmerga in the ethnically-mixed disputed territories in Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala governorates, while the root causes that had led disenfranchised Sunni Arabs to join the Islamic Caliphate were still there in plain sight. His concern was right.

The themes mentioned above are all interwoven with a sense of place that defines the common belonging to a Kurdish nation primarily in terms of emotional attachment to native land. In line with a phenomenological approach, the concept of sense of place signals the intimate and relational experience, either conscious or unconscious, connected to a location or site (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Cresswell, 2004; Agnew, 2014). It is a sensed process of signification "involving both an interpretive perspective on the environment and an emotional reaction to the environment" (Hummon, 1992: 262) through which a place gets constituted with a set of affective, moral, or aesthetic qualities[97]. Therefore, it explores the rootedness of self in a geographical setting. Human bonds to a place may be of varying intensity and of different kinds: biographical, as a result of a lived experience, but also constructed through a mythology of the origins, which may sustain a feeling of identification even in absence of

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[95] For reasons of consistency with data collected through interviews and presented in the empirical chapters, I prefer to use "Kurdistan region" instead of KRI (thus omitting "of Iraq") as my Kurdish interviewees did so. When I refer to the broader transnational region encompassing also the Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian parts the expression "Greater Kurdistan" is made explicit.

[96] The Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units, PMU) is an umbrella of approximately 40 militias established in June 2014 to counter the ISIS insurgency and then integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus in March 2018. Predominantly Shi'a, the PMU have been equipped, trained, and supported on the ground also by Iranian military advisers, most notably Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards, who has been ubiquitous in the Iraqi and Syrian theatre.

[97] Place and the relationship between self and place are defining concepts of human geography, which have been treated according to divergent sensibilities and traditions of thought that are not reviewed in the present work. The phenomenological notion adopted here, for instance, does not take into consideration the debate around the "time-space compression" of late modernity (Harvey, 1989) and the progressive re-articulation of place at a time of globalization (Massey, 1994), which nevertheless are relevant for a full understanding of Kurdishness and its geographical views given the large, scattered, and heterogeneous Kurdish diaspora.

direct experience as often happens with second-generation diaspora members. Radcliffe and Westwood drew attention to the importance of place – a marker of national experience – in the construction of the imaginary of the nation, that is to say "the context within which national identities are called forth" (1996: 7). As seen in chapter 1, placing the nation has been a vital issue for the Kurdish cause. In this respect, Aziz emphasises that Kurdishness and "demands of Kurdish nationalism for political recognition (...) ultimately rely on territorial premises" (Aziz, 2011: 46). Territory presupposes statehood, which is the longing of many Kurds and was never a reality in the past, but Aziz rightly points out that Kurdistan "has always been assessed as a territorial community" (*ibidem*: 45). However, for every Kurd the homeland bears the scars of a denied and at times displaced identity. This perception became clear to me already during the first research stay in the region. As I began to build closer relationships of trust and friendship, I was shown many times the place where a relative had fallen in battle. "My father died on that hill behind the village, in 1991. He fought against Saddam's army" – Karwan said, for instance, once while we were driving to Kirkuk – "Also Beritan's father got killed there. Every family has lost someone. War never ends here". Similarly, each time I was introduced to a new circle of people, the proud memories of their 'martyrs' usually followed presentations: "Fazel has an important reputation in Sulaymaniyah because of his older brother, a great fighter. He became a nightmare for Iraqi soldiers; he killed many of them. When he was taken to Amna Suraka[98] and tortured to death, he demonstrated his courage one last time" – this kind of side comments usually filled conversations with my informants. Hence, an affective geography of loss and sorrow, embodied and passed down from generation to generation, gradually took shape before my eyes.

That amount of knowledge is fundamental to read and understand how the intimate bond between Kurds and their homeland has evolved over time and is reproduced nowadays. Indeed, a history of conflict and identity suppression flows through Kurdistan and is fixed in everyday spaces and practices. Places are constructed as "*lieux de memoire*" (Nora, 1989) through a coherent landscape of monuments, artistic artefacts, and rituals of remembrance that evokes a tragic heritage to be recalled and a collective destiny to be achieved. Such a process of space production keeps together imaginative and material elements alike. One should consider, for instance, how the cult of martyrdom is played out in Kurdish society, with the portraits of fallen Peshmerga (literally, 'those who face death') displayed prominently in public spaces, as the anecdote of a car ride from Sulaymaniyah to Erbil briefly describes in the previous chapter, and their bravery lauded during political rallies to mobilize emotional support. Martyrdom has been a powerful signifier of Kurdish nation-building since the dawn of the liberation struggle. The celebration of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the right of a Kurdish nation to exist, as well as the nostalgic representation of fighting heroes of a glorious past, is the response to a shared feeling of deprivation and became a driving force of Kurdish nationalist movements from the

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[98] The infamous Ba'ath prison – now turned into a museum – in the center of Sulaymaniyah where thousands of Kurds got imprisoned, tortured, and killed, especially during the al-Anfal campaigns.

beginning. On this point, McDowall alludes to the ideological attempt of "tracing a national continuity fixed upon 'heroes of the nation' across the centuries" (McDowall, 2003: 5; see also Laizer, 1996; Strohmeier, 2003). Contrary to primordialist understandings of nationalism, as it is often the case, these collective memories are fictional and even contradictories in some measure, being the result of a selective reconstruction of the history of Kurds, if not the creation itself of Kurds as political subject. After all, "the conflicting territorial claims of Kurds, Armenians and Assyrians make it clear that the conflict of interests is indeed more complex than that simply of politically dominant ethnic group or imperial power against the voiceless Kurdish minority" (O'Shea, 2004: 9). It should be noted, indeed, that the imaginative geography implicit in the Kurdish national narrative flattens an ethnic demography that is as much wavy and rough as the mountainous landscape of the region. The symbolic and political act of demarcating Kurdistan along national lines, then, produced also the parallel exclusion of other "powerless" groups (ivi). Looking at the present day, opposite claims on the multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk offer a prime example of how place making is an unstable process in which collective identities and interests confront each other (Till, 2003). The labelling of Peshmerga as martyrs insists on that mythology, which conceptualizes the resort to military force within the frame of an enduring struggle, fundamentally unchanged from the times of Mulla Mustafa Barzani and even before. As Fisher-Tahir puts it: "as powerful symbols of the Kurdish liberation movement, Peshmerga and martyrs served to legitimate the Kurdish Government in Iraq" (Fischer-Tahir, 2012: 93). We will see later on that such framing, coupled with the cult of Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani's leaderships, are part of a pragmatic strategy of the establishment to retain legitimacy and exert control. Nonetheless, it effectively awakens nationhood. No wonder, hence, that heroism and martyrdom take centre stage in the KRG public discourse and its manifestations[99]. Spatial practices, in particular, contribute to ritualize and sacralise collective memory, placing it into a spiritual dimension while keeping it tangible and tied to the present. The visual construction of border checkpoints with the extensive display of flags, banners, and slogans conveys the idea of entering a culturally separated space from the rest of the country, besides delimiting a different administrative authority. In many other contexts, the politics of memory has been associated with the masculine principle of defending homeland to enshrine the highest patriotic values (Mosse, 1990; Raivo, 2015). The iconic representation of historical battlefields or the monumental graves of 'unknown soldiers' are clear illustrations of it.

The same can be said of memorials, relics, and commemorations of the al-Anfal campaigns launched by Saddam Hussein during 1988 to crush the Kurdish minority in Iraq, such as the Amna Suraka heinous prison. The symbolic capital infused into these places of memory reiterates the image of a "common external enemy" – the parent state (Kolstø, 2006) – and unifies Kurds within a "representational space" (Lefebvre, 1991), though with an emotional tone stressing victimhood instead

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[99] Martyrdom is worshipped all across the Greater Kurdistan. Koefoed (2017) sees the cult of martyrs as an act of emotional resistance that is part of everyday lives in Bakur (North Kurdistan).

of resistance[100]. The 'al-Anfal catastrophe' is presented by the KRG, which established a Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs, as a key historical landmark in the nation-building narrative for several purposes: preserve autonomy vis-à-vis Baghdad and promote allegiance to regional institutions in the first instance, but also draw international attention to the enduring violations of Kurdish rights. In this sense, Baser and Tovainen argue that al-Anfal became the Iraqi Kurds' chosen trauma "to underwrite a sense of shared history and a collective belonging to a nation that has fallen victim to genocidal persecution" (Baser & Toivanen, 2017: 17). In post-2005 Iraq claims for genocide recognition are used then as a legitimisation tool to advance and internationalize the Kurdish quest for self-determination. Tejel points out that, beyond many omissions, the KRG hegemonic discourse "tends to link [al-Anfal] to present political issues at stake" with central government (Tejel, 2015: 2577), reproducing ethnic enmity. This insight shows that the top-down rendition of the past bestows official meanings to sites and events in order to nurture a certain imaginary. However, such a power move of ruling elites can be resisted by subaltern discourses (Till, 2003). Nicole Watts (2012) takes the destruction of the Halabja Martyrs Monument following the killing of a young protester by the Asayish (KRG's security and intelligence agency) in March 2006 as a powerful example of state-society tensions in the Kurdistan region. The memorial was built as a sacred place to commemorate the 1988 devastating chemical bombardment, which is emblematic of Ba'athist repression on Kurds. Nevertheless, the KRG official discourse on the Halabjan martyrdom overshadows local memories that recriminate a complicity of the PUK leadership, blamed by some for having put the lives of Halabja residents knowingly at risk. On the backdrop of these grievances and historical inconsistencies, when widespread anti-government protests stormed the Sulaymaniyah governorate in 2006 protesters chose that site in Halabja and reclaimed its legacy to raise demands and mobilize shame against regional authorities. As analysed in chapter VI, evidence of a similar symbolic struggle between elites and ordinary citizens can be found with regard to antagonistic oil imaginaries.

Also war remnants are inserted into the symbolic repertoire: thousands of unexploded landmines covering large swathes of the KRI, particularly in the mountainous areas along the Iranian border, are not only the legacy of decades of warfare, but also a current threat to rural communities that draws a line between cleared and contaminated areas[101]. This separation brings people back to war memories

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[100] Fischer Tahir investigated on how Kurds dealt with the narration of al-Anfal and noted an interesting shift in the gendered symbolism used in the Kurdish nationalist discourse: in order to grieve the defeat of brave Peshmerga, typically portrayed as protectors of Kurdish rights, "the ruling parties introduced the image of rural women dressed in black, mourning the fate of their disappeared husbands and sons" (Fischer-Tahir, 2012: 93). Women who survived persecutions later rejected this imaginary already in early 1990s: "they organized their social lives and constructed counter-narratives (Bhabha 1990) that incorporated the complicity of former regime supporters" (*ibidem*: 94). For a gender sensitive reconstruction of the al-Anfal aftermath through women's memories see also the excellent book by Choman Hardi (2016).
[101] According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and Cluster Munition Coalition's (CMC) Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, around 1000 square kilometers in Iraq are contaminated by tons of

and disrupts access to what are considered to be the ancestor's birthplaces from time immemorial. Land and bloodline are inextricably bound in the Kurdish imaginary, and the vivid present of a torn homeland is constantly renegotiated with a collective memory of violent marginalization. The landmines issue, which restricts the individual experience of moving through an emotionally laden space, contributes to perpetuate this deep-seated sense of struggling for survival. Likewise, the Qandil Mountains lying in the north, which have long been refuge and headquarters to the PKK and are shelled by Turkish and Iranian forces regularly, renew the reality of an endless strife. To a certain extent internal and external borders are understood as fast-changing military frontlines, and new conflicts inside and beyond Kurdistan bring with them the rendition of previous traumatic events. A sense of historical continuity, therefore, reifies the narration of national redemption.

The list of examples above is helpful to make a point. Places of memory witness in pedagogical forms that dialectic of denial and resistance Abbas Vali recognizes to be the distinctive feature of Kurdish nationalism (Vali, 1998). A significant body of literature in human geography addressed how memory-making can serve precisely the purpose of forging a national self. Besides Nora's vast work on the re-articulation of French national identity in the wake of modernity and the passing of peasant societies (Nora, 2010), a large number of studies across disciplines brought into focus the performative role of memory to ground or recast a national imaginary in time and space (Gillis, 1996; Till, 1997; Atkinson & Cosgrove, 1998; Osborne, 1998; Azaryahu & KellermanBarrett, 1999; Zubrzycki, 2017). In the Kurdish case, however, the foundations of national identity are negative in the literal sense since encapsulate more the absence of recognition than some affirmative features in order to arouse a shared sense of national commonality. As explained at length in the overview on Kurdish nationalism, this is not surprising given that Kurds seized the concept of nation, to be used as semantic unifier and political vessel thereafter, as a response to the aggressive nationalisms of emergent neighbouring states during the 20th century, which had fragmented Kurdistan into exclusive national blocks. Outside pressure (i.e. the ideological assimilation of heterogeneous Kurdish tribes into the normative and territorial body of nation-states, which replaced loosen forms of imperial control) solicited Kurdish leaders to promote the idea of an equally legitimate Kurdish nation. Instead, Kurds' collective identification was in a tradition of memory emphasising ethnical self-consciousness. Kurdishness defined the common in-group identity (though with a wide spectrum of variations), but crucially not upon a political basis. Hence, the antecedent construction of Kurds as ethnos, later appropriated and politicized by Kurdish nationalists, leans on a different signification and even a different sense of place.

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unexploded antipersonnel mines and cluster munition remnants (ICBL-CMC, 2018). Such a legacy tells the different phases of a prolonged state of warfare across the country: from repression of Kurdish revolts in the 1970s, to the Iraq-Iran war throughout the 1980s, until the First Gulf War and ensuing civil war between Kurdish factions during the 1990s. A total of 13,423 mine casualties were recorded in the KRI only by the end of 2013; 41 during 2016. Despite the declining rate of victims, the psychological, social, and economic impact of landmines on affected communities is severe (Heshmati & Khayyat, 2015).

It is common knowledge that Kurds have always perceived themselves as a people from and belonging to the mountains. Topophilia towards the "forbidding mountains" (van Bruinessen, 1992) that constitute their homeland is perhaps the most powerful marker of Kurds' cultural identity (O'Shea 2004). Izady puts that affective bond into expressive words:

> "As a community, Kurds are a niche-oriented people. Their history and culture are so intertwined with the mountains that the ethnic identity of a Kurd on the plain becomes a contradiction in terms. Kurds themselves have a saying: "Level the mounts, and in a day the Kurds would be no more." (…) To a Kurd the mountain is no less than the embodiment of the deity: mountain is his mother, his refuge, his protector, his home, his farm, his market, his mate, and his only friend. This intimate man-mountain relationship shapes the physical, cultural, and psychological landscape of Kurdistan more than any other factor. Such a thorough attachment to and indivisibility from their natural environment is the source of many folk beliefs that all mountains are inhabited by the Kurds." (Izady, 2015: 188)

Romantic and mystical tales mediating the human-nature attachment are pivotal in the Kurdish mythology and found in the Taurus and Zagros mountains the transcendent source of a common ancestry. McDowall cites some of these stories:

> "Various myths exist concerning Kurdish origins. The myth that the Kurds are descended from children hidden in the mountains to escape Zahhak, a child-eating giant, links them mystically with 'the mountain' and also implies, since the myth refers to children rather than one couple, that they may not all be of one origin. A similar story suggests that they are descended from the children of slave girls of King Solomon, sired by a demon named Jasad, and driven by the angry king into the mountains." (McDowall, 2003: 4)

The rugged topography of highlands effectively protected Kurdish tribes from the incursions of hostile neighbours. Peshmerga came to be known for mastering guerrilla tactics in inaccessible terrains for the Iraqi army, and that gave to the Kurdish resistance the character of an indomitable spirit. Eyewitness accounts of Peshmerga coming down from the mountains and attacking government outposts, recalled by some of my interlocutors, are invested with an epic aura. The ideological de-legitimization by neighbouring nation-states, which tended to reduce Kurds to primitive nomads or lawless bandits living in remote areas and lacking a cultural specificity, somehow reinforced such identification[102]. Although a physical connection is now eroded by socio-economic transformations and went lost for most Iraqi Kurds, who are no longer nomadic dwellers or guerrilla fighters hiding in the mountains (with the

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[102] The Kemalist discourse in Turkey banned the words 'Kurds' and 'Kurdistan' and after Ataturk's death in 1938 began to designate Kurds as "mountain Turks" to deny them as a distinct ethnic group (McDowall, 2003: 210; Gunter, 2018: 215). Iranian policies followed suit (Strohmeier, 2003: 139).

notable exception of PKK fighters), the mountain imaginary remains an extraordinary magnet for Kurds' ethnic consciousness, and the nationalist endeavour as well. In a nutshell, "the mountain image loses nothing of its potency, for nations are built in the imagination before they are built on the ground" (*ibidem*: 3). The nationalist movement obviously capitalized on that idyllic landscape, to the extent that "much of the nationalist creation of Kurdistan depends on its perceived topographical features rather than on its inhabitants, institutions or other particularities" (O'Shea, 2004: 5), but the mountainous geography that is precious to every Kurd had in fact obstructed the supposed territorial continuity of Kurdistan and prevented pan-Kurdish integration to emerge. This fascinating paradox is pointed out well in the literature. To quote Gunther among many, "their mountains and valleys have divided the Kurds as much as they have ethnically stamped them" (Gunter, 2018: 4).

The ways of seeing world fabricate political reality. This long discussion on the geographical perceptions surrounding the Kurdish imaginary, which should be read in conjunction with the broader introduction laid out in the first chapter, is necessary to enable the reader to grasp the sense of complexity that informs the Kurdish question in Iraq before adding the oil dimension. Given a past of military occupations, forced displacements, and attempts of assimilation including the atrocious extreme of genocide, struggles over natural resources interact with a heavy set of emotions and meanings that are attached to a disputed homeland and resonate within a pan-Kurdish audience. In my conversations with KRG officials, topographical features were often presented as evidence to naturalise ethnic divisions in territorial terms. I remember one of those meetings in particular. I was sitting in a windowless office inside the MRN in Erbil. For the first time I was forbidden to use a recorder, but the ritual of drinking chai eased initial suspicion and the interview flowed pleasantly. "We are entitled to stay there" – the official with whom I was chatting cut it short when I asked about the future of Kirkuk. Then, he gave me a detailed account of the Arabization policies undertook under Saddam Hussein, when economic subsidies and land allotments were given to Arab settlers from other parts of Iraq to replace displaced Kurdish residents. Even more interestingly, he backed his argument sketching a map, on the fly. By drawing a thicker line, he insisted on the "objective fact" that the Hamrin Mountains south of Kirkuk – well below the KRI official border – delimit a "natural" separation between Kurds and Arabs:

> "These are two completely different ecosystems. Kurdistan is wooded with oaks and conifers; there you will find palm trees. It is the same with animals: we have mountain goats here. And beyond that, even our somatic features are different."[103]

Regardless of whether the comparison is accurate or not, which is irrelevant, it is important to stress instead that the natural landscape was used to convey the idea of an exact match between physical and

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[103] Interview n. 31

cultural barriers. A representative of the Kirkuk Provincial Council raised the same point during a meeting that took place some time later, in a more relaxed setting and again with the support of improvised maps[104]. A longer excerpt from that (recorded) conversation is reported as follows:

> "Oil in Kirkuk is of the highest quality because it is mixed with gas, especially in Khabbaz, which makes it very light. Oilfields are exactly in between Kurdish and Arab areas, with the Kurdish ones having much more oil. Most of Arabs living in the province came no longer than 60-70 years ago. They were not here before. Until the Hamrin Mountains it was all Kurdish land, but Kurds were not encouraged to settle south of Kirkuk because of the lack of water. The Iraqi government built irrigation canals to make this area fertile for agriculture in order to move people from Baiji, Tikrit, Mosul, and from the south. At the same time, they started displacing Kurds, Turkmens, and Assyrians. They seized the land, kicked the people out, and put everything under control of the Iraqi North Oil Company. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, they did everything they could to reduce the number of Kurds in this area. Entire villages were destroyed, with the Arabs' ones left intact."[105]

The passage suggests the junctions through which identity formation and imaginative geographies get mutually constituted. In this sense, it brings out a collective perception of alterity: deep-rooted mistrust and unsolved territorial issues keep fuelling a frontline mentality. The two interviews happened during Spring 2017, before the referendum and the resulting showdown in disputed areas. Hence, both interviewees did not confide a passing apprehension, but a long-standing state of anxiety that is tied to statelessness and exile. Both themes cast a shadow on Kurds' unfulfilled search for recognition. Literature on Kurds and Kurdistan has devoted much attention to the politics of exile, with particular reference to Kurdish diasporic communities in Western Europe (Wahlbeck, 1998; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Alinia, 2004; Emanuelsson, 2005; van Bruinessen, 2007, 2012). However, that sense of alienation from the homeland exerts a seemingly influence even on Kurds living inside the safe borders of the KRI. An adult man from Dohuk, who spent half of his life as refugee in Iran, captured the depth of that feeling in a quite incisive assertion, while sitting cross-legged on a colourful carpet inside a traditional café:

> "A Kurd is a guy who had felt alone in other cultures for centuries. He is a guy who always hid himself, always escaped from different enemies, and grew up in a place where he was always kept under control."[106]

Cultural segregation and material dispossession also entered the Kurdish imaginary on oil. Quite tellingly, Bashir Mustafa's poem in the opening associates the flame of Kirkuk - the "city of black gold"

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[104] One of these sketches can be found in Appendix II.
[105] Interview n. 37
[106] Interview n. 40

- to the "grief and rebellion" the city (which refers, by extension, to the Kurdish question) has suffered. Bearing this consideration in mind, energy disputes at the federal level and KRG oil policies are the subject matters of next paragraph.

4.2 The road to one million barrels

The geopolitical constraints arising from the landlocked position have set the bandwidth of KRG foreign policy (Mills, 2013; Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014; Natali, 2015; Romano, 2015). Caught in the middle of historic opponents of Kurdish self-determination, Iraqi Kurds have been mindful of a limited room for manoeuvre and since 2005 have pragmatically cultivated open relations with regional powers to retain (and possibly deepen) autonomy. As the KRG strategically bet on the development of the oil and gas industry, securing commercial routes and reaching the position of energy supplier became not only the path for a viable and fast-growing economy, but also the material foundation of statehood. However, the lack of direct access to outside markets through sea lines obviously penalises, if not undermines, an export-oriented oil producer because of higher fixed costs and transit agreements with third countries. In this regard, economic and infrastructural peripherality from the rest of the country accentuated a condition of physical insularity given by the rocky topography along the northern and eastern borders. The implosion of Syria and international sanctions on Iran narrowed down the suitable options for the export of hydrocarbons. In absence of alternative routes, the 970 kilometres long pipeline running from Khurmala (the northern-most dome of the super-giant oilfield in Kirkuk that has been operated by the Kurdish KAR Group since 2009) to the Fish Khabur border crossing lying in between Syria and Turkey, and from there connected through southern Anatolia to the energy terminal of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean appears to be nothing less than a lifeline. This is the reason why, while withdrawing from Kirkuk almost without firing a shot during the convulsive night of 16 October 2017, Peshmerga fought off the ISF 40 kilometres south of Fish Khabur, before reaching a truce – though a military escalation was avoided also because it would have implied violating the KRI borders[107]. Despite lobbying for a foreground position in the federal reconstitution of Iraq and taking advantage of participation in the Iraqi affairs on an equal footing, from the outset the KRG sought economic independence away from Baghdad. A bitter history of ethnic collision suggested Kurdish upper cadres and especially KDP's inner circles to set the terms of a tight energy partnership with Turkey – the only outlet available – with the purpose of maximising the hydrocarbon potential, notwithstanding Turkish repression of brethren in Bakur. That choice came with the price of deepening internal divisions since PUK has historically been close to Iran. It also untied pan-Kurdish solidarity further given that the KRG was careful in distancing its agenda from the "other" Kurdistan(s) to prove

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[107] "Iraq paramilitaries battle Kurds in push towards Turkish border oil hub", Reuters, October 24, 2017; available at: https://goo.gl/qXcBoh

willingness to not interfere in the internal affairs of neighbours[108]. Even more so, it created a condition of precarious reliance on an external patron.

This broad picture was behind the interviews I had with KRG high officials, who nevertheless took exception to an image of vulnerability. "Geography is our main adversary"[109], Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir (Head of the Department of Foreign Relations) agreed, but his reflection landed in quite the opposite conclusion. The Minister emphasized that the landlocked issue had been already broken by changes in the regional dynamics and savvy adjustments to a mercurial landscape. Different opinions on whether the KRG's political tightrope has been successful are allowed, of course. What is certain is that when Iraq plunged into ethno-sectarian turmoil after the removal of the Ba'athist autocracy the Kurdistan region was given with new credentials for neighbours and international investors. The void of power encouraged even foremost defenders of the status quo to deal separately with Erbil bypassing Baghdad[110], hard-pressed by the desire of carving new areas and axes of influence. On the other hand, the KRG lent support to those intents by acting as a counterweight in the new Iraqi experimental equilibrium while presenting itself to the international community as a "beacon of hope" in midst of chaos – a safe, stable, and business-friendly proto-state at the crossroads of the Middle East, blessed with plentiful and largely untapped natural resources. Or more concisely, the "Other Iraq", as the KRG advertises[111]. Furthermore, the KDP-PUK internal cleavage somewhat helped Iraqi Kurds to juggle a twin-tracked dialogue with both Turkey and Iran, floating between the two poles in competition. One might argue that the turbulent post-referendum scenario puts into question the reliability of such strategy of appeasement, but Minister Bakir's interpretation went towards the opposite direction again:

> "We were not expecting Iran and Turkey to be so aggressive against us because we thought we had assured our neighbours that the referendum was not against them. They were very tough with the closure of airports and airspace. However, both countries kept their consul generals here. Even more importantly, Turkey did not close the border, nor shut the pipeline. Had they did so, it would have been a disaster, but there was an understanding that the sanctions already in place were enough to send a message. After all, it was mutually beneficial because Turkey benefits from what we have:

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[108] Although the KRG policies put a distance with the rest of Kurdistan, it would be simplistic and inaccurate to ascribe the lack of pan-Kurdish nationalism to the unilateral agenda devised in Erbil. In point of fact, no Kurdish reality can lift itself out of the host country. From time to time this circumstance has resulted in divergent alliances with regional powers. The pragmatic and fluid re-composition of national movements inside such narrow space is at odds with the image of the Greater Kurdistan. Rather than the frequently evoked metaphor of toppling dominoes, Kurdish mobilizations across the region resemble more the one of communicating vessels: containers of different ideological shape and political direction, though filled with a shared sense of ethnic belonging.

[109] Interview n. 41

[110] As a former Minister noted while commenting on the growing confidence of KRG leadership: "They [regional and global powers] would appease Baghdad. They would make a phone call, but they are not waiting for permission; they are just informing". Interview n. 9

[111] See the website of the campaign at: http://www.theotheriraq.com/

oil and gas in the first place, but there are also about a thousand Turkish companies active in Kurdistan nowadays. Therefore, the pipeline remains the soft channel to keep relations open."[112]

The statement tends to exaggerate KRG's leverage vis-à-vis its immediate neighbours, at least given the uncertain financial standing and decreasing oil output capacity; it also leaves aside the overnight alternation of constructive deal-making and resentful competition between Kurdish and Iraqi counterparts on energy trade arteries. Both aspects will be addressed later on and put into the context of larger geopolitical rifts. By reading between the lines of the extract above, however, three elements can be brought to light to make the oil nationalist discourse intelligible in its very premises.

First, although the KRG has been determined to head towards its own approach for the unilateral exploitation of hydrocarbons since the unification of KDP and PUK administrations in 2006, the turning point was only achieved when in early 2014 ISIS repeatedly damaged and eventually knocked out a key section of the Iraq-Turkey pipeline (ITP) connecting the super-giant oilfield in Kirkuk (which encompasses the southern dome of Baba Gurgur, the middle one of Avana, and the adjacent fields of Bai Hassan, Khabbaz and Jambur) to the refinery in Baiji and from there back to the main conduit. Before its complete halt, the pipeline was operating at a capacity of about 550.000 bpd[113]. By that time, the bulk of oil production from the entire governorate of Kirkuk began to be shipped out of necessity through the parallel "Kurdish pipeline", which was opened in December 2013 to link Khurmala to the Turkish part of the ITP through the entry point of Fish Khabur at the northern border and was further completed with shorter ramifications to the producing fields of Taq Taq and Tawke inside KRI. The pipeline runs inside the Kurdistan region and thus created a powerful sense of unity, but the decisive push occurred when the central government, then led by Nouri al-Maliki, withheld the share of the federal budget owed to the KRG (amounting to 17% of the total) as a retaliation against the refusal to export oil through the federal State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) (Mills, 2016: 36). This was done in March 2014; in January the MNR had announced the sale of its first crude cargo from the port of Ceyhan[114], in line with previous deals signed with Ankara, and was negotiating pre-payments with major international trading houses, such as Trafigura, Glencore, Petraco, and Vitol. The central government denounced it as illegal and turned off the tap to wreck plans in Erbil: federal allocations were reduced by a half in January and then drastically stopped altogether by March[115]. Hence, any financial transfer from the centre was frozen. The KRG had to rely precisely on oil exports and local taxation in order to survive economically. The budget dispute has much animated nationalistic rhetoric

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[112] Interview n. 41

[113] "Iraq aims to increase Kirkuk oilfield output to 1 million bpd", Reuters, November 13, 2017; available at: https://goo.gl/srkjNp

[114] "Ministry of Natural Resources Announcement on Oil Export Sales", MNR, January 08, 2014; available at: https://goo.gl/hiY4q5

[115] "Exclusive: How Kurdistan bypassed Baghdad and sold oil on global markets", Reuters, November 17, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/6XEQGL

thereafter, not least because the KRG was bearing the brunt of conflict against ISIS during the same period. The first tanker loaded with over one million barrels officially left Ceyhan on May 23, with proceeds deposited into an escrow account at Turkey's state-run Halkbank and "treated as part of the KRG's budgetary entitlement"[116]. Before that, exports of unrefined petroleum (crude and condensate) trucked out the region to Turkey and on a much smaller extent Iran were limited, ranging between 30.000 and 50.000 bpd, and were not opposed in Baghdad. The pipeline scaled up the overall output capacity to approximately 300.000-400.000 bpd. Given the ISF retreat from disputed areas after the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent entrance of Peshmerga to set up a barrage against ISIS incursions, the fierce protection of the Kurdish pipeline took on the meaning of safeguarding a vested right of economic self-sufficiency, even more so under exceptional war conditions that once again were raging at the borders of the Kurdish enclave, while central government seemingly relinquished its constitutional commitments. Peshmerga took also control of energy facilities throughout the Kirkuk oilfield[117], with KDP forces occupying its western part and the PUK deployed in the eastern one. Hence, an additional bone of contention between the two ruling parties also came to rise, whereby the two legs of the KRG began confronting each other along an internal frontline in the middle of contested oilfields and pursuing separate agendas: the KDP brought in its oil service company, the KAR Group, to replace the Iraqi North Oil Company (NOC) in Bai Hassan and Avana so as to pump approximately an extra 285.000 bpd into the Khurmala-Fish Khabur conduit; despite having a much stronger power base in Kirkuk but crucially not handling the MNR oil dossier, nor the transit route running through the KDP's yellow zone, the PUK let NOC to operate the eastern fields[118]. Notwithstanding KDP-PUK tensions, the renamed 'Kurdish pipeline' came to be recognized as a symbol of national pride, beyond its strategic importance.

Second, being dependent on Turkish goodwill was deemed acceptable by President Barzani's KDP for the purpose of solidifying economic discontinuity with the rest of Iraq. Until the referendum at least, the KRG was sophisticated in not provoking Turkey into reaction while stepping up self-rule in the shadow of Iraqi fault lines. As mentioned, Erbil had no other outlet but Ankara to disengage oil exports from the Iraqi infrastructure and, therefore, spent much effort to drop Turkish suspicions about potential repercussions in the internal affairs, whereby civil war in Syria already threatened the southern Anatolian border that historically has been considered as the bulwark of Turkey's territorial integrity. The KDP, in particular, stood back from the Kurdish insurgency in northern Syria and turned a blind eye on Turkish anti-PKK raids over Qandil. Moreover, it offered Ankara the opportunity to both retain

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[116]"KRG Statement on First Oil Sales through Pipeline Export", MNR, May 23, 2014; available at: https://goo.gl/jdcGfg. With the Kurdistan Region Financial Compensation Law (n. 5/2013) the KRG had granted itself the authorization to sell oil in the event of unpaid dues from the federal government.

[117] Also the Zalah, Butmah, and Sufaiya fields north-west of Mosul were secured by Peshmerga (Mills, 2016a).

[118] "Intra-Kurdish tensions high amidst provocations and protests", Iraq Oil Report, March 17, 2017; available at: https://goo.gl/ELqtb6

a strategic presence in Iraq at a moment of deteriorating relations with the Shi'a-led governments in Baghdad, drawn into the Iranian influence, and present at home the "good face" of Kurdish politics against the PKK side. On the other side, domestic and regional factors encouraged the Turkish gradual rapprochement towards the KRG (Tol, 2014). From an energy perspective, Kurdish unexploited reserves were a seductive source for diversification in view of a rising demand, which was mainly met with Russian and Iranian supplies (Morelli & Pischedda, 2014). It is noteworthy that the KRG signed the first oil production-sharing agreements (PSA) with the Turkish companies Petoil and Genel Energy in 2002, when Saddam Hussein was still in power. The successive dealings negotiated between Barzani's KDP and Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been the backbone of the regional economy. From 2010 onwards, Turkish counterparts welcomed several times KRG delegations and President Masoud Barzani with the honours befitting a head of state and with the Kurdish flag flying alongside the Turkish and Iraqi ones[119]. This "friendship pipeline" had evolved into an even closer partnership with the 50-year long energy agreement signed in November 2013, which has not been disclosed publicly ever since[120]. It is much likely that PM Nechirvan Barzani and MNR Minister Ashti Hawrami are still the only KRG representatives with full knowledge of the terms. The deal was a milestone achievement. When the two flagship oilfields inside the region (Taq Taq and Tawke) started exporting crude in June 2009 the KRG had been forced to agree upon the federal management of sales, then marketed through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline and with all the revenues deposited into the Development Fund for Iraq (Crisis Group, 2009: 18). At the time, NOC connected both fields to the federal transportation schemes, but Baghdad refused to recognise the PSAs Erbil had signed with the IOCs operating there (DNO at Tawke; Addax Petroleum and Genel Energy at Taq Taq). The Turkish entry coupled with the Kurdish pipeline reversed the scenario in favour of Erbil. Defying Baghdad on this slippery ground, however, is not without risks. Turkey is in full capacity of breaking the thin bottleneck of the faltering Kurdish economy, which relies heavily on the neighbour not only for crude shipments but also for imports of food and goods, let alone an estimated $4 billion debt to be paid off[121].

Third, and most importantly, the considerations above highlight that achieving the full status of oil exporter has been a fundamental carrier of legitimation. Ascending as a new hub in the global energy markets, indeed, opened the front door to the international stage. During fieldwork I found this layer

of meaning, generally glossed over in most analyses on the oil game in the Kurdistan region, to be the major driver of an outward looking policy. At least from the perspective of the elites, such policy reflects a shift in the collective imaginary of oil. Historically, the Ba'athist regime left mineral resources in Kurdistan underexplored, whereas oil revenue accruing from central and southern fields provided Baghdad with the financial means to build up a vast military machine and carry on brutal repression campaigns in the north. Since the revolt against the rule of Abd Al-Karim Qasim Kurds had engaged in demonstrative attacks against the Iraqi oil infrastructures. In August 1962, Mustafa Barzani's Peshmerga blew up the Kirkuk-Baniyas pipeline (Wenner, 1963: 72). Again in 1969, this time to harm the newly established Ba'athist government, Kurds shelled IPC installations in Kirkuk (McDowall, 2003: 326). Energy facilities, even more those located in contentious areas, were a high premium target for the guerrilla to exert pressure on Baghdad, though taking care not to antagonise Western interests. However, the removal of Saddam Hussein was a watershed also in cognitive terms insofar as the appropriation of oil reserves had an impact on the symbolic production upon which a crude narrative of economic independence has been built. Interviewees from the KRG level were unanimous on this point: whilst oil had "cursed" Kurdistan for decades, since then "our oil" has become the gate through which Kurds were given a chance to achieve and guarantee national existence within a country that was turning a whole new chapter. With IOCs setting foot and locking a flow of investments onto the local economy, oil was soon translated into a symbol of national unity, earned sovereignty, international recognition, deterrence, and even citizenship. To borrow from Kapuscinski, "oil [created] the illusion of a completely changed life" (1982: 35). Tellingly, despite that internal contestation against the KDP-PUK oligarchy often takes place around oil-related issues, oppositions resort to the same resource imaginary: during meetings with representatives of anti-establishment parties I was told several times that having oil "in our hands supports our sovereignty" or "assures that there is a place for us in the future" or "will prevent Baghdad from attacking us again", with this last expectation that proved to be misplaced only a few months after given the ISF comeback in disputed areas. Rather, challengers of the KDP-PUK duopoly focus a counter-discourse on the lack of transparency and accountability in the revenue distribution and on the pervasiveness of patronage networks. The oil imaginary linking national prosperity to natural wealth is not challenged. This does not preclude marginalized and powerless groups living alongside oil wealth from developing an alternative imaginary, which sees extractivism as a source of violent expropriation. The last empirical chapter brings out such forms of grassroots resistance against the overarching narrative. Yet, for all the different political registers and positions, oil nationalism is a unifying imperative for Kurdish parties.

Recasting Kurdistan as a commodity frontier

For many newly independent countries, Iraq included, the nationalization of the petroleum industry during the 1970s put greater distance with former colonial powers. Similarly, the developmental

narrative resting upon the oil promise provided Iraqi Kurds with a political response to the persistent question of statelessness. In the first place, a bold energy stance was a card for the KRG to reach out the international community on equal footing and hold firm an external commitment to Kurdish autonomy so as to tackle vetoes of unsympathetic regional powers and, possibly, a violent resurgence of ethnic conflicts inside the country. The recognition from the outside, which echoes the sense of exile discussed in the previous paragraph, is essential for maintaining a condition of semi-statehood, let alone the quest for de-jure sovereignty. This argument clearly came out several times in the long conversation with Minister Bakir:

> "We knew the importance of oil and we adopted energy diplomacy in a way to prove ourselves internationally through this commodity. We were able to put Kurdistan on the energy map of the world thanks to that vision."[122]

The "energy map of the world" is a recurrent cartographical image in KRG statements and speeches. It is a formulation that deliberately gives back and exhibits a historical accomplishment: it envisions Kurdistan at the centre of global economic flows. Furthermore, it well exemplifies once again the importance of maps in the construction of Kurdish irredentism. After all, as Farinelli puts it, "managing reality comes through its geographical expression" (Farinelli, 2009: 29). Already in 2010, Nechirvan Barzani, then deputy leader of the KDP, defended the constitutional right to achieve independence in the energy sector by using the same image:

> "And now, the KRG is in a position that would enable it to contribute to securing the energy supplies needed by foreign countries, particularly through gas exports to Turkey and Europe. We will continue with this policy until Kurdistan has a place on the map of world's energy supplies."[123]

Studies on the KRG energy gamble usually concentrate on a language of barrels, shares, and pipelines – which certainly constitute the material and operational context of oil politics. Yet, the whole set of evaluations and assumptions informing policymaking is often neglected. A notable exception is Voller's interpretation of the unilateral oil policy laid down in Erbil. In his view, the Kurdish breakaway cannot be explained fully through the conventional 'greed' or 'grievances' theses, which are contested in the theoretical framework of the present study as well. On the contrary, Voller argues that "a better explanation (...) lies in the concept of contested sovereignty and the resultant pursuit of international legitimacy" (Voller, 2013: 68) given that the KRG leadership has been aware that without international support the fragile self-rule in the three Kurdish governorates would have been at the mercy of Baghdad, either in terms of annihilation or forced reintegration. Voller is right to point out that

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[122] *Ivi.*

[123] "Iraq's Nechirvan Barzani on KDP conference, Turkey ties, 'alliance' with PUK", Govari Gulan, December 31, 2010; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

unrecognised states are compelled to seek the favour of the international community by demonstrating their compliance to norms and practices of statehood (see also Caspersen, 2013). This is particularly true for the KRG, which rose up in 1992 as a de-facto entity under the shield of the no-fly zone enforced by Western powers. Since then, the external dimension of state-building, which buttressed the foothills of the internal one, has been given priority with the goal of avoiding the impending threat of isolation. The commitment to values of democracy, religious tolerance, and good governance, the remembrance of ethnic cleanings and acts of genocide in the public discourse, and not least the guarantee of stable and reliable energy supplies should be all read in that spirit. While in the region I had the impression that even my presence as researcher, though potentially inconvenient given the issues at stake, was welcomed for the same reason. Simply put, better to keep the world engaged in Kurdistan than being left alone. In this sense, striving for inserting the petroleum industry into the regional fabric has had a paramount political value prior to any financial reward (Voller, 2013: 78).

Indeed, external legitimation is the cornerstone to which the KRG has directed energy diplomacy. Apart from being an essential partner on the ground for the US-led international coalition to counter the ISIS offensive in 2014, Erbil felt anxious to prove foreign investors that oil shipments to the global markets were rock-solid and entirely lawful, as well as that integrating the hydrocarbon reserves located in disputed Makhmour, Kirkuk, and Nineveh into the KRG energy grid was not exclusively due to force majeure. An excerpt of an interview with Karwan Jamal Tahir, the KRG High Representative in the UK and deputy Head of the Department of Foreign Relations reconstructs that position:

> "Had we not had that oil, had we not developed that industry, it would have been very difficult to survive. We fully and firmly committed ourselves to a federal, democratic, pluralistic, and free Iraq. We handed our hand to Iraqis and draft a good Constitution for all the components living in Iraq. It seemed us that our fate was within Iraq since we don't have international support. Unfortunately, at the end of the day we found to be more Iraqis than the other Iraqis. (…) Iraq does not have an oil and gas law. The legislation is from the 1970s, the period of the nationalisation of the oil industry, which is not investment friendly. According to the Constitution, each province can have its own laws on matters falling outside Article 110, which sets the exclusive powers of the federal government. In 2005 Iraq was still mired in chaos, so we couldn't wait for Baghdad and we started developing the oil and gas sector. We started from scratch but at the right time and we encouraged IOCs to bring their capitals. We exercised a constitutional right."[124]

Until 2009 the High Representative was senior adviser to the MNR, where a handful of people set the whole process into motion. Therefore, I asked him to detail the early phases and the expectations he had at the time. He stressed that Iraqi federalism had been emptied soon of its contents, as

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[124] Interview n. 39

demonstrated by persistent violations of constitutional provisions: not only obstructionism in complying with Article 140, which was supposed to settle the administrative future of disputed areas through local referenda in a secure timeframe, but also the non-delivery of the due share of weapons and budget to Peshmerga, compensations for al-Anfal persecutions, and once having reached heightened tensions on oil issues the failure of oil-for-budget agreements[125] to resume fiscal transfers towards the region. On the contrary, energy decentralization was acknowledged as a constitutional right, envisaged by the combination of articles 110, 112 and 115 regulating regional competences for the development of oil and gas potential. In this perspective, revenue sharing agreements came into the spotlight as the ultimate mechanisms for correcting historical inequalities and balancing federal ties. On this point, the High Representative emphasised how the MNR had stated several times that the additional revenue extracted by producing fields would have been distributed between regional and federal treasuries in line with the general criteria set out in Article 112. Therefore, any economic improvement in Kurdistan would have enriched Iraq as a whole.

My talks with senior government members followed the same script without exception, regardless of party affiliation[126]: the evidence of bad faith in Baghdad was juxtaposed to the constructive and law-abiding attitude that the KRG, instead, had maintained despite navigating through much troubled waters. The Constitution, drafted before the eyes of US officials, was always in the foreground as a holy text. Having also a look to the MNR communication strategy, it is hardly an exaggeration to argue that reassurances on the legality of KRG's prerogatives in the oil and gas sector were primarily addressed to the external audience of private buyers operating in the energy markets. Suffice it to say that quite often MNR press releases are first published in English or to notice the high significance attached to the annual CWC Kurdistan-Iraq Oil and Gas Conference[127] usually held in London, with top KRG members and oil majors attending. After all, the international standing of the region basically comes down to its attractiveness as a new energy frontier to be added to the portfolio of IOCs and the success rate returned to investors. The steady centralisation of contracting and managerial competences within the MRN, the offer of more favourable investment conditions, the bypass of Iraqi infrastructures and SOMO's mediation to export and market crude, and not least the fortification of the regional perimeter

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[125] By way of example, see: "MNR: Setting the Record Straight on Oil Export and Revenue so that the People of Kurdistan Can Judge for Themselves", MNR, August 20, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/VERg5Q

[126] Although relevant variations can be found in the KPD and PUK positions with regard to federal relations with the central government, it should be noted the consistency of the oil discourse over time and along the KRG political spectrum. The then PM of the KRG and senior PUK member Barham Salih said in 2010: "Some look at the Oil and Gas Law as a Kurdish demand. But let me tell my Iraqi brother in Basra and my people in Baghdad, al-Ramadi, and other places, that seven years after the fall of the regime, our oil production and exports continue to be very low. (…) We are producing 100,000 barrels per day and these are being exported. This is the oil of the Iraqis and not our oil. It belongs to all Iraqis. The revenues are not deposited in Kurdistan's account but in the Iraqi treasury. Each barrel of oil that is not exported is a loss for Iraq." see "Iraqi Kurdistan Region PM discusses government formation, oil issue", Al Iraqiya, August 12, 2010; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

[127] Here is the link of the event: https://www.cwckiog.com/

against any threat that might disrupt the reliability of oil flows were motivated on this basis. It is in this light that after the 2013 milestone arrangement with the state-backed Turkish Energy Company (TEC) the KRG tried to keep momentum and raised the bar to the ambitious goal of reaching a production capacity of 1 million bpd by 2015[128]. MNR Minister Ashti Hawrami, who was both architect and executor of the plan, made clear the rationale behind that figure while addressing the 2013 European Energy Summit in Istanbul: "nowhere in the world does 1 million barrels per day remain stranded"[129]. Hawrami returned to this matter one year on while giving a speech – in English, "the oil language" – at the 2014 MERI Forum in Erbil within a session on federal relations. Even though everything that happened before the referendum seemingly belongs to another political phase, his intervention still delineates the geopolitical profile of the KRG in a very explicit manner. On that occasion, Hawrami revisited the path made since 2006, when he had found a backwater region, to that moment, one step closer to lay the foundations of economic self-sufficiency. He spoke of decentralisation as a guarantor of Iraqi unity, rather than a source of fragmentation. He also tied federal coexistence to "a genuine revenue sharing". Finally, he touched upon two related aspects discussed in these pages, namely the partnership with Turkey and the vital necessity of securing an energy corridor:

> "Let me tell you – Turkey needs Kurdistan, perhaps at least as much as we need Turkey. That is a strategic relationship we both recognized. We are working as partners on economic cooperation and on oil exports and that is important to us. (...) Turkey spends 60-70 billion on energy supplies, almost the entire budget of Iraq. It is a big market for us. During recent events of ISIS, coming to the region, everybody expected the deterioration of a lot of things and certain things have happened. But I am glad to say that oil export remained resilient. We have some 60% increase in exports actually, since the first bullets were fired in Kurdistan. And this is significant in order to increase the production and export throughout. (...) When there is oil, it will flow."[130]

Exporting 1 million bpd would mean to equal the production level of Colombia and being ranked among the top twenty oil producing countries, ahead of suppliers such as Oman, UK, Azerbaijan, and Indonesia. Hence, even without a formal recognition of statehood, coming closer to that target is seen as the strongest assurance for the long-term acquisition of an international status. Therefore, Hawrami's consideration was not naïve at all: since "petroleum is one the most fundamental building blocks of twentieth century hydrocarbon capitalism" (Watts, 2001: 189) or "the lifeblood of the world's industrial economies" (Yergin, 2011: ?), and only a handful of exporters meet the insatiable thirst for energy, keeping oil flowing is an imperative that undergirds the international order. This is chiefly demonstrated

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[128] Speech by Minister Hawrami at the European Energy Summit, MNR, October 31, 2013; available at: https://goo.gl/ecwCmX

[129] "Update 1-Iraqi Kurds say new oil pipeline to Turkey to start soon", Reuters, June 19, 2013; available at: https://goo.gl/S5Hd2V

[130] Intervention of Ashti Hawrami, MERI Forum 2014, November 06, 2014; available at: https://goo.gl/Nt5LKm

by the longstanding US commitment to the free movement of oil in the Middle East, set out in 1979 in the so-called "Carter Doctrine"[131] but already a guiding principle of the US "twin pillars" policy towards Saudi Arabia and Iran since the British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf in late 1960s; it is an enduring strategic principle that eventually advised Washington to send boots on the Iraqi ground in 1991 and again in 2003, with the dire consequences dramatically exposed by an almost decade long military occupation. Despite peak-oil or post-oil narratives, the global hunt for oil supplies underlines the logic of accumulation of an industrial paradigm that is still based on fossil fuels.

However, the "conundrum" of a shrinking resource base, eroded by the gradual exhaustion of conventional[132] fields, and the parallel increase in the demand of global poles of production crafted a "new geography of investment" in recent years (Bridge & Le Billon, 2017). From the side of energy investors and operators, two trends describe such renewed competition over resource and market access: i) "seeking to access conventional oil in unconventional locations", typically discoveries of offshore reservoirs; and ii) "turning to unconventional resources in accessible and relatively stable jurisdictions", such as oil shale and tar sand deposits in Canada to give one pertinent example (ibidem:. ?). Yet, the exploitation of deepwater drillings and unconventional sources comes with higher production costs and side issues – from legal controversies about extraction from seabed in international waters (well illustrated by the debate on oil explorations in the Arctic) to the associated environmental hazards (the disastrous blowout of the Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico in

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[131] President Carter made explicit the doctrine that bears his name in January 1980 by warning that any threat to oil seaborne trade in the Middle East would have been considered a threat to the US national interests. Zbigniew Brzezinski, then National Security Adviser, formulated that passage as follows: "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force" (State of the Union Address, January 21, 1980). In fact, the preservation of the status quo in the Middle East was a strategic principle that President Truman had already laid down in 1947 as a corollary of the programmatic support to "the free peoples of the world", at a time when the two power-blocs of the Cold War were thickening (Address of the President to Congress, March 12, 1947). However, the emphasis placed by Carter was prompted by the series of watershed events that in 1979 changed the rules of engagement with the region: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian revolution, the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamist opponents to the House of Saud, and the start of Saddam Hussein's presidency in Iraq with the bloody purge among the higher ranks of the Ba'ath Party.

[132] The line between conventional and unconventional sources is drawn according to the method of extraction, which depends on the porosity of the reservoir rock where oil is trapped into millions of tiny droplets. Conventional oil is extracted through traditional drilling techniques from large underground formations whereby the differential pressure lets oil to be pumped up to the surface with a vertical rig, sometimes by injecting water or gas to increase pressure in the reservoir as the amount of reserves decline over time. Instead, unconventional oil is obtained through new and usually more expensive technologies, such as horizontal drilling or hydraulic fracking, to capture oil when dispersed in more porous sediments. The type of geological formations has effects on the chemical properties of crude: whereas conventional oils are lighter with an API gravity above 25°, unconventional ones are heavier and with a greater sulfur content ("sour oils") that has to be removed through refinement. As a rule of thumb, the lighter and the sweeter the oil, the higher the commercial value. By way of background, Kurdish oil ranges from the excellent quality of the light crude produced at the dwindling Taq Taq field (around 48° API) to the much heavier one of Shaikan (below 29° API) (Mackertich & Samarrai, 2015).

2010 is a case in point) or with regard to unconventional crude the lower quality of extracted material that implies longer refinement processes to obtain petroleum products. Within this dynamic geography of investment at the crossroads of demand and supply, the KRI emerges as exception, this being a significant onshore and conventional source of hydrocarbons that was left behind at the margins of the Iraqi energy sector for historical reasons. Hence, the successful attempt of recasting Kurdistan as an uncharted commodity frontier for the entropic social metabolism[133] of industrial societies.

Jason Moore remodelled the concept of commodity frontier to explain how the expansionary drive of capitalism restructures the geographical space at the corners of the world-system (Moore, 2000). Based on Wallerstein's theory on the spatial division of labour in the globalised capitalist economy (1989), Moore argues that the commodification of nature is the essential mode of capital accumulation that had replaced the earlier "trading-post imperialism" in feeding industrial cores upon the availability of resource-rich and powerless peripheries. Frontier is not as the same as border. If the latter draws a fixed partition between equal entities on a contiguous political canvas such as territorially bounded states, the former instead delineates a moving area of encounter and incorporation that stands in-between different spatialites. Not necessarily a buffer area or contentious borderland, the frontier is seen as "a diffuse zone of transition" (Korf & Raeymaekers, 2013: 12) or a relational space (Barney, 2009: 146). As highlighted by Eilenberg, "the frontier concept has a long and ambiguous history and has been widely applied (often unreflectively) as a heuristic device to describe processes of transition, exclusion and inclusion, both physically and figuratively" (Eilenberg, 2014: 161). In this sense, the frontier was the ultimate heuristic device of Western colonial projection. In his discussion on the construction of wilderness, Cronon describes it as the edge of a "savage world at the dawn of civilisation" (1996: 16), situating its conventional usage in the folds of an epistemological separation between a civilised space and 'terra nullius' – an empty, unruly, and disordered space awaiting for a benevolent intruder. Hence, Moore's commodity frontier sheds light on the colonial expansion of capitalist modes of production and knowledge systems in 'virgin' (i.e. underexploited) areas, with the transformation of land, labour and rule that comes with it. Drawing a parallel with Turner's overused frontier thesis (1893), just as the continuous movement from east to west of European settlers in North America was portrayed as the epic conquest of wild lands inhabited by native communities to be grabbed, it might be said that the capture of raw materials and workforce in remote areas of the globe epitomises the forward and equally violent movement of capitalism. In the same vein, Bridge claims that post-industrial narratives of "resource triumphalism" reconstitute often-distant places in commodity supply zones, conceived as remote 'badlands' denied of any socio-ecological and historical specificity, through a regulative

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[133] Mentioned in the Capital with reference to the relations between humans and nature "as mediated by the labor process" (Healy & Walter, 2013: 38), social metabolism has become a key concept in ecological economics. It conceptualizes the economy "in terms of flows of energy and materials" (Martinez-Alier, 2009: 64) and draws attention on how industrial societies reproduce themselves by demanding increasing amounts of raw materials (see also Fischer-Kowalski & Haberl, 1993).

mechanism of socio-spatial ordering that reinforces the covert material practices undergirding consumer societies (Bridge, 2001).

In fact, the idea of a resource frontier – "a space of desire" (Tsing, 2003: 5102) – is as old as capitalism itself. Enclosure, predation, and exploitation of land take center stage in Marxist theory on the primitive accumulation of capital (cf. Harvey, 2003)[134]. Political ecologists, in particular, have sought to answer empirically how frontier capitalism resulted into comparable patterns of ecological degradation and dispossession of indigenous communities, from the Amazon (Hecht & Cockburn, 2010; Schmink & Wood, 2010) to Southeast Asia (Barney, 2009; Tsing, 2011), from the Niger Delta (Watts, 2004) to the Arctic (Nuttall, 2010). Moore's notion is built upon the same terrain but more accurately concentrates on the underlying commodity chain, which is to say the "network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity" (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1986: ?). As these processes operate transnationally, tracking the commodity chain allows extricating the links between actors and stakeholders at multiple levels without constricting the analysis to the state level. The ensuing methodological advantage for the present study is illustrated in section 4.3 below. Another element should be added. The coercive disengagement of nature from local ecologies and livelihoods at the frontiers of capitalism, typically occurring through land grabbing and extractive industries, runs in parallel to the replacement and replenishment of local systems of knowledge and rule (cf. Tsing, 2011). That means that "as new types of resource commodification emerge, institutional orders are sometimes undermined or erased outright, and sometimes "taken apart" and then reinterpreted, reinvented, and recycled" (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018: 2). Commodity enclosures do not only extract economic value out of appropriated land and alienate that value to local population, but also ends up overturning the entire set of relational structures that are embedded in land, from property rights to models of governance. Rasmussen and Lund provided an excellent overview of such "frontier dynamics". In their understanding, frontier spaces "are transitional, liminal spaces in which existing regimes of resource control are suspended" (*ibidem*: 1). The spatial dynamics occurring within "dissolve existing social orders

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[134] For instance, Rosa Luxemburg's diagnosis seems to be still appropriate to highlight that the unrestricted exploitation of nature is a material requirement of capital accumulation: "Thus, if it were dependent exclusively, on elements of production obtainable within such narrow limits, its present level and indeed, its development in general would have been impossible. From the very beginning, the forms and laws of capitalist production aim to comprise the entire globe as a store of productive forces. Capital, impelled to appropriate productive forces for purposes of exploitation, ransacks the whole world, it procures its means of production from all corners of the earth, seizing them, if necessary by force, from all levels of civilization and from all forms of society. The problem of the material elements of capitalist accumulation, far from being solved by the material form of the surplus value that has been produced, takes on quite a different aspect. It becomes necessary for capital progressively to dispose ever more fully of the whole globe, to acquire an unlimited choice of means of production, with regard to both quality and quantity, so as to find productive employment for the surplus value it has realized. The process of accumulation, elastic and spasmodic as it is, requires inevitably free access to ever new areas of raw materials in case of need, both when imports from old sources fall or when social demand suddenly increases." (Luxembourg 1913, quoted in Moore 2000: 430).

– property systems, political jurisdictions, rights, and social contracts" and territorialize new institutional arrangements at the same time.

Thus complemented and read in connection with the digression on the evolution of energy markets, the concept of commodity frontier is therefore quite helpful to understand how oil and gas reserves vested the KRG of sought-after qualities for oil corporations and importers. The KRG encouraged at a steady pace the opening up of a Kurdish frontier inside the collapsed Iraqi state with the purpose of outsourcing political autonomy to global market demands, though with internal backlashes that will be discussed later on. It should be also borne in mind that economic investors are certainly more permissive and less rigid than state chancelleries in engaging with sub-state communities directly: at most, strained political relations with central institutions are part of a risk investment assessment and may even ease profitable opportunities for business operators. As far as the Kurdish case is concerned, however, the referendum on independence showed the fatal misjudgement about eagerness and readiness of profit-oriented players in supporting autonomy to the extreme of full secession. After all, dangerous overconfidence on external patrons has been typical throughout the history of Iraqi Kurds (cf. McDowall, 2003). Anyway, the belief that autonomy literally passes through energy routes is well consolidated in the mindset of regional elites and to such an extent that is much likely to steer the KRG approach in the near future, despite the recent acute backfire. Notwithstanding a number of alarming indicators both in terms of debt solvency and regional alliances, it is quite surprising that the Kurdish establishment exhibits overconfidence about the provisional nature of the current situation. Nevertheless, following the interpretation set above, the KRG could not communicate differently given the need to be recognized as an indispensable hub on the energy map.

Petro-populism and nationhood

Ideologies are not just ideas, but organised sets of ideas and beliefs to read the world in all its facets, integrate a collective, imagine pathways to reach higher goals, and imply corresponding actions – in other words sustain worldviews and set forth principles of political action. Therefore, ideologies are indispensable benchmarks for the study of politics insofar as are tied to cognitive experiences, socialisation processes, behaviours, and reactions. This paragraph is a reflection on the ideological discourse developed by the KRG elites, who grounded a narrative of national redemption on the abundance of natural endowments. This teleological imaginary was meant to justify oil nationalism as the shelter of Kurdish existence and mobilise popular consent around the state-building endeavour. From the KDP angle, it also served the purpose of gathering favour to Masoud Barzani's undisputed leadership. Beyond instrumental reasons, however, the framing of the petroleum industry as driver of reconstruction and source of well-being for the people of Kurdistan internalised a deeper set of assumptions about the right model of development to pursue. The vision opposed by Syrian Kurds,

who staunchly rejected the commodification of natural resources in the Social Contract underpinning the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, witnesses that resource imaginaries are mobile, contingent, and contested constructs inside the constellation of Kurdish communities. The concept of extractive imperative (Arsel, Hogenboom, & Pellegrini, 2016) appears to condense well the neo-liberal orientation of the KRG's political economy. Described as a "broadened, deepened and self-sustained form of extractivism" driven by the expansion of the commodity frontier (*ibidem*: 2), it underlines three ideological positions that are central in the developmental plans of many resource-based economy worldwide: i) the belief that extraction is the unavoidable initial stage for economic growth; ii) the identification of the state as the proper level of governance and chosen actor for regulating extractive industries in particular and the economy in general; iii) poverty reduction as a policy priority. The same ideological elements, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to KRG's oil nationalism. Harnessing the vast hydrocarbon reserves and attracting foreign investors were seen as fuel and propeller respectively in order for an impoverished and neglected region to take off. Diversification in other sectors came out belatedly when the drop in oil prices hit the nerves of an already refashioned rentier economy, while exceptional cash windfalls replaced social programmes with a makeshift and patrimonial welfare. In fact, the dream of the oil bonanza turned soon into a fairy tale for most Kurds, "and like every fairy tale [into] a bit of a lie" to use again Kapuscinski's words. Booming double-digit growth and unbridled urbanization, which explicitly wished to replicate the "Dubai model", was betrayed by a rough downturn and rising social inequalities just as quickly. I will return later on some of these aspects.

If we go along with classic definitions of state, the exercise of "monopoly of coercion and extraction within a given territory" (Smith, 1991: 14) is the lowest common denominator. Extraction of resources can be taken quite literally here. I made it clear throughout the research that resource sovereignty has had a fundamental imprint on Kurdish self-determination in Iraq. It is worth noting here that the KRG tried to reorient the very notion of citizenship on the basis of the extractive imperative. A case is point is the Oil and Gas Law of the KRI (n. 22/2007) approved by the Kurdistan National Assembly on 6 August 2007 that paved the way to IOCs. The final provisions foreseen that a share of revenue shall be allocated for special purposes to the benefit, *inter alia*, of all citizens of Kurdistan, future generations, and the families of martyrs[135]. These general principles of revenue management were delineated in full in an explanatory memorandum dated October 2006, which recognizes "special moral obligations that the Kurdistan Region's petroleum wealth places on the KRG"[136]. Specifically, the memorandum illustrates that a percentage of approximately twenty percent is to be permanently dedicated by law to the following "non-negotiable" areas:

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[135] Oil and Gas Law of the Kurdistan Region - Iraq, Law No. (22), 2007; available at: https://goo.gl/tK9MkD; see chapter 17th and art. 57 in particular.

[136] Explanatory Memorandum for the Draft Petroleum Act of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, KRG Council of Ministers, October 22, 2006, p. 9; available at: https://goo.gl/EtRkGQ

"An annual cash dividend for citizens of the Kurdistan Region; a special fund for the future to ensure that the Kurdistan Region has income when the petroleum resources of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq are in decline; a dividend for citizens who suffered greatly under the previous Iraqi regime; funds to support the requirements of the Kurdistan Region's ethnic and religious minorities to provide their own social, cultural and governmental services; and funds to restore the natural environment of the Kurdistan Region."[137]

Therefore, creating a legislative framework for governing petroleum resources independently from Iraqi central authorities went hand in hand with the attempt of re-negotiating the profile of citizenship. The entitlement to a share of the oil income to be put "straight into the pocket of the citizen" (the memorandum leaves no room for interpretation) is a striking example since translates oil into a *natural* element of the nation. In so doing, oil becomes a discursive frame implicated in the articulation of national identity, with actual effects beyond mere interests or the purported goal of poverty alleviation. Whatever the reception of this attempt, the KRG has much indulged in the promotion of what I would call petro-populism, an ideological scheme that encouraged a perverse cycle of massive public spending and rent-seeking practices.

The juxtaposition of 'petro' and 'populism' begs for explanation, even more so as the prefix does not dispel the ambiguity surrounding the latter concept and its negative connotation in the common usage. Indeed, the multifaceted and chameleonic character of populism, its heterogeneity over time and across space, makes it difficult to agree upon an unequivocal definition (Tarchi, 2013): whether a weak ideological manifesto (Mény & Surel, 2000; Zanatta, 2002; Mudde, 2004) or a political regime (Germani, 1978; Mair, 2002) or a political style or mentality (Canovan, 1982, 1999; Taguieff, 2002) there is no consensus on how to deal with the broad inventory of empirical phenomena that have been variously typified as populist[138]. It has been observed that such interpretive discordance resulted in the proliferation of a catch-all label of uncertain content and reduced analytical sharpness (Chiapponi, 2012). This notwithstanding, efforts to find common traits have been made. Most notably, Tarchi (2013) distinguishes three core features: i) the idealisation of the people as a pure, homogeneous and organic community that is morally superior to its various components; ii) the opposition against a number of enemies to be ousted; iii) a message of reassurance to heal the wounds inflicted upon the community. These attributes keep together a side of protest (the reaction against the moral decay or social disintegration of a natural order) and a side of identity (the reinstatement of a common good and its custodians in the rightful place). Hence, populists sense community as a cohesive and undifferentiated totality, regardless of class or ideological divisions; instead, the individuals that are not in line with the values upon which the community is traditionally built are represented as threats to its

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[137] Ibidem, p. 5.
[138] For a more comprehensive and accurate overview of the concept see Chiapponi (2012).

unity and integrity – be they a ruling elite that betrayed the popular mandate, immigrants, conspirators of various kinds, or social segments inciting class struggle (cf. *ibidem*). Yet, the *people* is not a given, but a fictional plural entity that cannot be observed empirically and, moreover, that abstracts the whole for one of its part, a particular group. Although void of semantic density, constructing the people is the prime rhetorical act to mobilise masses and instil a feeling of brotherhood, in both democratic and autocratic settings. Given the many different referents it may have, the promiscuous appeal to the people is therefore object of intense fighting.

What does the "people of Kurdistan" in the KRG discourse stand for? And subsequently, who are regarded as the legitimate carriers of authority and who others are left out? To begin with the first question, people does not stand for the demos – the sovereign basement of the polity from which political legitimacy ensues. Rather, it appeals to the ethnos – a timeless national community that has firm roots in an ethnically defined homeland, relies upon forms of mechanical solidarity, and needs to be protected against enemies at the doorstep. In this terms, the primacy of the people leans on a plebiscitary, if not caesarist, vision of representation that places national destiny on the shoulders of the two hegemonic parties – KDP and PUK. In fact, the KRG discourse might be considered populist only in the limited sense of a symbolic register to stabilise leadership. As it is described in depth in the next chapter, the rule established by Barzani and Talabani's clans more properly resembles a demagogic autocracy taking tentative steps towards democratization. This makes it incompatible with the concept of populism in principle since the will of the people claimed in authoritarian regimes is purely cosmetic and not an effective check on the rulers. As Canovan puts it, "populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself" (1999: 3), despite its outspoken illiberal vocation has led some scholars to associate it with peronism and other so-called national-populist regimes in Latin America (Germani, 1978).

Why then I am proposing petro-populism as the adequate key to interpret oil nationalism in the KRI? In answering this question, it is necessary to take into account the other side of the equation – 'petro'. Terry Karl (1997) explained the malaise of boom and bust cycles typically suffered by petro-states by looking at the ways in which the dependence on oil exports "moulds the state". Focusing on the case of "Venezuela's *democracia pactada*", she pointed out the all-embracing impacts that the "overwhelming incentives" generated by the influx of petrodollars are wielded over institutions and behaviours within them. What Karl describes as *petrolization* is far-reaching: it redesigns the decision-making apparatus, generates "specific types of social classes, organised interests, and patterns of collective action", and produces "a distinctive type of institutional setting" (ibidem: ?). In short, petroleum not only alters the developmental strategy, but also affects society at every level and to the extent of rebalancing the very structure of the state – from the loci of authority to its symbolic images. It is easy to guess that the overall effect of petrolization is unfortunate: petro-states are equated to the image of modern King Midas, dying of starvation because of their greedy appetite for black gold. I have already reviewed the

debate about the so-called paradox of plenty (which also gives the title to Karl's book). However, drawing attention to the institutional metamorphosis (though degeneration would be probably nearer to the mark) triggered by the reliance on oil revenues sheds light on the innermost ideological layer of the matter: the fetishization of petroleum in modern societies, which keeps fuelling mighty fantasies of power and wealth. The concept of commodity fetishism comes from Marx's critique of value-form: commodities are not given with a price tag corresponding to their intrinsic value-use; rather, the exchange value objectifies a hierarchy of valorisations that is no longer attached to the physical properties of commodities. The theory of value is a pillar of classical economics, as reminded by Adam Smith's famous comparison of water and diamonds. Marx argues that social relations of production are obscured in the process of commodification: commodities cease to exist as products of labour and are "endowed with a life of their own" (?). They are turned into fetishes. This argument is implicit in the discussion on the social construction of natural resources in chapter II. Taussig (2010) made it explicit in a remarkable anthropological inquiry on the everyday rituals through which the symbolism of the devil is invoked by landless peasants in the sugarcane plantations in the Cauca Valley and tin miners around Oruro in Bolivia with the hope of getting increases in production (and consequently in their wages)[139]. Likewise, several scholars have pointed out the mysticism embodied in petroleum-derived products. Fernando Coronil's (1977) ethnography of the Venezuelan state along the bumpy road of oil-led "magical" transformation during the 1970s is a prominent and widely cited example. Watts recalls "Coronil's claim that oil illustrates the importance and the mystification of natural resources in the modern world" to contrast the "fetishist qualities" bestowed upon oil (2004: 53): a coveted treasure to kick-start development and achieve unprecedented power ("a harbinger of El Dorado") on one hand; a deceptive and evil temptation that curses anyone who touches it on the other hand ("the devil's excrement", as famously stated by Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso, the Venezuelan co-founder of OPEC). However, such imaginaries do not come into being at the frontiers of capitalist expansion as such, in producing areas craving for economic growth. In fact, extractive peripheries diffract (though with particular cultural angles) the modes of thinking sowed by capitalist cores. Huber contends that the "American way of life", with its exceptionalist hubris and the imagination of free spaces, is constructed through a repertoire of key symbols (open roads, cars, and gasoline stations) that presuppose "access to and control over cheap gasoline as a natural, commonsensical right" (Huber, 2009). He therefore suggests that the seemingly endless consumption of fossil fuels has been profoundly implicated in

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[139] Taussig interprets devil-beliefs not as manifestations of "desire for material gain", but rather as a collective opposition against the proletarisation of indigenous communities and the process of alienation it arouses. In other words, the reinterpretation of esoteric symbols is a reaction to the destructive forces that supplanted traditional livelihoods and belief system: "the devil represents not merely the deep-seated changes in the material conditions of life but also the changing criteria in all their dialectical turmoil of truth and being with which those changes are associated – most especially the radically different concepts of creation, life, and growth through which the new material conditions and social relations are defined" (2010: 17).

shaping the imaginative geography of nationhood, as noted previously with reference to the Carter doctrine. Taken to an extreme both the cult of individual mobility and the openness of the multilateral trading system, which represents respectively a core attribute of the American self and a durable postulate of the US strategic projection overseas, ideally date back to Edwin Drake's first oil discovery in Pennsylvania in 1859. From early oil wildcatters to the latter-day "Drill, baby, drill!" Republican slogan, the history of petroleum and the US political and cultural trajectory are inextricably bound together. These few examples from the leading industrial pole tell us that the influence of "petrocultures" (Wilson, Carlson, & Szeman, 2017) on contemporary social imaginaries has been pivotal throughout the 20th century. Although living in energy intensive societies this influence frequently goes unnoticed; it remains hidden in the commodity chain. The petroleum culture we live in makes us oblivion of the systematic presence of petroleum products in everyday life and dissociates commodification processes from consumption patterns (Black, 2014). Despite its fetishistic qualities and mimetic manifestations, petroleum also triggers a dazzling symbolic universe that mesmerises and seizes political visions.

Here we close the loop. In my view, petro-populism is one possible outcome of such interaction. More precisely and applied to the present study, petro-populism denotes an ideological scheme that inserts oil wealth into the re-imagining of the nation, provides a sense of organic unity between natural entitlements and national ethos, and indeed tightens the manifested destiny of the community upon a 'gift of nature'. In such a manner, it projects a solution to the overarching Kurdish question insofar as it pledges to solve the issue of statelessness and, moreover, brings a reconciling message against the perils of modernisation, though the ramifications of hydrocarbon exploitation actually engendered even more severe forms of social exclusion. On the surface petro-populism appears to be a top-down discursive tool in the hands of the oligarchy, but it actually fosters a widespread cross-class mindset that channels political competition and social demands. Even though Kurdish factions are not in full agreement about the way the oil and gas industry should be managed, the extractive imperative is not disputed. Therefore, the arbitrary choice of making (or not) Kurdistan an oil-supply zone and its socio-economic implications disappear from view. It also renders invisible the fact that oil wealth is dis-embedded from the local context and tied, instead, to transnational capital. Kurdistan is imagined as "blessed" *because* of its natural resources. As a KRG high official reminded me: "if the Greater Kurdistan were united politically, it would be the richest state in the Middle East by virtue of its copious raw materials"[140]. Although such patriotic argument is rooted in the popular imagination as well, this is not to say that petro-populism was successful or unchallenged. In fact, it has been resisted by large sections of the population, though incapable of unseating those in power.

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[140] Interview n. 17

The same ideological dimension features prominently in the literature on resource nationalism and petro-states in Latin America, which intercepted most of scholarly attention on these issues. Out of a comparison between Ecuador and Bolivia, Perrault and Valdivia emphasize: "political economy and cultural politics are inseparable in resource conflicts, as contests over the distribution of rents and the objectives of national economic policy are infused with struggles over the meanings of development, citizenship and the nation itself" (2010: 697). Valdivia (2008) termed *petro-citizenship* to illustrate how petroleum in Ecuador not only defines the subterranean properties of the territorial state and consequently guides its economic aspirations, but also delimits the perimeter of subject formation since rationalities of resource governance regulate relations between institutions and citizens. Chapter 2 includes a number of studies addressing the reproduction of spatial identities through energy production (or consumption, as Huber's outlook on the "lifeblood" of American myths brings to mind). Back again to the Kurdish case, it should be noted that the framing of oil as national good harkens back to a collective memory of oppression. In the memorandum of the Oil and Gas Law cash dividends are linked to the hardship suffered by "the many Kurdistanis whose lives were unjustly damaged as a result of the genocide, war and terrorism of the Saddam regime"[141]. Even more than a promise of future prosperity, oil wealth is conjured up in terms of restoration of violated rights. Whereas the final version softened the passage mentioned above (which remained dead letter in the same way as many other cardinal provisions of the document), the proposal of delivering a monthly cheque of about $500 to $1000 to every family in Kurdistan was showcased again by PM Nechirvan Barzani during the 2013 parliamentary elections campaign, at a time when the KDP was already criticized in public for the accumulation of revenues in the party coffers[142], and on several other occasions. Again intentions were a long way separated from actual deeds, but endurance and grip of that electoral trope show how deep the advent of extractivism had entered the Kurdish belief system, within a few years. I will point out in the following chapters that such act of rewriting belonging to the national community from above was generative of mechanisms of social control.

To sum up the considerations made in the couple of sub-paragraphs above, from the perspective of an oil-fed national imaginary the toxic confrontation with central government upon energy issues can be intuitively understood as old-aged antagonism between irreconcilable nationalisms, locked in a knife-edge stalemate. I am focusing here on the Kurdish side of the fence, of course, and it is not my intention to assess if accusations of political sabotage from one side or another are baseless or truthful, in whole or in part. Rather, I hope to offer a persuasive interpretation of KRG's oil nationalism. I argue that petro-populism is the internal counterpoint of the outward orientation of energy policies, in endless

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[141] Explanatory Memorandum for the Draft Petroleum Act of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, KRG Council of Ministers, October 22, 2006, p. 9; available at: https://goo.gl/EtRkGQ

[142] "Ruling, opposition parties use oil as 'weapon' in Iraq's Kurdistan region polls", Hawlati, September 08, 2013; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

pursuit of external legitimation. In both cases, ownership and control over oil resources mediate Kurds' attachment to the homeland, or rather contribute to territorialize a contested sovereignty by reasserting and defending in ethno-national terms the existence of a pre-political jurisdiction (figuratively embedded and inscribed in land), which justifies subsequent claims of autonomy. Hence, oil is more than an object of political struggle: it is involved in the negotiation of political identities and the consolidation of rule.

In this regard, the development of the petroleum industry "from scratch" has been the most visible exercise of the unprecedented leverage enjoyed by Iraqi Kurds. In particular, mapping an energy landscape of exploration blocks auctioned to the highest bidders was the ultimate strategy to uphold resource control and take an ownership stake in the disputed areas. Acting as landowners with IOCs without referring the issue to the federal level, Kurdish elites availed themselves of a sovereign right over land and consolidated those situations that exceeded the letter of the Constitution. The KRG openly defied the Green Line, that is to say the ceasefire line drawn in October 1991 when Iraqi forces retreated from the region and recognised thereafter as the official border of the KRI. Three out six blocks licensed to ExxonMobil in 2011 were located in disputed areas: Bashiqa and al-Qush near Mosul, Qara Hanjer in the governorate of Kirkuk. Already in September 2007, before the ink of the newly enacted Oil and Gas Law dried, the MNR had signed a PSA with the US Hunt Oil for exploration rights in Ain Sifni[143], outside the KRG nominal authority. As explained by Minister Hawrami repeatedly, history and de-facto administration of those areas denied in principle and in practice any "hard line" of separation[144]. Accordingly, the MNR requested IOCs and their sub-contractors to remove the Green Line from their maps (Crisis Group, 2009: 11). The *fait accompli* of oil concessions awarded to foreign investors (included a giant like ExxonMobil) in unredeemed lands, therefore, was key to redraw contentious borders. It shows that quite often "territorialisation establishes authority" rather than the other way round (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018: 2).

The MNR divided the region into 48 blocks and 8 border areas without leaving a single square meter of land: the entire KRI was visualised as a prospective oil producing area[145]. The cartographic representation makes then explicit economic and ecological properties of a regional space recast and engineered as such. In this sense, mapping is a formidable discursive device that declares the full extent of oil nationalism. In the first place, it sends out a message of openness to international markets.

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[143] US Embassy in Baghdad, Cable 2007-Baghdad-3071, "Hunt Oil signs Agreement with KRG under KRG Oil Law", September 12, 2007; available at: https://goo.gl/Ccn74N

[144] "There is no hard line drawn somewhere that says this is KRG controlled territory and these are disputed territories, it is all gray areas. (...) We provide the security; administratively we run the towns and villages in that area. It is and has always been under control of KRG, under our security" quoted in "Analysis: Kirkuk project battle heats up", UPI, November 28, 2007; available at: https://goo.gl/YqUgYJ

[145] MNR maps are attached in the Annex II.

Furthermore, the extractive regime envisaged on map and started up by upstream operators institutionalises territorial continuity. The political utility is quite obvious: asserting and practising the resource imaginary supports the territorialisation and centralisation of power under KRG authority. As said, it provided an aura of legitimacy. Nevertheless, there is a more relevant consequence than control over valuable resources: through the nationalisation of environmental assets, the resource imaginary passes for a natural manifestation of the national self-image. Put it differently, the appropriation of hydrocarbons is presented as organic to national existence. Therefore, the exploitation of natural endowments becomes a right incorporated into the overarching national narrative. Better yet, the commodification of the rich subterranean geology is amongst KRG's duties towards citizenry. It is only a small step from there to identification with the extractive imperative. After all, the resource imaginary mobilises cultural and topographical features that draws on the iconography of the lush mountainous landscape Kurds revere. And that is where landscaping and "mindscaping" the nation meet (Whitehead & al., 2007: 11). However, a contradiction has prevented the transfiguration into an oil nation: extractivism created pockets of wealth that fuelled the exclusions of many. Despite overlap with the construction of nationhood, the oil economy led to dismemberment, at times violent, of rural communities and the explosion of inequalities. As a result, the myth of oil wealth has become increasingly untenable. I devote the following two chapters to the analysis of that contradiction.

In conclusion, another discursive element coming out the interviews with officials that deserves attention is the breaching of the principle of "voluntary union" (Rafaat, 2016) to which Iraqi Kurds resolved to abide to after 2003. An excerpt from a conversation with the High Representative of a diplomatic mission in Europe accentuates its contours:

> "Payments of government salaries lagged behind because of the budget cut. Then ISIS came and the Iraqi army collapsed. I am sure you will hear different variations and interpretations on how Peshmerga came to control disputed areas, but the reality is that we, as Kurdish authorities, had two options: either leave them falling into the hands of Daesh or protect our people. That is what happened. It was not to protect oilfields in the first place. We decided to secure the perimeter of those areas and at the same time we kept our borders open. Despite the economic burden and a de facto embargo from Iraq, we hosted 1.8 million refugees and internally displaced people from Mosul, from Baghdad, from Fallujah... from everywhere and without discrimination. While running a costly war and caring for refugees, all of the sudden the oil prices felt down, and we were already selling below the market price because Iraq was chasing us. We managed to resist only because of the oil we could export and thanks to our allies. We received nothing from Baghdad."[146]

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[146] Interview n. 3

In the passage grievances against central government are based on two propositions. On one side, the KRG obligation on all the Iraqi Kurds living outside the regional borders, which brings into play what is perceived to be the actual geography of blood and kinship. On the other side, the withdrawal of Baghdad from the commitment to a true partnership between the peoples of Iraq as enshrined in the preamble of the Constitution. Implicit in the latter is that Kurds decided of their own accord to be one component of a democratic and pluralistic country, and as long as the other components will adhere to the same principles. Such notion of voluntary union, of course, has been rejected by Iraqi governments throughout the last century to preserve territorial integrity and crucially evokes the apparently insurmountable dialectic between a subjugated Kurdistan and the Arab occupier (Rafaat, 2016).

This representation still gains traction as it is entrenched into the lasting struggle over alternative national identities, as discussed in the opening chapter. After all, the seeds of discord were already sowed in the 1958 Interim Constitution that outlined a fragile and unbalanced coexistence between Kurds and Arabs, on which successive formulations have been based upon (van Bruinessen, 1992: 27), such as the al-Bazzaz's declaration in 1966 which recognized the bi-national nature of the Iraqi state (Yildiz, 2007: 17). Kirmanj (2013) argues that the modern history of Iraq is marked by the unsuccessful integration of these collective identities, which ended up fuelling much pronounced sectarian divisions, particularly after the end of the monarchy and the rise of Ba'athists during the 1960s. He underlines that competing nationalisms were crafted in opposition to each other since the beginning of the republican period: on one hand Arab nationalism, defined in ethnic (*qawmiyya*) or territorial (*wataniyya*) terms, with the first notion calling for a broad pan-Arab unity and the second one filling up into the narrower (yet more inclusive towards ethnic minorities) boundaries of the state; on the other, Kurdish nationalism (*kurdayetî*), which goes back to a distinct ethnic heritage from the Arab and Islamic culture. Kirmanj points out that the idea of Kurdish nationhood has grown to prominence even more since 1991 as the international no-fly zone, coupled with the internal blockade imposed by the Iraqi regime, effectively set the KRI on a separate path: "by 2003, the semi-independent 'nation' of Kurdistan had produced a generation of young people who had experienced minimal contact with other Iraqis" (*ibidem*: 54). Such collision of identities renewing nowadays with the "failed experiment" of federalism, as Masoud Barzani called it[147], witnesses the enduring Kurdish perception of a threatened or denied legitimacy. Given the array of strategic entanglements, the energy dimension came to be the main arena for that clash.

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[147] "Barzani discusses Iraqi Kurdish referendum with Saudi paper", Asharq al-Awsat, September 04, 2017; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

4.3 Chokepoints

As was often the case elsewhere, oil gave Kurdish elites a sense of power and heightened nationalist aspirations since it granted access to the world markets and made the KRG a desirable newcomer in the uneven geography of conventional energy reserves. The regional government strived to break the fiscal dependency from Baghdad and built its (external and internal) legitimacy on a sudden, unprecedented growth that hinged on the unilateral export of crude. As noted, the oil-led state-building venture was primarily meant to obtain acquiescence of energy importers, aside from keeping the house in order inside the region. The excursus above illustrates that energy issues ran through the reproduction of spatial identities around notions of nation, citizenship, and inter-ethnic relations. This occurred by creating new imaginative geographies upon the oil dream, renegotiating the criteria for belonging to the national community, and re-territorializing ethno-national claims to sovereignty. So far, the construction of the KRG nationalist oil discourse has been explored from the angles of identity formation and the birthright to self-determination. This notwithstanding, a full understanding also requires taking into account the peculiar "materialities of oil" (Bridge, 2010: 315).

The geography of the oil commodity chain is an irregular one. Oil is a highly concentrated and usually state-owned resource, "inseparable from the largest forms of transnational capital" (Watts, 2001: 191). The juxtaposition of territorial attributes and financial rewards at different geographical scales suggests some of the tensions intrinsic to the oil industry: while embedded in a web of capitals and infrastructures to market and move petroleum products globally, upstream activities for the extraction of hydrocarbons refer instead to a "punctuated and discontinuous" landscape of subterranean sites and surface points (wells, rigs, pumping stations, terminals, refineries, petrochemical plants, etc.). Often organized in militarized enclaves, this spatial configuration does not conform with the contiguous territorial logic of national development or expansion (Bridge, 2010: 319). The commodification of crude requires advanced technologies, large investments, and commercial concessions involving state-private joint ventures to translate a diffuse and viscous raw material buried deep underground into what is idealized as black gold – a "bulk commodity" (Wallerstein, 1989) that is among the hard currencies of power politics. Moreover, the appropriation of petroleum would be barren if not integrated into a global network of tankers, trucks, pipelines, and trunk routes connecting points of production to storage deposits and consumers downstream – let alone financial markets and brokers managing the black box of oil transactions. Overall, these material processes articulate a tri-dimensional (vertical and horizontal) space that does not fit the flat map of nation-state boundaries. The oil commodity chain, hence, is good evidence for Agnew's territorial trap argument (1994): even though they intersect each other across a thin membrane, from a spatial perspective territory and capital are defined by different structures of relations for which domestic and foreign dimensions are, in fact, tangled. Moreover, the state neither overlaps, nor is the "container" of society. Commodification is not a state prerogative. It

is for this reason that Michael Watts speaks appropriately of an *oil complex* (2004), which he defines as a massive assemblage populated by various actors, agents, and processes all thriving upon the breeding ground of petro-capitalism:

> "(...) this is obviously the IOCs, the NOCs and the service companies and the massive oil infrastructure but also the petro-states, the massive engineering companies and financial groups, the shadow economies (theft, money laundering, drugs, organized crime), the rafts of NGO's (human rights organizations, monitoring agencies, corporate social responsibility groups, voluntary regulatory agencies), the research institutes and lobbying groups, the landscape of oil consumption (from SUV's [to] pharmaceuticals), and not least the oil communities, the military and paramilitary groups, and the social movements which surround the operations of, and shape the functioning of, the oil industry narrowly construed." (Watts, 2009: 8-9)

The configuration delineated above shows the limits of state-centered reductions of oil geographies, such as Karl's concept of petro-state does. Also the MNR Minister Hawrami would probably agree given that he has always been confident that energy partnerships would have allowed a sub-state regional entity to escape from the landlocked condition. He had based his audacious moves on the more malleable map of energy demand. Hence, the material infrastructure of the oil chain keeps together a dispersed geography of power, from local to global. However, key nodes within such geography provide some actors (e.g. oil firms, economic elites, or even insurgent armies) with sufficient leverage to exert significant control over the entire commodity chain (Le Billon, 2001: 575-576). Violent struggles typically revolve around these junctures between oil enclaves and world markets (Watts, 2004: 53). Bridge adds that the presence of chokepoints or bottlenecks in producing and transit countries (the Strait of Hormuz is a classic example) influence perceptions of available supply to such an extent that "expectations of crisis are integral to the financialization of oil" (Bridge, 2010: 320), meaning that geopolitical uncertainty affects price volatility, the build-up of oil inventories, and investments in oil futures[148] regardless of the actual shutting off of energy flows (cf. Labban, 2010). Well-known examples about the self-fulfilling properties of such perceptions are the two shocks on the heels of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 and the toppling of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran six years later. In the first case, Arab OPEC members proclaimed an embargo against the US and some allies (among which Netherlands, Portugal, and South Africa) for their support to Israel during the fourth Arab-Israeli war, which was named after the holiest day of the Jewish calendar when it began. Country-specific measures and production cuts, however, were largely symbolical since the crude refined by non-targeted buyers could be sold to any third country without restrictions. Yet, "the oil weapon, wielded in the form of an embargo" (Yergin, 2011: ?), exposed the vulnerability of energy-dependent

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[148] Oil futures are financial contracts that bind sellers to deliver a certain amount of crude by a specific date and at an expected ("future") price.

Western consumers with respect to a seemingly fickle Middle East and thus established a precedent that is still evoked in current geopolitical analyses[149]. Even more so, the second energy crisis after the Iranian revolution in 1979 resulted in widespread "panic at the pump", a frantic rush for assuring additional inventories against potential shortages that further drove up prices (*ibidem*).

Against this theoretical background, the rest of the paragraph aims to give an overview of the blind spots of oil economy in the KRI. Some of them have been already mentioned before. Nonetheless, the complexity of the scenario requires further attention to the range of players involved. This is all the more relevant given that actions undertaken to become a production hub were quite often tactical adjustments to interferences and interests of outside actors. In so doing, I go after Mitchell's suggestion of "following closely the oil itself" and "tracing the connections that were made between pipelines and pumping stations, refineries and shipping routes" (2009: 422) in order to broaden the perspective beyond the usual and limited interdependency between exporters and importers. The information below supplement chapter 1.4 with a focus on the less noticeable interactions that coalesce into the KRG oil policy, and is based both on secondary sources and interviews with consultants in the oil and gas sector.

Since 2014, international oil traders have been keeping the KRG's economy afloat with 'cash-for-crude' prepayments, which are the first source of revenue generation to pay back an outstanding debt estimated at $20 billion[150]. Although data on crude sales are opaque at best due to their high sensitivity, the three major purchasers combined (Vitol, Glencore, Trafigura) are rumoured to have loaned about $3.5 billion[151]. Not just lenders, trading companies are even more important for acting as the crucial intermediaries to export Kurdish barrels, with shipments from Ceyhan unloaded for the most part at the Israeli port of Ashkelon and then stored on different cargos through the Mediterranean to evade SOMO's tracking before reaching refineries in Germany, Poland, Italy, and Croatia. The Iraqi federal government has regularly threatened to file lawsuits against buyers of the oil "smuggled" by the KRG, as happened a first time in 2014 with the tanker United Kalavryta stopped 60 miles off the coast of Texas[152], and blacklisted all the companies dealing energy transactions with Erbil. However, Iraq does not have diplomatic relations with Israel and, therefore, KRG shipments with third parties on Israeli

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[149] Arab oil producing countries raised unilaterally to 5.12 USD per barrel on October 16, nearly doubling the posted price (which was about 3 USD on October 8), with the purpose of influencing the outcome of the war (Alnasrawi 1994: 10). The oil spike triggered an unintended chain reaction of large proportions. Driven by fear of further disruptions, the inflationary pressure ushered into onerous and long-term consequences throughout the West, with prices skyrocketing to 33 USD per barrel in December 1979.

[150] "For Iraq's Long-Suffering Kurds, Independence Beckons", The New York Times, September 9, 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/jp4GJt

[151] "Iraqi Kurdistan oil minister 'pleads' for international support", Financial Times, October 10, 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/3xiA2B

[152] "Iraq Seeks Seizure of Kurdistan Oil in Tanker Sitting off Texas Coast", VOA News, August 2, 2014, available at: https://goo.gl/5Avd4b

soil are outside Baghdad's scope of action. Moreover, oil-trading houses are indispensable operators to let crude flowing out the KRI. Vitol, in particular, is the biggest one. Yet, traders remain opportunistic speculators. Regardless backlogs in the delivery of monthly shipments agreed by contract and the fact that output capacity from an average of 580.000-630.000 bpd halved overnight with the loss of Kirkuk oilfields, trading houses are still the guarantors of KRG's independent oil sales and have accepted Hawrami's requests of re-negotiating contractual terms.

Nevertheless, despite his mastery of deal making, Hawrami cannot win over the geology of the region, which proved to be not only difficult to tame given a mountainous terrain that raises overall extractive costs and forecloses new drillings in remote areas, but also less profitable than originally expected in terms of actual reserves and their commercialization. From initial optimism with the influx of independent small- and medium-sized companies after the promulgation of the Oil and Gas Law in 2007 and the watershed entry of ExxonMobil in 2011, which dragged in other energy titans such as Total and Chevron, falling profits or unsatisfactory discoveries have recently cracked prospective investments. Between 2014 and 2016, international operators relinquished 19 exploration blocks[153]. The reconsideration of the assets of oil majors, in particular, lessened the confidence of investors: ExxonMobil pulled out from Arbat East, Betwata, and Qara Hanjer, while scaling down operations in al-Qush, Pirmam, and Bashiqa; Chevron walked away from Rovi; Total relinquished both Baranan and Safeen. Likewise, minor companies such as Genel Energy, Repsol, TEC, KNOC, Marathon, Hess, Gulf Keystone, and MOL followed suit. Lack of proper infrastructures (which has stifled so far the development of gas fields), debt arrears, plummeting oil prices with the Brent benchmark below $50 per barrel, water saturation of reservoir rocks leading to decreasing rates of production, and the downgrading of reserves in some fields (e.g. Taq Taq) were among the main reasons given by operators (Mills, 2016a) – leaving aside a tumultuous political scenario, amid the ISIS insurgency and rising tensions with Baghdad[154]. In this light, the economic lifeline of the cash-strapped KRG seems to be quite frayed and precarious. The landlocked condition came back to the fore as Turkey, Iran, and Iraq took coordinated countermeasures to cripple secessionist temptations after Kurds inked "yes" (often with a drop of blood) on the ballot for independence in September 2017. The Turkish President Erdoğan got to the point of threatening the closure of the Khurmala-Ceyhan pipeline. For its part, Baghdad resumed the dialogue with both Ankara and Teheran for planning additional conduits from Kirkuk in a move to seal off Erbil again. This notwithstanding, Turkey eventually did not sink KRG exports to not lose a bridgehead in Iraq and a fruitful partnership sustaining its energy needs, whereas

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[153]"Exxon cuts Kurdistan portfolio by half", Iraqi Oil Report, December 6, 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/XiujKG

[154] Chevron, for instance, halted drilling operations in Sarta in October 2017 due to the stand-off between ISF and Peshmerga after the referendum and resumed them in February 2018; "Chevron restarts drilling in Kurdistan region of Iraq", Reuters, February 19, 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/vwYx9H

any infrastructural project envisioned by the central government would require years to become operational (including reopening the damaged ITP pipeline).

The journey of a barrel of oil is quite illustrative of a different order of strategic interactions, which are still in favour of a Kurdish niche in the energy market. Starting with the essential Turkish outlet, TEC has been teaming up with ExxonMobil in their exploration blocks in northern Iraq since 2011 (besides having its own stakes in Pulkhana, Arbat, and Jabal Kand) and the 2013 agreement laid the groundwork for a full-fledged and enduring collaboration, which provided Ankara with considerable dividends – from a preferential share of oil exports at a discounted price and easy access to unexploited gas resources (with the Miran and Bina Bawi fields currently being developed by the Anglo-Turkish Genel Energy) to transit fees levied on shipments from Ceyhan and plans for expanding the network of pipelines with further branches[155]. Moreover, a 2.5 billion USD bilateral trade volume (utterly skewed towards the massive import of goods from Turkey) and the transfer of revenues via Turkish banks complete the picture. In addition, Israel bankrolls the KRG as a large and convenient market (three-quarters of the Israeli energy demand is met with Kurdish oil[156]) and a mid-point for selling oil worldwide through seaborne cargoes, out of sight of Baghdad[157]. Unsurprisingly, Israel was a lone voice in enthusiastically backing the referendum. More than anything else, however, the entrance of Rosneft has been a welcome turn of events for the KRG. Since February 2017 the leading Russian company has struck a series of pre-financed deals: an initial off-take contract for the purchase and sale of crude evolved into an ever closer investment agreement, signed in June 2017 and complemented in September of the same year, a couple of weeks before the referendum. Rosneft became the majority shareholder of the Khurmala-Ceyhan pipeline by buying 1.8 billion USD stocks (about 60% of the share value) and raised its effective carrying capacity to 1 million bpd, began the development of five exploration blocks (Batil, Darato, Qasrok, Zawita and Harir-Bejil) that were previously abandoned by other operators, and committed to expand the KRG energy infrastructure with a gas pipeline that is intended to export up to 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year to Turkey (and from there to the European markets through the Southern Gas Corridor) by 2020[158]. Type and level of investment, as well as the full involvement of the state-run company into the Kremlin's agenda, signal a long-term engagement in the region. This

[155] "Exclusive: Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan ink landmark energy contracts", Reuters, November 29, 2013, available at: https://goo.gl/sjUyYV

[156] "Israel turns to Kurds for three-quarters of its oil supplies", Financial Times, August 23, 2015, available at: https://goo.gl/vCn3g3

[157] "The Mystery of the Disappearing Tankers That Carry Kurdish Oil to Israel", Hareetz, April 10, 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/iTQ9Z8

[158] "Rosneft and Iraqi Kurdistan Government Agree to Expand Strategic Cooperation", June 2, 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/D7SgwN; "Rosneft and Kurdistan Regional Government announce the entry of Rosneft into an infrastructure project in the Kurdistan Autonomous Region", October 19, 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/HNm7Qb; "Rosneft and The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq signed Gas Business Development Agreement for Kurdish Region of Iraq", 25 May 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/LKyunU

is in line with Russian renewed stakes in the Middle East, which became apparent with the decisive military intervention in the Syrian civil war and filled the vacuum left by the US disengagement initiated under the Obama presidency. Amid mounting skirmishes after the referendum, President Putin himself warned about the inconvenient consequences that the cut of oil exports would have caused on the energy markets[159], whereas Western observers sat back on more cautious positions. Rosneft's footprint is further substantiated by the expressed desire of laying hands on the much-disputed oilfields in Kirkuk. Hours after the Iraqi army took over the city and ousted Peshmerga, the Iraqi Minister of Oil Jabar al-Luaibi revived old contacts with British Petroleum (BP) to redevelop and boost oil production, despite the serious constraint of not having an operative export route. However, the fact that BP owns 20% of Rosneft's share capital and that the Russian energy giant, in turn, owns the Kurdish pipeline soothed oppositions in Baghdad against independent contracts approved in Erbil and set the premises of discussions for the resumption of exports, with Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin personally mediating with the Iraqi central government[160]. As the Kurdish state-building endeavour was falling apart, Rosneft has subsidized financially the crumbling KRG with some 4 billion USD, which made it the first investor by far in the region[161], and also politically by acting as influential third party in the conflict. Moreover, the Russian backing restored a piece of reputation in the eyes of international markets. That does not mean, obviously, to be neutral: just as trading houses act on margins of profits, the Russian (or Turkish or Israeli or US) assistance follows the rationale of power projection. However, whereas the convenience of private corporations may swing and vanish rapidly, the strategic exposure of state actors is less uncertain and more durable.

The course of events points out from where KRG's short-termism comes from. Kurdish elites see dependency on external sponsors as a necessary evil to maintain a priceless autonomy, whereas profound alterity with Baghdad imparts centrifugal forces to federal relations. From a general perspective, the description above draws attention to the layered spatial configurations of extractive regimes and its changeable dynamics. The empirical case leaves a series of question marks given that future oil sales might not be enough to pay back obligations to creditors, despite Rosneft lifebuoy. Furthermore, even when there were no more loans to be repaid or debt to be refinanced, at current oil prices the KRG will be break-even at best, without being able to generate income. In short, the oil dream seems to have dragged the region to the bottom of explosive contradictions. This recommends going down one analytical level and looking at how the history of the two ruling dynasties came to be

[159] "Putin says Moscow handling post-Kurdistan referendum situation with care", Kurdistan24, October 4, 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/vrJhBQ

[160] "Russia's Rosneft holds key to fixing Iraqi Kurdistan oil flows", Reuters, March 5, 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/QcfdWL

[161] "Russia becomes Iraq Kurds' top funder, quiet about independence vote", Reuters, September 20, 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/YRy8Ws

intertwined with oil politics. After all, the goal of autonomy voiced on the surface has often concealed the partisan agendas of hegemonic Kurdish parties underneath.

V. A NATION DIVIDED

Kurdish infighting and the oil chessboard

The unredeemed Kurdish nation has a fissure at its heart, which follows deep-rooted antagonism between two long-governing dynasties fighting for its soul. The KDP-PUK division is more than the legacy of the bloody civil war that wreaked havoc and despair during the 1990s, nor only the territorial partition ensuing from the power-sharing agreement between complementary oligarchies. Beyond that, the two areas are socialized as containers of different values and different people. "Dry people over a dry land", a Kurd from Sulaymaniyah described in this way his countrymen in Erbil. Historically, Talabani's PUK has insisted on the tribal and reactionary leanings of Barzani's supporters. There are equal and opposite mockeries from the other side. Localism is everywhere, of course. However, the significance of these mutual perceptions sedimented in ordinary language somehow surprised me given the powerful Kurdistani identity and patriotism uniting the region under the "colourful flag" (*alaya rengin*), with the distinctive golden sun at the centre, pledging for the long-wished independence of Kurdistan. The conventional wisdom lending weight to the political dividing line, in fact, draws on the tribal structure and cultural attributes that are indeed very much present in everyday social practices. Linguistically, for one thing, the two main dialects spoken in the region match more or less the two territorial areas: Bahdinani (a variation of Kurmanji) in the northwest and Sorani in the southeast (with a variety of several other dialects used locally). The ruling class absorbed and leveraged these discursive markers for the sake of tightening both constituencies upon traditional parties, with the consequence that sub-regional identities and groupings served as the background for two exclusive nation-building projects under the institutional umbrella of the KRG. I will return on this point later on. This chapter is devoted, specifically, to illustrate how the hegemony of KDP and PUK has driven the creation and permeates the dynamics of the oil complex.

5.1. A history of violence. KDP and PUK between rivalry and power-sharing

The political regime in the KRI reproduces a clear-cut territorial separation in two distinct areas each representing the traditional power bases of KDP and PUK: a so-called yellow zone including the governorates of Erbil and Dohuk, where the Barzani enjoy a position of supremacy, and a green zone covering the governorates of Sulaymaniyah and Halabja[162], where the PUK is hegemonic, though within

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[162] The district of Halabja turned into governorate in March 2014.

a more volatile political environment[163]. Internal checkpoints and partisan patches on Peshmerga uniforms give practical substance to a division that feeds upon old mistrust. In the disputed areas the KDP rallies local support across the Ninewa plain north-east of Mosul, while PUK has long been the main party in Kirkuk, which nevertheless lies at the centre of bitter competition between the two as demonstrated by the recent crisis commented in section 5.2. The colours attached to each zone come from the party emblems. As mentioned in passing, chromatic differences do not go unnoticed. Wearing in yellow or green (to a lesser degree also blue given the already solid presence of Gorran as the third largest faction) is like taking a political position. The whole region is loaded with the colourful banners, logos, and flags of ruling parties. Such visual overrepresentation is permanent and not limited to electoral campaigns or political events: it is aimed at crystallizing sub-regional loyalties and making visible party influence.

KDP and PUK have roots in the tribal ascendancy of Barzani and Talabani's clans of which the two political groups are the direct emanation. We already said about the undisputed leadership of Masoud Barzani. In the same way, Jalal Talabani was heir to a prominent family of sheiks belonging to the Qadiri order. He stood beside Ibrahim Ahmed in the KDP Politburo and then took the lead of the PUK after the scission in 1975. Since then, the two main Kurdish political organizations have competed against each other, at times very violently. Until 1991 the common purpose of acquiring national rights prevented inter-party fighting to plunge into full-blown warfare, which broke out when international support[164] offered Kurds effective autonomy free from Ba'athist crushing and soon turned into the ugliest face of Kurdish politics. Under a double blockade (UN blockade of Iraq and Iraqi blockade of Kurdistan) and in absence of a strong economy, the fratricidal confrontation was destructive and left 3,000 people dead (Rogg & Rimscha 2007). It is a common saying nowadays that Kurds became their worst enemies, descending into chaos and proving themselves unable to set down a constructive path to self-determination. Intra-Kurdish animosity reached a point where opposition against Baghdad was secondary, so much so that the KDP found a temporary alliance with Saddam Hussein to drive the PUK out of Erbil. The US-brokered Washington Agreement in September 1998 ended a four-year long bloodshed. A sense of exasperation and external pressure created an environment for ceasefire and then agreement, so that the two parties had to raise their responsibilities. However, the immediate consequence of the civil war had been that everything was cut in half: two different administrations with independent strategies, two separate territories, two decision-making processes, and two judicial systems. Besides the heritage of conflict, in the absence of a clear policy agenda, the short-term humanitarian relief provided by the international community paradoxically came at the expense of intra-

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[163] This is not to say that KDP and PUK do not enjoy some support in the opposite zone, but territorial control by means of influence on economic and political dynamics is not projected over the internal boundary.

[164] Politically with the UN Security Council Resolution n. 688 that condemned Ba'athist repression of civilians in the Kurdish populated areas, militarily through Operation Provide Comfort that allowed refugees to return under protection of a no-fly zone, setting a barrier to further incursions.

Kurdish unity since it prompted a struggle for donor funds and also infused in regional politics the hazardous reliance on external (and often rival) sponsors (Natali 2011). On the contrary the ideological differences of the origins were no longer significant (Jüde 2017: 855). The division is still there: despite the reunification in 2006, finances were not merged and the parallel administration in Sulaymaniyah not dismantled. Therefore, nation-building was put back in the process, but with a heavy burden to bear. The fall of Saddam Hussein was the turning point, which pushed Kurdish leadership to make the most of an opportunity that was far bigger than anything they had in terms of influence, participation in regional and international politics, and financial rewards. The moment was propitious to set controversies aside, and efforts to bring the two zones into a unified structure were done. Albeit long-time rivals, KDP and PUK therefore found a ripe ground for cooperation, with the consequence, nevertheless, that party interests have continued to weigh more than public ones in shaping regional institutions. From this perspective, the KRG has served the primary purpose of intercepting and distributing the financial flows pouring in either via federal allocations and foreign investments, leaving the two partners free to run the respective territories. A unitary stance was required to make a difference in Baghdad and negotiate with international players; accordingly, the bipartisan agreement in 2006 expressed Barzani and Talabani's commitment to deal with those issues on equal footing. The injection of petrodollars made this byzantine pact to work, at least until oil prices remained high.

The KDP-PUK alliance was challenged by the rise of Gorran (Change), which entered the Kurdistan National Assembly in 2009 with an electoral breakthrough and emerged as a main contender of the duopoly. The movement was founded by the charismatic Nawshirwan Mustafa[165], a Sulaymaniyah-born former leader of the Marxist-Leninist Komala that merged into the PUK in 1975 and among the initiators of the uprising (*raparin*) against Saddam Hussein following the Gulf War. Gorran set forth the goal of reforming a corrupted and nepotistic system and won consent especially in the green zone at the expense of PUK. The development broke the dualistic pattern described above, but all things considered was not a serious blow to the KDP-PUK hegemony. Even though it introduced an establishment-opposition praxis that is likely to bear fruits for future democratization, it did not undermine power centralization into Barzani and Talabani circles, despite the electoral results indicate growing disaffection. In this regard, if we wish to understand the internal situation in the KRI there is no need to go any further than the symbiotic relationship between party politics, coercion, and political economy - the "unholy trinity", a Gorran member suggested[166]. Indeed, the line between those who have power and those without power follows military capabilities, first: despite law n. 5/2009 made provision for the party militias to be integrated into a unified army formally responding to the KRG,

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[165] Nawshirwan Mustafa died in May 2017 a few months before the passing of Jalal Talabani.
[166] Interview n. 13

Peshmerga remain loyal and belong to KDP and PUK[167]. The same can be said for police and intelligence forces. All the other political factions, instead, do not have paramilitary units at their service. Although the embodiment par excellence of the national liberation struggle, Peshmerga is then a collection of politicized armed groups that, against the backdrop of factionalism and weak institutions, have been used to pursue partisan and private gains (Aziz 2017). The mixing of military and civilian is a longstanding characteristic of Kurdish society and possibly the most relevant imperfection.

At the same time, KDP and PUK occupy the economy as they please through patrimonial relations. Both parties have their own media outlets, commercial enterprises, and business. This point will be detailed later on with reference to the oil and gas industry. In short, the voting base fall within the perimeter of patronage and the means of coercion available to the elites. When I interviewed the Speaker of the Parliament, Yousif Mohammed Sadiq, he said that the political monopoly must capture the economy in order to survive[168]. Yet, the reverse is also true in the measure that control on the economy comes from political dominance. The consideration is well-founded. In many ways, the loss of consent suffered by the elites swelled on hardship and political failure in reversing the financial crisis. This notwithstanding, political and economic dynamics should be analysed as separated in nature, which is an important point to be stressed in order to not support consequential arguments, in one way or the other. As noted, the status quo relies upon a stratification of interests that are also economic, but political dynamics ensue from and are driven by socio-cultural and historical factors. This is to say that the economy did not curse Kurdish politics. Rather, the elites were savvy enough to bring into being an extractive regime in such a way to buttress their primacy even more.

That was possible partly because of the endurance of tribal customs, for which leadership is handed down from father to son[169]. The offspring are leaders by birthright. The sway of traditional parties on public affairs is such that appointments to government positions are based on kinship for the most part. Evidence of nepotism in the oligarchy is pretty obvious: under Masoud Barzani, who resigned from the KRG presidency in the aftermath of the referendum but still is the undisputed leader of the KDP; his nephew Nechirvan holds the post of PM and he is also the Vice President of the KDP; the older son Masrour is the head of the Kurdistan Security Council; the other son Mansour commands the Gulan Special Forces; the nephew Sirwan founded Korek Telecom and he is a military commander as well; another nephew Rawan is commander of a Peshmerga brigade; a further nephew Saman is in

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[167] The Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs has an estimated force of about 40,000 fighters, organised in supposedly depoliticised Regional Guard Brigades. However, the bulk of Peshmerga troops are directly controlled by the two parties: the KDP's 80th Brigade and PUK's 70th Brigade number 120,000 fighters (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton 2017). Furthermore, prominent leaders (Nechirvan Barzani, Kosrat Rasul, Hero Talabani, Bafel Talabani) have private forces.

[168] Interview n. 25

[169] The family tree of the Barzani and Talabani ruling houses is sketched in Appendix II.

charge of ZagrosJet, while the Zagros Group (whose activities span from constructions to oil and gas) as a whole is run by another Barzani, Aram. Such Tolkien-like list goes down for long through the family tree. Most names mentioned above are part of the KDP leadership council; just like Hoshyar Zebari, currently deputy PM of Iraq and with a long experience of government in Baghdad behind, other than being Masoud Barzani's uncle. The same tendency is mirrored in the green zone. Especially with the passing of its founder in 2017 after a long illness, factionalism broke out within the PUK, which is internally divided in several wings in competition with each other. Nonetheless, the Talabani's family has a tight grip on the reins: Hero Ahmed, Jalal's widow and Ibrahim Ahmed's daughter, holds a pre-eminent position in the PUK Politburo; her younger son Qubad serves as deputy PM, while the older one Bafel is a military commander on the rise; her sister, Shanaz Ibrahim Ahmed, married with the former Iraqi Minister of Water Resources Abdul Latif Rashid, was the KRG representative in the UK and is said to oversee the finances of the party-run Nokan Group; the nephews Lahur and Polad were appointed at the head of the Sulaymaniyah-based Zanyari Intelligence Agency and the Counter-Terrorism Group, respectively; the niece Ala heads the PUK bloc in the Iraqi Parliament. Looking at the rival wing led by Kosrat Rasul, a veteran Peshmerga and incumbent Secretary General of the PUK: the elder son Shalaw was co-opted into the party high ranks, while the younger Darbaz is the KRG Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction. Again, the list is far from complete. Barzani and Talabani surnames are everywhere in the KRG structure and allegations about public funds amassed by the two families abound. Within such sultanistic system and under the facade of regional institutions, the personalization of power through private paramilitary forces and extensive clientelism is the dominant feature. Corruption spreads from the top. Then, there is oil.

Although KDP and PUK lobbied together for obtaining rights for exploration, production, and exportation of oil and gas within the constitutional framework, they were not in agreement on basic points (from revenue sharing to strategic partnerships with regional neighbours), as a result of which energy issues came to be the uneasy context for both inter-party and intra-party contention. In spite of vehement disagreement on the lack of transparency haunting the oil sector, in May 2014 the National Assembly ratified the KRG policy of exporting crude independently. As analysed in chapter IV, the effect of that policy on nation-building was ambivalent: it first created a sense of unity around the possibility of economic independence from Baghdad, materialized with the opening of the Kurdish pipeline; yet, corruption and uneven distribution of dividends polarized political parties and disconnected the elites from the rest of society. Either way, the unsuccessful way of managing the energy sector has led to significant indebtedness towards buyers and the oil boom to turn into recession. Section 5.2 outlines somewhat the prologue to this situation by putting the extractive regime in the perspective of party politics, or rather illustrating how the latter has shaped the former.

My Kurdish oppressor[170]

> "We are living into an illegal state of exception, which is not regulated by any law and ripples through a crisis of legitimacy. What is worse is that this extreme state of emergency does not follow any constitutional provision, as Schmitt and Agamben wrote instead. We are outside the law."[171]

KDP and PUK have never been reluctant to use whatever means when it comes to the survival of the party. If the territorial partition witnesses the acrimonious fence between traditional dynasties, the militarization of society is integral to the patron-client model established by hegemonic parties in their heartlands. In this respect, the privatisation of security forces casts a chilling shadow over the state of political rights and freedoms in the region. Despite cultivating the image of a thriving democracy, the deadly repression of dissent brings into light a rather draconian reality. Since February 2011, when people in Sulaymaniyah were on the streets for 65 consecutive days demanding reforms and basic services, protesters have been threatened, beaten, arbitrarily arrested, tortured, and shot dead in a climate of impunity. On April 19, the nonviolent Kurdish Spring was clamped down by Peshmerga and Asayish. Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International released reports denouncing severe restrictions and violations of freedoms of speech and assembly[172]. Journalists criticizing the government were often abducted, detained without warrants, and murdered[173]. The silence of Western allies possibly emboldened KDP and PUK cadres in forcing the hand. Albeit bonds of solidarity and party affiliations lessened the burden of economic crisis for some, strikes and demonstrations have been intermittent and became widespread when the KRG was no longer able to ensure full payment of public sector salaries. The ease of violence obviously affects the relations between government and non-armed oppositions. In October 2015, KDP-aligned security and police forces prevented the Speaker of Parliament from entering Erbil and four Ministers from Gorran to access government buildings[174].

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[170] I am indebted for both title and inspiration of this paragraph to the piece of article by Hoshang Waziri giving a first-hand account of the crude suppression of peaceful protests that broke out in the capital Erbil in March 2018, in which he was personally involved. By making a comparison with the bleakest pages in the history of Iraqi Kurds, Waziri places emphasis on the perilous drift towards a "republic of fear" whose autocratic tendency brings back memories of the atrocious persecutions suffered under the Ba'athist regime. The article is available at: https://goo.gl/c7sBwB

[171] Interview n. 13

[172] See this series of reports accessible on the HRW website: "Iraqi Kurdistan: Free Speech Under Attack", February 9, 2013); "Iraqi Kurdistan: Ruling Party Forces Fire on Protesters", October 21, 2015; "Iraq/Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Troops Shot at Protesters", March 30, 2017; "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Protesters, Journalists Detained", February 28, 2018; "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Protesters Beaten, Journalists Detained", April 15, 2018; "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Detained Children Tortured", January 8, 2019.

[173] Amnesty International called on KRG authorities to investigate on the killings of two journalists: Kawa Garmyani, shot dead outside his house in Kalar in 2013, and Wedat Hussein Ali, kidnapped and found lifeless in Duhok with marks of torture on his body in 2016. All the fixers and journalists I worked with told me that they had received threats in the past.

[174] "KRG ruling party ejects rivals, escalating political crisis", Iraqi Oil Report, October 12, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/SHRqKB

Earlier that year in June Yousif Mohammed had convened a parliamentary session to discuss a reconfiguration of presidential powers as the Barzani's tenure was to expire in August. The KDP justified the move by holding Gorran responsible for the arson attacks against party offices exploded in Sulaymaniyah, Kalar, and other towns throughout the governorate during three days of rage and bloody repression, though no involvement of the opposition movement was there[175]. The ousting of Gorran ministers from the KRG and the banning of Yousif Mohammed (also from Gorran) was related to Barzani's remaining in office outside the time limit. The National Assembly would have been closed for more than two years (and oil issues were also involved in the institutional paralysis, as it will be shown in a few pages).

With the legitimacy of ruling parties in jeopardy, the extra-legal resort to violence is a common occurrence. I had a direct perception of it on the eve of the Iraqi general elections in May 2018. After the epilogue of the Kirkuk crisis, discontent was plain to see and vehemently directed against the elites. Already in December a rush of anger had surged across the region with protesters setting fire to party buildings and banners in the cities of Sulaymaniyah, Ranya, and Halabja: 6 dead and over 100 wounded was the KRG response[176]. In March civil servants and youth had taken the streets to demonstrate against delays and cut of salaries[177] even in Erbil, where protests have always been quieter than elsewhere in the region, especially in the Sulaymaniyah Governorate whose constituency is instead imbued of a political culture that is less tolerant of one-party rule and is relatively more open to competition. As a testimony to plurality (or, conversely, as a sign of the enfeeblement of Talabani's leadership), two newly founded parties came out on the scene to contend PUK footholds in the green zone: the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ), basically Barham Salih's card to regain political virginity after leaving the PUK, and the New Generation Movement, led by the businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir. In the eyes of the Politburo, the fragmentation of the political landscape was a byword for the cracking of the power base. Ballot rigging was then the solution to grapple with the erosion of consent. During the election day on May 12 there was ample evidence of systematic frauds and irregularities[178]. Printed receipts of votes not matching ballots or backdated a couple of days gave

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[175] "Violent protests threaten Kurdistan's stability", Iraqi Oil Report, October 12, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/W4XMd7

[176] "At least 6 killed during violent protests in Iraqi Kurdistan", CNN, December 19, 2017; available at: https://goo.gl/Azwz2m

[177] The charge of oil robbery levied on the pockets of ordinary citizens was on the background of protests targeting the KRG. In February 2016, the PM Haider al-Abadi had suggested to hand over oilfields in Kirkuk for giving every Kurdish employee a salary in exchange, as further confirmation of the unscrupulous resort to the oil weapon in the negotiations, from all sides. See, "Iraqi PM offers to pay Kurds' salaries in exchange for oil", Reuters, February 15, 2016; available at: https://goo.gl/csYQ4V

[178] The Korean-made MIRU electronic voting system, introduced right for the parliamentary elections in Iraq, was found to be full of holes. With the benefit of hindsight, the fact that the same system has been used in Russia, El Salvador and Kyrgyzstan only was not so encouraging.

the impression of a charade orchestrated by ruling parties[179]. The presence of Qasem Soleimani (commander of the Iranian Quds Forces) in Sulaymaniyah raised suspicion of foreign interferences also. Hours before polls closed preliminary results were already available and were markedly at odds with exit polls: the KDP scored higher in Erbil and Duhok than the previous election, while the PUK increased as well in Sulaymaniyah and retained the first position in Kirkuk; a literally unbelievable result in view of the loss of all disputed areas and the inability of paying salaries since July 2015. Pressures and intimidations by Asayish at polling stations were also documented. Gorran, Komal, KIU, and CDJ issued a joint statement denouncing the election process and requesting a new vote. The PUK reacted militarily.

The night of the elections heavy gunfire hit the Gorran headquarters at Zargata Hill, a couple of miles from the place I lived. PUK pickups mounting machine guns fired on the main building of the opposition party, under Sheikh Jaafar Mustafa's orders (commander of the 70th Brigade), meanwhile ballot boxes were stolen from polling stations to avoid manual recount. I thought it was celebratory gunfire at first, but the massive amount of weapon fire dispelled any doubt. I watched the armed attack going on from the window of the apartment, while checking my Twitter feeds. The attack was a warning against anyone attempting to perturb the status quo. If it were not for some freelancers, the attack would have received far less attention. PUK officials and party media belittled it, alternatively, as an incident in the euphoria of celebrations or as Sheikh Jaafar Mustafa's personal feud. That agitated night and the deployment of Asayish forces by the sides of roads the days after made me feel my task much heavier. Almost every household has a gun at least and, as Gorran supporters gathered at Zargata Hill vowing to protect Nawshirwan Mustafa's grave at all costs, a violent escalation could not be excluded. Resentment and frustration were palpable[180]. Some Gorran militants began wondering if it was time to set up a militia, despite the party had set the goal of institutionalizing Peshmerga and Asayish. Furthermore, having come to the last part of fieldwork, I was digging through the most sensitive issues for this research precisely in those days. I was cautious even more, but I got paranoid at the idea that sclerotic security apparatuses might be over suspicious in my direction too.

The anecdote clarifies the violent state of exception in the opening quotation. PUK attack on Gorran was meant to show off military strength, but also pointed out a voting base riddled with bullets. I detailed local dynamics in Sulaymaniyah because it is the context with which I am most familiar, yet the

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[179] Gorran tweeted: "You rig your side and we will rig ours" - the cheats are united on one thing only - dividing our oil, our region and now our votes".

[180] The following morning a neighbour shared her thoughts: "it would have been better not to vote; at least, people would have saved their voice to protest. Instead, their votes have served PUK's interests". An AUIS graduate who helped me out with some translations commented with a forced smile: "I didn't manage to vote. I applied, but I didn't get the biometric ID. I would have been defrauded of my vote anyway, so it doesn't really matter". I am adding these quotations to give a sense of what was the general mood in the aftermath of the elections. The low turnout, after all, was a clear indication of disaffection, across the whole country actually.

same can be found in Erbil and Dohuk, where the iron fist of the establishment is actually hardwired in society even more. KDP and PUK keep running the game by means of militias and patronage. Peshmerga are the bulk of public employees, though their role is anything but public, as seen. The outsized military reflects the "continuing expansion of patronage-based recruitment" (van Wilgenburg & Fumerton 2017: 5). Albeit tribal loyalties and the liberation struggle are deeply rooted in the collective imaginary, Peshmerga's blind faith towards party leaders comes from socio-economic conditions since they are recruited from the most impoverished and less educated segments of society for the most part. In absence of other forms of income, joining up the army is the most readily available salary. Giving them a uniform to wear, a place to live, and a prestigious in-group identity to be proud of make the rest. Once I was looking at the long line of posters with the portraits of fallen Peshmerga, all of them posing with a shotgun and the party logo behind, a collaborator who was assisting me with some translations that day commented with pity: "Before the war against Daesh, they were nothing. They fought for a salary, not for Kurdistan. Parties celebrate their deeds and death, but the families are often left alone". Peshmerga are the hammer and the anvil at the service of Kurdish élites. This stands out when digging into smalls details, such as the criteria through which the KRG reduced government spending. Given economic recession a new system of salary distribution was introduced. From what I gathered, before the financial crisis about 700 million USD per month were set aside for paying salaries. In greater detail, 400 million USD were allocated for the military, while the remaining for civil servants. After the crisis, the overall budget was cut by one-quarter, but that was distributed unevenly: out of 500 million USD, only 120 million was intended for the civil service, with salaries being cut by over half. KRG funds, instead, are drained by the military, with salaries almost untouched. While figures may be more or less accurate, the math is pretty simple: "whenever an uprising starts, the military fellas will nip it in the bud". Therefore, the outcome is that protests are suppressed by the KDP-PUK oligarchy through the poorest class. In a manner of speaking, tribalism is stronger than class-consciousness. Since the KRG economy is fully dependent on oil earnings, it comes somewhat easy to say that oil money is there to enrich the establishment and crack down dissidents. The simplification works, but the matter is more complicated.

5.2. Party politics and the making of the oil complex

During interviews I naively raised questions on the agreements in place to export crude (legally and illegally) between the many stakeholders involved - be they governments, parties, or militias. I never got precise answers, quite understandably. Percentages and barrels swung widely depending on the source. As I was told once, "agreement lost its meaning in Iraq", which is to say that, though everyone is talking about it, the oil business is governed by ongoing negotiation in which agreements are much ad-hoc, temporary, and flimsy bargains that may easily change overnight and be even at odds with

concurrent ones. "Sometimes both sides stick to, most of times not". Hence, I needed another gateway to learn about informal practices beneath formal discourses. Despite the Iraqi visa allowed to conduct field research in the disputed areas as planned, during my second stay I decided instead to gather information inside the KRI borders because of the intervening changes outside. My informants warned that local administrations were undergoing high turnover, most notably in Kirkuk, after Peshmerga had surrendered all the territories to the ISF and Hashd al-Shaabi. I equally gave up the idea of visiting oilfields as I doubted that it would have been any helpful, let aside the fact that getting permits was not straightforward. As I was advised a year before, I narrowed down the field of research to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, where it was more likely to find knowledgeable people on the issues I was interested in. It was so indeed: a few journalists, advisors, and politicians from the ranks of opposition parties provided me with enough material to delineate the oil complex run in synergy by KDP and PUK, or at least to understand the dynamics within. Given time constraints, I was lucky with the selection of informants thanks to previous deskwork and connections. At the same time, I also learned that even in secretive contexts there is always someone willing to talk.

About the overlap between the KRG oligarchy and the petroleum industry, there are two interpretations. The prevalent one is that the oil dossier (from contracting to revenue management) is firmly in the hands of the KDP, whose strength is increasingly tied to the exclusive management of the resource pool, which makes the Barzani family capable of retaining power by disbursing allocations to clients and allies, while foreclosing the sector to anyone else. The second one places responsibility equally on KDP and PUK, both accused of having feasted on a flood of petrodollars for the benefits of a caste of profiteers. Although it is indisputable that the KDP has the upper hand, the relatively short story of extractivism in Kurdistan supports the thesis of co-responsibility between Barzani and Talabani clans. I provide here some evidence drawing primarily on a few torrential interviews with MNR insiders and external consultants in the energy sector, who asked to remain anonymous[181].

In the first place, it is worth noting that was actually the PUK to initiate the exploitation of hydrocarbons during the early 1990s. At the time, the KDP controlled all border crossings, and taxation of smuggling routes was a substantial source of income, estimated in 750 million USD annually (Chorev 2007: 4). For this reason, the PUK looked at the already discovered deposits in the green zone as a viable alternative to strengthen its position economically. In 1994 and 1996 two of the three wells in the Taq Taq oilfield, plugged in late 1950s but abandoned by Ba'athists during the Iraq-Iran war, were reactivated and small amounts of crude (about 3.000-5.000 bpd) began to be refined in Sulaymaniyah for domestic use only. It should be taken into account that Kurds were under a total embargo. By the

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[181] What follows is the synthesis of in-depth interviews for the most part. In order to make the discussion smooth and protect the confidentiality of data further, information is not immediately linked to the source as it is in the rest of this research. When relevant, secondary sources were added in footnotes, instead.

early 2000s both parties had signed separate exploration contracts with foreign independent wildcatters, for whom investment opportunities outweighed the chances of getting banned by the Iraqi central government: as said, Genel Enerji and Addax in Taq Taq, and DNO in the KDP-controlled Tawke were pioneers. The balance of power over the oil complex, which was gradually taking shape, was reversed in favour of the KDP with the creation of the KRG in 2006. Geopolitics was not neutral since the border crossing into Turkey via Zahko and Fish Kabur was the only prospective export route. The shift also followed the rise of Ashti Hawrami, a British-educated oil engineer and CEO of the ECL Group Plc who was requested by the then PM Barham Salih (from PUK) to lead the newly established MNR. Hawrami told he was reluctant at first and he was begged to accept several times. Anyway, since then he has occupied that seat without interruption, becoming the dealmaker of every PSA struck in the region and the designer of the KRG energy policy. When he first set foot into the MNR, Hawrami was not yet credited as the most precious operating arm of the Barzani family as it turned out to be, but "the KDP put a hat on his head" with good timing. The KDP played its cards right, so to speak; Hawrami's deputy, who was selected from PUK in order to ensure fair redistribution between ruling parties, resigned once he realized that all the authority had been transferred in the sole person of the Minister. Under guidance of Hawrami, the MNR came to be the real treasury of the KRG. At the time all the eyes in the PUK were looking to Baghdad and the party handed over the oil dossier to the KDP in exchange for support to Mam Jalal's[182] candidacy for the Iraqi presidency. It was definitely a gross miscalculation, whereas Barzani consciously placed his trusted men at the head of fundamental ministries. As one interviewee commented, "we passed from owing oil to begging for charity". However, the oil business was never beyond control of PUK completely. Albeit from a subordinate position, the Talabani family in particular has been able to exert pressure on the revenue distribution.

The one-party rule explanation is inadequate, indeed, for a series of considerations. First, even though revenue collection comes through the KDP-run MNR, Barzani and Talabani agreed upon a redistribution mechanism along the same lines of the formula for the allocation of the regional budget (KDP 54%, PUK 46%). In the context of mutual allegations of oil theft, the fact remains that bargaining on revenue between the two parties is done in secret. No one knows how the money comes in, where it goes, and how it is spent. The revenue partly disappears internationally in Turkish or Swiss bank accounts, partly flows into the Kurdistan International Bank (KIB), which is chaired by Salar Mustafa Hakim, husband of Nechirvan Barzani's aunt. Yet, the Oil and Gas Law (Law n. 22/2007) had marked out an institutional framework, though not implemented. Before the promulgation, about 16 contracts had been signed off by KDP and PUK without passing through the Parliament or any regulation whatsoever. The 61 articles of the law were intended then to set up procedures covering all aspects of oil and gas governance, but most provisions were not applied because of the reticence of

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[182] Mam (Uncle) Jalal is the affectionate moniker by which he was known to his people.

ruling parties. Indeed, the institutional and legal vacuum has given priority to the already preponderant MNR and the Regional Council for the Oil and Gas Affairs, which was the only body effectively created on the basis of Law n. 22. And not by chance: the Regional Council is the bipartisan negotiating table approving petroleum contracts. Since the PSCs offered by the MRN typically include clauses of advance payment for the concession of exploration and production rights, the approval of contracts means cashing billionaire cheques immediately. In absence of institutional precautions to disengage the process from party politics, the "sweetness" of advance payments turned everything sour. Five members only have a seat in the Regional Council: the PM, the deputy PM, the Minister of the MNR, the Minister of Economy and Finance, and the Minister of Planning. The PUK occasionally had more members than KDP in the Council and no oil contract has been signed without them. For all the other parties, the door is closed. If that were not enough, a two-member KDP-PUK commission was formed in 2008 to ensure the balanced distribution of the "hidden revenue" falling outside the contracts approved by the Regional Council[183]. The high commission, which is virtually non-existent if looking at the official KRG structure, is made up exclusively of PM Nechirvan Barzani and the PUK treasurer Deler Saeed Majid.

Second, contracts are revealing as well. The MNR made available through its websites most PSAs signed from 2002 to 2011, basically the pre-ExxonMobil contracts[184]. Every contract has the double signature of the KRG PM and of the MNR Minister. Hence, the agreements between September 2009 and January 2012 displays the signature of Barham Salih (or the deputy, Omer Fattah) who was leading the cabinet during that period. It might be argued that with the end of Salih's interregnum and Nechirvan Barzani back in the saddle the ticket Barzani-Hawrami exemplifies KDP's full grip on the energy sector. In fact, the signature tells another detail that is worthy of attention: the subtext signals that the document is signed "on behalf of the Regional Council for the Oil and Gas Affairs of the [KRI]". We will see more in depth later that this body has been the fastener between KDP and PUK shared interest in the governance of hydrocarbons.

Third, every single drop of crude (excluding the amounts trucked illegally) is channelled through the KRG pipeline without prejudice to the colour of the area from which it is extracted. Gorran and some PUK MPs condemn an unbalanced development of energy infrastructures to the disadvantage of the Sulaymaniyah Governorate, where major natural gas fields are located. KDP is also blamed for having almost exhausted the Taq Taq field. The charges are actually out of focus. Whereas recoverable oil in Taq Taq is declining, significant steps have been made in the direction of developing gas fields in the

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[183] "PUK and KDP set up a high commission for the distribution of oil", Awene, October 7, 2008; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

[184] On the contrary, the most recent ones are not published. The model of PSCs was amended starting from the agreement with ExxonMobil reached on October 18, 2011. The list available at: https://goo.gl/i2WMPY

green zone, after the problematic judiciary saga with Crescent Petroleum in the Chamchamal district[185]: Gazprom Neft is a big investor in Sarqala in the Garmyian block, where WesternZagros also expanded the scale of activity; Genel Energy has bet on Miran (and Bina Bawi) fields; the same applies to the substantial reserves in Chamchamal and Khor Mor, both operated by the Crescent Petroleum consortium; WesternZagros and Repsol acquired stakes in Kurdamir and Topkhana. Being a physically volatile commodity, natural gas is less flexible than oil: besides capital expenditure, the low density of the substance binds production to fixed transportation schemes, which imply long-term contracts and large-scale infrastructures. This accounts for the delayed advancement of gas exploitation inside the KRI. However, Rosneft's commitment to the construction of a pipeline to export natural gas into Turkey and Europe gave an unequivocal sign, taken by KDP and PUK leaders in full accordance.

Fourth, aside from the agreed share of royalties and profits from petroleum operations upon which the KRG alliance is based, the PUK takes advantage of the underbelly of the extractive regime. As mentioned, this is consistent with an overall pattern according to which the two royal households monopolize the economy. Patrimonialism has roots in tribal ties, which extended allegiance into business empires, with no independent checks on the private use of public monies. KDP and PUK leaders are owners or shareholders of most local enterprises. In the green zone, for instance, the Nokan Group is considered to be "the financial outlet" of PUK (Rubin 2018: 332). Co-founded by the already mentioned Deler Saeed Majid, the Nokan Group has 23 subsidiary companies and an estimated net worth of 4-5 billion USD[186]. Not by chance, the company is headquartered in the PUK General Management building in Sulaymaniyah. Besides evident conflicts of interest, the PUK-run company has been involved in illegal occupations and transfers of land, typically to reward party leaders and their cronies. Even when there are no direct links to party members, economic assets and activities are under party control. According to a confidential cable of the US State Department, the profits of the Sulaymaniyah-based telecommunication company Asiacell are evenly split between the company and three members of the PUK Politburo, to give one example[187]. Back to the oil and gas industry, all the private companies providing mid- and downstream services in the PUK area operate under supervision of the party, in one way or another. The same occurs in the KDP-held yellow zone. Next paragraph adds further details.

Therefore, the manoeuvring of ruling parties around energy issues shall be broken down in three levels. At the outermost one, KDP and PUK forged an alliance to defy and bypass the central government. As seen in the previous chapter, this has taken place by holding out a more investor-friendly

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[185] See infra p. 207.

[186] "Nokan Group and the PUK business empire", Kurdish Tribune, May 26, 2012; available at: https://bit.ly/2WPKt7P

[187] US Embassy Baghdad, "Corruption in the Kurdish North", Wikileaks Cable: 06KIRKUK37_a; February 16, 2006; available at: https://bit.ly/2HZJS02

environment (i.e. tax free) for upstream operators and by selling crude at a deep discount[188] despite the fall in prices, which stands as a demonstration of the importance of achieving a breakthrough on the energy markets. "Baghdad was chasing us"[189], Minister Bakir commented, using a verb that conveys the idea well. This strategic goal, intended to earn the favour of international actors before even cashing in, is shared by KRG elites regardless of divisions. Setting a barrier against internal competitors equally unites KDP and PUK leaders indeed. Whereas military apparatuses are an insurance against oppositions, control over the oil complex was implemented through legal and economic arrangements for the purpose of preventing decentralization and parliamentary oversight. Yet, the innermost layer of oil politics is marked by subterranean clashes between the two hegemons. KDP managed to cement primacy thanks to the occupation of the MNR and the Khurmala-Fish Kabur conduit running through the yellow zone, which made Turkey the immediate interlocutor of KRG exports at the expense of PUK close relationship with Iran, but the PUK has managed to tap into the stream of revenue both directly and indirectly. Beyond divergent alignments looking towards antagonistic patrons, the energy battle found expression in the disputed areas even more. The ruthless escalation on Kirkuk in October 2018 is explicative.

Opacity, enclaveness, predation

As said, legal and institutional gap paved the way for the manipulation of the revenue system by elites within the elite. A few key members in KDP and PUK, mostly from the Barzani and Talabani houses, handle the stream of cash. Even at the level of political bureaus only a handful of senior leaders are aware of the process. The strictly controlled disbursement allowed both leaderships to establish discipline inside the party ranks and avert power grabs. Not all officials, therefore, benefited from the oil money, which unleashed intra-party conflicts between winning and losing groups. All this happens outside a proper bookkeeping system.

The KRG brings weak excuses for not revealing data on oil. Initially it was to avoid sensitive information falling into the hands of Baghdad or whoever could take advantage of them against the noble cause of Kurdish autonomy, but this argument has grown weaker over time. The patrimonial elites are more afraid of prying eyes at home, which was the reason for bringing people from abroad to manage oil production and trade in all its phases. If recruitment of local staff by IOCs is low in general and skewed towards low-skilled jobs[190], top advisors to the MNR itself are quite often from UK and

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[188] This is the case of the 50-year long energy partnership signed with TEC.
[189] Interview n. 41
[190] Kurds employed at the managerial level are about 10% of the total. "Who is going to manage the oil and gas industry of the future in Kurdistan?", MNR, March 2, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/bWVroK

US[191]. Although justified by the need of hiring competent and specialized professionals in a highly technical industry, the reliance on foreign staff offered an additional way of insulating core segments of the commodification chain. In 2008 Iraq joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), a non-profit organization promoting transparency standards for petroleum and mining industries, but since then the KRG has not shared data to be included in the EITI reporting process on the country. As goodwill gesture, in January 2018 the MRN released an independent audit conducted by Deloitte, but the exercise was not sufficiently detailed and, moreover, not based on different sources than the KRG itself[192]. The publication of production and trade data has been sporadic and inconsistent, to say the least. If one considers the discrepancy between what is reported on the MNR website and what is effectively shipped in Ceyhan, coupled with the circumstance that the National Assembly has not passed a regional budget in years[193], opacity is the trademark of a dual administration siphoning off oil earnings uncontrolled. The Head of the parliamentary Finance Committee, Ali Hama-Salih, released some data highlighting an obvious incongruity between the number of barrels exported and the amount of sales, for which an average of 500 million USD was gone missing each month[194]. The Oil and Gas Revenue Fund Law, provided for in Law n. 22/2007, first submitted to the attention of MPs in 2011, and finally enacted in April 2015 was welcomed as an avenue through which put a check on the misappropriation of public funds accruing from oil exports, but the accounting mechanism of revenue inflows/outflows has not been implemented so far. The board in charge of the Fund, which must be proposed by the Council of Ministers, is still empty. The circumstance shows how rough the waters of reforms are inside a self-protecting oligarchy.

The misapplication of Law n. 22/2007 still remains the paramount example. According to the law, five public entities ought to be established: i) Kurdistan Exploration and Production Company (KEPCO), a Kurdish upstream operator free to compete with IOCs for winning authorisations in future fields and enter into joint ventures inside and beyond the KRI; ii) Kurdistan National Oil Company (KNOC), intended to participate in the management of current fields; iii) Kurdistan Oil Marketing Organisation (KOMO), to directly trade or regulate the marketing of petroleum products; iv) Kurdistan Organisation for Downstream Operations (KODO), to manage KRG-owned infrastructures and create subsidiaries operating in the downstream sector; and iv) Kurdistan Oil Trust Organisation (KOTO), as the safe box where all revenue from current and future fields shall be brought together, under parliamentary

[191] Such as Ian McIntosh, tasked of assisting the Ministry precisely on the development and training of local workforce, and Michael Howard, of Kurdish origin from his father's side.
[192] "Selective Transparency: Things You Can't See About KRG Oil", Patrick Osgood, April 25, 2018; available at: https://goo.gl/KNpBoR
[193] Ivi.
[194] "Iraqi Kurdish MP says 500m "disappears" each month from Kurdish oil sales", KNN TV, November 30, 2015; retrieved from BBC Monitoring. Nicknamed "the Calculator", the MP from Gorran became popular for his placing the accent on how MNR figures on crude exports and sales do not add up.

oversight. After three cabinets, none of these bodies has seen the light of the day. The board members were to be appointed by the Council of Ministers, and from there approved by the parliament by absolute majority, within a 90-day timeframe, but nominations were not done. The political deadlock in which the region has plunged in recent years has a great deal to do with such aborted procedure. If set effectively into motion, Law n. 22/2007 would strip the MNR much of its oversized authority since the legal entities above would operate independently from it, while MNR functions would be limited to regulation and supervision. At the present time, on the contrary, every decision goes back to Ashti Hawrami himself.

As a consequence, KDP and PUK also kept the road clear for a massive and extensive involvement in midstream and downstream activities. I pointed out before that Kurdish economy is dominated by vertically integrated conglomerates owned or in any case controlled by patrimonial elites matching party bureaus. The local sub-contractors providing services to foreign upstream operators represent a lucrative and relatively lawless hotspot swallowed by Barzani and Talabani clans. Most KDP and PUK officials have shares in the business, whether it be through a security firm, a construction company, procurement of logistics, or even illegal refineries. Even though the scale is much lower than oil profits, just like the case of revenue management ruling parties are jealous of holding the higher ground to license all the complementary activities involved in oil and gas extraction. Given the mammoth size of patronage, the oil complex is the saving grace for the party's finance. Even more so, the dispensation of oil-related benefits enables to smooth oppositions and settle internal squabbles when necessary[195]. Two weeks before the Peshmerga took over the oilfields around Kirkuk in 2014, for instance, a delegation consisting of PM Nechirvan Barzani, the deputy PM Qubad Talabani, the MNR Minister Ashti Hawrami, and the then Governor of Kirkuk Najmiddin Karim flew to Turkey in order to obtain the go-ahead from President Erdogan. Talabani and Karim spoke on behalf of the PUK and, hence, doubling the KRG oil output by the addition of the disputed oilfields in Kirkuk was a joint decision of ruling parties; nevertheless, not all the PUK wings got equally rewarded and the unequal treatment sparked issues. Next section goes a bit deeper.

KAR and Qaiwan are the major Kurdish oil services providers. Both are industrial conglomerates with a diversified portfolio of activities encompassing oil refining, energy trading, power generation, real estate construction, and hospitality. They are closely tied to KDP and PUK respectively. The Erbil-

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[195] "[KDP and PUK] leaders can give portions of money to smaller parties to make them quieter. If someone is moving up within the party, they will give him a branch of security or a service company. If a problem gets out the party, that's because someone asked for more. And he will receive more in the end. It is pretty much the same old thing in the yellow zone and the green zone, but the KDP does not wash the dirty laundry in public". Wings in competition inside the two main parties take advantage of the oil game to get more leverage both in terms of decision-making power and resources broadly defined. KDP's territorial projection in the plain of Nineveh was also related to rivalries between factions. Beyond Kirkuk, the PUK had similar problems in Garmiyan. These are open secrets, but for safety reasons I am omitting names or details, while putting across, instead, the general idea.

based KAR Group won in 2004 a 25-year contract tendered by the KRG for the rehabilitation of the Khurmala dome (which is part of the Kirkuk formation, though lying within the KRI) and started production in 2009. The high-quality crude extracted from Khurmala supplies the refinery in Kalak, the biggest production plant of this kind in the region with a refining capacity of 100.000 bpd, owned and operated by KAR itself. Looking at the extensive footprint in the yellow zone and the full participation in the MNR's strategy (i.e. KAR has shares in Rosneft's infrastructural projects), it is rather clear that the company is politically connected with Barzani's interests. After the ISIS insurgency changed the energy map in favour of the expansion of KRG holdings in the disputed areas, the firm replaced NOC in Bai Hassan and Avana, and later was banned by the Iraqi parliament from the Kirkuk oilfields when the security situation on the ground reversed again[196]. Since 2009 the Sulaymaniyah-based Qaiwan Group operates the Bazian refinery, the second largest inside the KRI and recently upgraded to a capacity of 34.000 bpd. The Bazian refinery is owned by WZA's Petroleum, the oil and gas arm of the Nokan Group. The CEO of WZA and the Chair of the executive board of the Nokan Group are actually the same person: Parwen Babakir, former Ministry of Industry in the PUK separate administration from 2003 to 2006 and a high-profile party member keeping tabs on PUK interests in the oil and gas sector. The warping of the economy is the rule, not the exception. Beyond KAR and Qaiwan, ruling parties tied a rope around the Kurdish private firms in the sector (such as Zagros Oil & Gas, UB Holding, Eagle Group, Sher Oil, and Ster Group to mention but a few).

Not only the lines between political and economic elites are blurred. The same distinction between legal and illegal is evanescent as well. Next chapter hints at the largely illegal small-sized topping plants that are usually given to cronies in order to ensure their loyalty to the party. Nonetheless, the Kalak refinery itself was at the centre of legal issues[197]. The two rivals have made allegations against each other about smuggling crude for their interest: the KDP through the border crossing of Ibrahim Khalil, while the PUK mainly via Parwez Khan. In November 2017, PUK officials in the Ninewa governorate reported that KDP authorities were extracting oil from the wells in Guwer in the Makhmour district (still under Peshmerga control despite the retaliation of ISF across disputed areas), refining it in Lanaz and then trucking out into Turkey[198]. The PUK is accused of facilitating the Hashd al-Shaabi in trading barrels from Daquq, south of Kirkuk, to Iran[199]. What is certain is that intense oil trucking can be seen

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[196] "Iraq Bans Kurdish Firm Kar Group from Operating Kirkuk Oil Fields", Reuters, January 8, 2018; available at: https://goo.gl/ocX61T

[197] Reportedly, the KAR-owned refinery was transferred under the authority of the KRG Investment Commission in December 2015 and, consequently, was exempted from paying taxes for 10 years. According to the Oil and Gas Law the refinery shall be under control of the MNR. Moreover, it is somewhat curious that a 2 million USD budget was approved for its construction when the refinery was already in place.

[198] "Iraqi Kurdish parties trade oil smuggling accusations", November 23, 2017; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

[199] "Hashd al-Shaabi smuggling oil from Kirkuk to Iran: MP", Kurdistan 24, May 09, 2018; available at: https://goo.gl/uxxKUk

with the naked eye on both frontlines every day[200], and the involvement of Peshmerga in overseeing oil-smuggling routes is equally clear. The Committee of Natural Resources lamented on several occasions the lack of transparency, with the long suspension of parliamentary activities further contributing to it. Sherko Jawdat, who chairs the committee, alleged that PUK officials in Kirkuk were exporting in 2016 around 30.000 bpd to Iran following an agreement struck by the Iraqi central government and NOC, whereas an equal amount was also refined in Dukan, with the KRG and the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah unaware of the business[201]. I am not in the position of validating the statements above, of course, but they are unlikely to be baseless. Monitoring a few artisanal "teapot refineries" just outside Sulaymaniyah or the relentless traffic of oil tankers across the Iranian border is sufficient to get an idea of the ambiguity surrounding midstream and downstream activities. Most insiders into these issues confirmed that smuggling oil out of Kirkuk or elsewhere is an open secret. When the offensive against ISIS was on fire in 2015, the Russian Ministry of Defence had released documentation implying KDP's complicity in ISIS oil trade on the black market, staunchly rejected by the KRG[202]. The PUK received similar charges insofar as a subsidiary of the Nokan Group, Meer Soma, was rumoured to transport refined products from ISIS-held refineries[203]. After all, the crude sold by ISIS to finance a full-scale war did not remain stranded in the wells under siege. It found its way thanks to a vast array of middlemen and brokers. As far as Iraq is concerned, transit routes crossed the Anbar desert towards the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor[204], but it also passed through the Kurdish-controlled checkpoints on the Turkish and Iranian borders[205]. At the very least, it can be said that the military frontlines in-between Peshmerga and ISIS militants were rather porous and murky with regard to oil traders. The implication of KDP and PUK members was found by a KRG commission of inquiry, according to which the illegal trade with ISIS amounted to 1 million USD a day[206].

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[200] Historically, the illegal cross-border trade of goods in general has been prosperous and is the main source of income for local economies, particularly on the Iranian side where thousands cross-border porters (known as *kolbar*) rely on it.

[201] "Kurdish MP: Kirkuk oil secretly going to Iran; PUK officials involved", Rudaw, September 7, 2016; available at: https://goo.gl/FMVoFq

[202] "Iraqi Kurds "reject" Russian allegations on ISIS oil sales to Turkey", Shar Press, December 3, 2015; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

[203] "UK, US turn blind eye to Islamic State oil sales", Middle East Eye, July 31, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/HDMZ1A

[204] "Inside Isis Inc: The journey of a barrel of oil", Financial Times, February 29, 2016; available at: https://goo.gl/zsyKMz

[205] "Inside Islamic State's oil empire: how captured oilfields fuel Isis insurgency", Guardian, November 19, 2014; available at: https://goo.gl/v3jsyc

[206] "Erbil committee finds Kurdistan officials implicated in smuggling with ISIS", Rudaw, January 20, 2015; available at: https://goo.gl/2Xg3wW

Kirkuk: fuelling the frontline

I quoted an informant before about the ambivalence and the fragility of any agreement in Iraq. A fixer I collaborated with would agree, but probably add that "everything is a deal in Iraq". When it comes to strengthening hands in negotiations over the disputed territories the oil argument is the bone of contention for all parties involved. Given the demographic balance leaning towards a Kurdish majority, the central government has been wary of promoting censuses for settling the administrative status in accordance with article 140. Most Shi'a nationalists, once pro-Kurdish advocates, shifted the debate from land ownership to revenue management on purpose. The knotty and torn stalemate on Kirkuk was a major theme of fieldwork since it promised to keep together all dimensions. Yet, it was also the hardest to decipher and, I must confess, I did not succeed in entering local politics. The fixer above had warned me when I explained him what I was going after:

> "You are not going to get this kind of information from these people [officials and commanders]. It might be that they do not even know what is going on. While those heading oil companies… the government keep an eye on them; they are told not to disclose any information. People got killed. That is why no one outside the country sees the picture. Though I have some contacts in Erbil that might be useful for you."[207]

As he had predicted the representatives in the provincial council and the local party officials I spoke with wanted to be sure I got the message that everything in Kirkuk was clean and safe. They were irritated by my questions. I have already described in chapter III the doubts I had after those meetings and how I changed the rules of engagement thereafter. Few weeks before, unknown gunmen had killed the deputy director of the North Gas Company (NGC) at a checkpoint[208]. The fixer alluded that he had spoken out some information to the media and that was the likely reason of the assassination. Kirkukis are confronted with a highly fraught security situation due to inter-communal grievances and ISIS remnants. Attacks against energy infrastructures and the Oil Police patrolling oilfields in the area have continued as well in the post-ISIS scenario[209]. Therefore, my glimpse into oil-related conflicts in Kirkuk cannot be all-round and is rather taken from a distance. Mindful of this shortcoming, I am providing below a brief reconstruction of the recent transfer of power and of KDP-PUK feuding.

I reviewed the KRG overall position on the disputed territories in the previous chapter. A KRG representative politely corrected me saying that the label "disputed" attached to predominantly

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[207] Interview n. 19

[208] "Senior Oil Official Assassinated South of Kirkuk", National Iraqi News Agency, May 2, 2017; available at: https://bit.ly/2OPfyFO

[209] "Four killed protecting pipeline warehouse outside Kirkuk", Iraqi Oil Report, July 11, 2018; available at: https://goo.gl/azk3uH

Kurdish-inhabited areas is unfair and historically inaccurate[210]. After the ISF 12th Division abandoned Kirkuk and Peshmerga stepped in their place, Masoud Barzani declared that "the Iraqi army shall never again return", stressing that the Kurdistani soil upon which the city relies is soaked in the blood of the martyrs fallen against Daesh[211]. It was expected that, with ISIS gradually falling apart, Kirkuk would have pushed again into the centre of the storm given the irreconcilable resolve of federal and regional governments. In the run-up of the referendum Barzani was already on his way to announce that the governorate would have received a special status within an independent Kurdistan. The Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi showed off even more resoluteness by issuing on October 12 a 48-hour ultimatum for the restoration of federal authority. Peshmerga were sealing all entrances to the city; they were preparing for war. Although Erbil emphasized the correction of historical inequalities and Baghdad the necessary integrity of the constitutional framework, the lure of oil was central for both sides. The KRG had managed to keep the oil production steady since mid-2015 until then precisely because of the inclusion of Kirkuk oilfields: if that share is subtracted, the overall level falls quite significantly. It fell indeed. With the surrender, in less than 24 hours the KRG lost about 36 wells and more than half of total production. Otherwise, Ashti Hawrami would be still cherishing the idea of pushing it to the fateful threshold of one million bpd. The much-coveted economic independence meant Kirkuk, basically. Therefore, the loss was catastrophic by all means. The Kurdish flags were symbolically lowered; Arab officials were appointed in place of Kurdish majors in Kirkuk, Daquq, Taz Khurmatu, and Sargaran; the same happened with the Kurdish directors of NOC[212]. Marginalisation in the decision-making process was compounded by resurgence of Arabization practices[213] and displacement of some 100,000 Kurdish residents[214]. On a more internal dimension, and leaving aside the KRG financial distress, the ISF takeover renewed the old fracture between ruling parties. Although KDP and PUK knew the limits, these were almost trespassed in the wake of the dramatic night of October 16, 2017, when Bafel Talabani ordered Peshmerga to withdraw from Kirkuk[215] and Masoud Barzani accused the long-time rivals of backstabbing the nationalist cause.

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[210] Interview n. 39

[211] "Top Kurdish leader says Iraqi army not welcome in Kirkuk", February 17, 2015; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

[212] "Kurdish officials lament Baghdad's 'Arabisation' of Kirkuk", Awene, December 30, 2017; retrieved from BBC Monitoring.

[213] See, for instance: "Kirkuk village locals express fears of Arabization as they face eviction order", Kurdistan 24, July 1, 2018; available at: https://goo.gl/pbCqZ4

[214] "Humanitarians are reaching thousands of recently displaced people", UNOCHA, October 21, 2017; available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/humanitarians-are-reaching-thousands-recently-displaced-people-enarku

[215] An eyewitness of that night used these words: "All of the sudden the order arrived. Peshmerga were ready to fight. Most of them were crying in shame while retreating. It was the best decision possible because it avoided the fight. Fight and die ... for what? But they made an unforgivable mistake because they had not informed their people in due time. People in Kirkuk felt betrayed. They said them: 'you robbed us of our dignity'. And now the PUK lost most of its consent, though they will get votes anyway because a lot of people depend on the party". The interview took place some days before the Iraqi general election.

A step back is needed to understand how the whole thing even got that far. In 2014, the opportunity to secure the exportation of crude from the oil-rich province led KDP and PUK to new arrangements, but that also created a sense of threat between them. Kirkuk suddenly became a new pole in the game in that how oil is exported and managed were thorny questions to be revisited. Although the Talabani family has had far greater popular support than any other political faction in the city, the PUK could not realize the full potential of the new situation without KDP's cooperation: having control of oilfields security-wise was, indeed, almost meaningless given that crude had to be pumped anyway into the KDP-controlled pipeline. The fight between ISIS forces and PUK Peshmerga flared up in Jawlawla, in the Diyala Governorate. The KDP sat on the sidelines, but when the ISF withdrew Barzani deployed his own forces in the western part of the super-giant oilfield in Kirkuk. Aso Almani, the head of the local PUK branch, subsequently moved troops in the eastern part. The two parties were behind each other: KDP forces occupied Bai Hassan and Avanah, with the KAR Group becoming the only operator in both fields; PUK forces took hold of Khabbaz, Jambur, and Baba Gurgur and left their management to NOC (though requesting the involvement of Nokan for transportation). The deployments would have not changed, though the situation on the ground was fluid. On March 2, 2017, the PUK-affiliated special police unit (known as "Black Force") at Almani's orders occupied NOC headquarters and seized a pumping facility in the eastern side of the Kirkuk oilfield, halting exports temporarily[216]. The armed deployment was intended to make pressure and force Baghdad to stick to a previous agreement for the establishment of a refinery in Kirkuk, whereas at the time most of crude was diverted instead to the KAR-run refinery in Kalak. Since that was advantageous for the KDP only, the Black Force's irruption was a way to request a due share. On August 3, the Iraqi PM al-Abadi himself defused the situation in a meeting with the PUK leaders in Sulaymaniyah.

Besides inter-party infighting, however, the oil battlefield was up for grabs between rival PUK factions also. That was evident when Hero Ahmed sent a secret letter to al-Abadi asking to reportedly stop oil supplies from Kirkuk wells to the KRG and reroute 50.000 bpd elsewhere (30.000 bpd of them trucked to Iran and the remaining 20,000 refined in Dukan)[217]. While the details of the letter are not available and there are conflicting views, it is certain that the initiative was unilateral and angered Barham Salih and Kosrat Rasol, who decided to subsequently establish a decision-making body against the hegemony "of a controlling group within the party (...) busy with secret oil deals"[218]. The implicit reference, of course, was to the heirs of Mam Jalal. Najmiddin Karim played an equally audacious game. Former Jalal Talabani's personal doctor, though opposed by Lahur, Bafel, and Qubad, the Governor of Kirkuk

[216] "Black Force deployed to Kirkuk oilfields seeks permanent role", Rudaw, April 15, 2017; available at: https://bit.ly/2uOiY2A

[217] "Hero Ibrahim Ahmad: Smear campaign or political crisis?", Al Jazeera, September 14, 2006; available at: https://bit.ly/2K9F8XD

[218] "PUK deputies announced new decision-making body, Iraqi Kurdistan", Ekurd, September 2016; available at: https://bit.ly/2A698wa

made a deal with the KRG, which entailed a monthly cheque of 10 million USD. Baghdad did not interfere; with the ISIS insurgency blowing up, the central government did not have the ability to project sufficient military power there to make the KDP and the PUK back down. The cash flow sent by Erbil was not meant to pay the salaries of public servants, but was given without restrictions instead. The Governor could spend it as he wished[219]. This is indicative that the KRG was not interested in taking over the local administration. Barzani's own calculation was that getting revenues from the oilfields was actually better than including the governorate within the administrative boundaries since the political dynamics in the region would have become unfavourable in view of PUK's leverage in Kirkuk. Anyway, the Governor's vocal support for the referendum was read as a sign of very amicable relations with the KDP, as the events would have later demonstrated given that, shortly after his ousting, Karim fled to Erbil and his PUK party membership was revoked by the Politburo.

The escalation with Baghdad has to be put, then, into this already tense background. The KRG did not have really any choice but to withdraw from Kirkuk, but the burden of the decision was essentially down to the PUK since it was the largest political and military force. The US gave green light to the ISF and the Hashd al-Shaabi for the attack, and Qasem Solaimani equally warned Sulaymaniyah that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps would have taken side with Baghdad. There was no match in terms of equipment and troops. Moreover, the PUK would have been politically isolated on every side. Therefore, the choice was whether being annihilated in Kirkuk, which would have meant most likely the end of the PUK as such, or not. The Talabanis opted for reaching a compromise with Baghdad (and Iranian proxies) avoiding the bloodshed. It might be argued with malice that the KDP would have preferred the rival to pick the fight. However, the sudden capitulation on the night of October 16 was ruinous, to say the least. Right the day before Ashti Hawrami had signed a gas deal with Rosneft and KDP-PUK leaders had held a bilateral meeting in Dukan, Talabani's heartland, without mentioning the possibility of surrender. The PUK lost the most important political and administrative positions. The reputational loss was even higher as giving up the would-be capital of an independent Kurdistan without firing a shot was a crippling humiliation, blamed by KDP supporters as the highest act of treason.

The multiple frontlines intersecting in Kirkuk, an oil-city that bleeds black gold, are quite illustrative of the theoretical proposition put forward in chapter II, which sees resource geographies as relational spaces for the negotiation and contestation of identity.

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[219] According to Ali Hama Salih, one-third of the total amount sent from 2016 to mid-2017 was unaccounted and, thus, where and to whom petrodollars were deposited is unknown. "Iraqi Parliament Makes a Decision about Kirkuk Oil Money", KirkukNow, March 6, 2018; available at: https://goo.gl/R7ZotS

Dissenting voices

In the PUK zone the 2017 referendum was welcomed with half-hearted feeling and most people gave a half-hearted yes, being mindful that after the expiration of the presidential mandate Masoud Barzani was stirring up the ardent struggle for self-determination in order to pursue, in fact, a personal goal – that is to say, forging a Barzanistan upon his leadership. Disdain against the political class was reflective of a widespread malaise. That said, for many the referendum still was a historic opportunity to speak up for Kurdish existence and exercise that right. About independency, nonetheless, Kurds were less cohesive than one would expect. Whereas KDP officials drew on the ready-to-use patriotic arsenal and maintained that Baghdad had buried the spirit of the federal constitution, the PUK conditioned its support to the re-activation of the parliament. Opposition parties were more vocal in this respect by condemning the one-party based process behind; accordingly, Gorran and Komal boycotted the committee in charge of preparing the consultation. During the first round of fieldwork the party representatives I interviewed often discussed energy issues in the perspective of the then forthcoming referendum. MPs from the oppositions shared the fear of further balkanization and blamed the lack of institutional capacity in the oil and gas sector as the bottleneck of a corrupted economy in disarray. The members of the parliamentary committee on natural resources, in particular, stressed the obstruction against legislative proposals and amendments aimed at filling in the institutional voids. Many interviewees attribute the shutdown of the National Assembly precisely to the draft laws aimed at making parliamentary oversight operational (especially through KODO) and, in such a manner, ensuring transparency and efficiency along the whole production chain. Hence, the rush forward a non-binding declaration of independence was interpreted as a way of shifting the blame on the many open questions with the central government and diverting attention from the paralysis of the political system. The extracts below are indicative of these positions.

> "Institutions are empty vessels. The KDP literally took over all the ministries and the MNR in particular. Without a watchdog, nor a regulator, issues of national security and national interest are monopolised by party politics. I cannot emphasise enough how much the Parliament is fundamental, because it links everything we are talking about: oil, referendum, Constitution."[220]

> "Before any step towards political independence, it is utmost necessary to have economic capacity, infrastructures, and effective institutions. The KRG has failed to use natural resources, and oil in particular, to serve other economic sectors. In fact, just the opposite happened. This would be wrong for every country; it is twice wrong for Kurdistan because we are landlocked"[221]

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[220] Interview n. 18
[221] Interview n. 25

"Barzani's KDP never called for independence in history. Not even federalism, but self-autonomy. Barzani wants a kind of emirate on the model of the Gulf monarchies. Secondly, this is no about Kurds and Kurdish nationalism. It is about getting more oil to exploit [in disputed areas]."[222]

"The oil sector affected negatively the democratization process. From the beginning we had a very poor performance in terms of transparency, with systematic frauds. Problems have not been solved and people lost trust towards the government. The political battles out there are hidden energy battles. Political parties should be far away from touching the oil sector, which should be institutionally organised."[223]

Among opponents, therefore, frustration with the institutional deadlock is inseparable from severe criticism of the landlord mentality that persists within the KDP, blamed for appropriating oil revenues for the party interests, as was the case in the past for custom duties. Given the balance of power, PUK is held accountable for the same policies and practices, though to a lesser extent. The call for transparent and accountable procedures in the oil and gas sector was coherent with the public debate and I was not real surprised. More interesting, instead, were formal conversations with KRG bureaucrats, who shined a light on some less debated points, revealing for instance a quite different viewpoint on independence. I should like to quote a couple of longer passages.

"In my personal view we cannot manage our natural resources far from Baghdad. We need Iraq and also Iraq needs us. We still are a federal region. It is not economic independence to rely on less than 1 million bpd, with falling prices, with lack of transparency, with a huge budget constraint, and with the lack of income-generating activities. You need reforms before, and a cut in the unlawful spending [of main parties]. The route for independence goes through Baghdad; not without, nor through Teheran or Ankara. When the Ba'ath Party came (despite the ideological orientation of Arab-controlled governments in Iraq) in some points they had a better vision for building the country than our Kurdish government. Natural resources were centralised and denied to Kurdistan. Anyway, we would need, I think, a Ba'ath-like government without a one-party rule. At the time we had one of the most advanced Ministry of Planning in the Middle East, but warfare and ideology prevented Iraq to become a developed country. I am in favour of coexistence, but some people here get chauvinist in being so much nationalistic."[224]

"Our region is small. And the market in our region is small. The natural and eventual bigger market for our products is the rest of Iraq. Now, we realised that at the same time the rest of Iraq needs us too. This relationship must continue because we depend on each other more than we should depend on other neighbouring countries. That is because of regulations, custom duties, and many

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[222] Interview n. 34
[223] Interview n. 17
[224] Interview n. 2

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other reasons. Independence should be to allow us to decide what is the best thing for our region, for our people – not to be influenced and forced to accept solutions that are not good for us by anyone else, whether they are neighbouring countries or the rest of Iraq. Either way, we have a mutual interest in making the country stronger, whether we are part of it or separated."[225]

The line between bureaucrat and party member is muddled. As explained, the KRG hinges on a blatant spoils system, for which political affiliation and kinship are prerequisites to enter the administration, especially at the upper levels. It is a matter of *wasta*[226]. The first person interviewed said to be independent; the second one said nothing on that, but I knew he was close to the PUK. Either way, not having to represent a specific party line, their views were based on pragmatic considerations and both made a case for coexistence within the federal settlement. As reported, economic complementarity and participation to decision-making in Baghdad were highlighted. When asked about the most sensitive issues (such as the status of disputed areas) they stressed the need to provide technical solutions, first, to beget political results, then. Although functionalist thinking goes inert very quickly, and technical is anything but innocent, the careful assessment of limits and potentials of federal cooperation gave depth to the argument. A step outside the agitated state of Kurdish infighting, I saw a different side of the matter.

5.3. Neo-tribalism and neo-patrimonialism reconsidered

In Max Weber's theory of the state clientelist practices are seen as pathological degenerations, which signal the distortion or even the absence of state institutions. As is known, the ideal-type of modern statehood implies a legal-rational authority, impersonal power, abstract norms, and neutral bureaucracies. In particular, the bureaucratic system defining the modern state is the antithesis of (and historically the successor to) patrimonial systems. In the latter, the public office corresponds with and serves the personal patrimony of the ruler; administrative officials are servants or clients selected on the basis of loyalty, not necessarily professional competence; and legitimacy ensues from tradition and a stratification of privileges favouring the social status of a dominant class. Patrimonial systems tend to be unstable because they depend on the benevolence and the charisma of the ruler. The transfer of sovereignty from the personal rulership to the legal person of the State (and consequently the shift from subject to citizen) marks the transition, ideally, from traditional authority to the modern state. However, patrimonialism is a feature of modern political systems as well, which is why political scientists have added the prefix neo- to point out the persistence or emergence of patrimonial *modus*

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[225] Interview n. 9
[226] In Arabic *wasta* refers to one's personal connections facilitating a favour or a service. Not necessarily illegal, its ethical connotation is usually licit.

operandi within hybrid orders that are structured along legal-rational lines – to stick with Clapham's definition (1985: 48), or rather how formal institutions are informally privatised by personal forms of rule. In this sense neo-patrimonialism stands for a modern patrimonialism. Yet, the concept is usually unspecified and conflates with clientelism and patronage[227] (Erdmann 2007); moreover, it often sustain the flawed argument of supposedly underdeveloped systems (typically African countries) not measuring up with the (Western) requirements of stateness.

Contrary to the Weberian ideal-type, model democracies are traversed by patrimonialism, as highlighted by Shefter (1993) in his famous analysis of patronage networks in the US two-party system. Clientelism and patronage, which are manifestations of patrimonial relations, are part and parcel of modern bureaucratic states, and not in pathological terms; in fact, they are found to be even foundational of state-building, though serving the private interests of power seeking elites. This is the case of the KRG, whose sultanistic political regime is described by four pillars, according to Kawa Hassan:

> "crony capitalism that is the result of blurred boundaries between the ruling party and the state, and between the public treasury and private wealth; personalism and dynasticism, even though the regime is not necessarily a monarchy; a kind of hypocrisy in which the constitution and laws are manipulated in the interests of ruling parties; and a narrow social base that means the ruling elite can exert its will independent of society." (Hassan 2015: 7)

The hold on power of Barzani and Talabani ruling houses is reflected in pervasive patronage, economic monopolies, and nepotism that goes up in the institutions of the autonomous region. The use of public resources as private property of ruling parties to be distributed as prebends and ensure obedience is the rule. The oil and gas industry lends itself to centralization and was developed as the main outlet for the patrimonial tendencies of KDP and PUK. Despite the KDP has had much better access to the MNR and, hence, the to the management of the oil dossier, the strategic agreement with the PUK is still there. The original agreement signed by Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani has pretty much survived for both sides, but the problem is down to PUK fragmentation: dealing with three or four Talabanis does not mean dealing with the rest of the party. Talabani's grip on Garmyian or Koya (close to Mam Jalal's place of birth), for instance, is not the same. Rival wings and free riders have been pursuing their own goals, through sub-contracts, military deployments, actions of harassment, and even blackmailing oil companies. Notwithstanding party factionalism and distrustful relations between the elites governing the yellow and green zones, the joint returns coming from the exclusive management

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[227] Clientelism and patronage both imply an unequal power relation and a transaction of services and/or resources for political support, being the difference between the two that the former describes a personal relation patron-client exchanging individual benefits or favours, while the latter involves the distribution of collective benefits within a group (e.g. a political party). These behaviours can overlap and reinforce each other, as the Kurdish case itself suggests.

of the energy sector have kept the KDP-PUK front united and the duopoly alive against winds of discontent. This relates closely to the particularism of Kurdish politics and the circumstance that the two main political organizations remain tribal in essence; not much in the sense of tribal mores, pre-modern loyalties, or blood feuds (which nonetheless are important), but rather in that party leaders act as chieftains or landlords upon a localised and tight power base. A tribal mentality survives through the incorporation of masses into a patrimonial social structure and the transmission of leadership based on kinship. This model of feudal dominance is interestingly at odds with the neo-liberal principles that the KRG wishes to reach, by the way.

However, nowadays Kurdish leaders and their cronies almost have nothing but oil to maintain their influence and privileges, which makes the elites vulnerable in a twofold sense. First, they are obliged to accept whatever the IOCs and energy traders are asking. Since the KRG in not entitled to secure international loans to encourage capital investment (Natali 2011), advance payments through PSCs are the only way to finance an expanding debt. Second, despite the closure of the oligarchy, economic diversification beyond the party tentacles is landing on Kurdistan across the divided zones as a necessity. The KRG inability to pay all the public salaries goes across the internal partition, whether it is PUK or KDP area. The desire to develop the private sector and inject more opportunities of employment is a pressure, which is shared regardless of neo-tribal partisanship. Hopefully, such a pressure will challenge the status quo and pave the way to a more distributed and democratic governance.

VI. NO FRIENDS BUT THE MOUNTAINS

Extractivism and social control

"They left us with nothing but smoke"

(Hassan, Kirkuk, interviewed in June 2017)

An IR interpretation from a realist outlook would present the KRI as the typical case of a restive, breakaway region that took advantage of a power vacuum and broader geopolitical instability to challenge or blackmail the central government through the oil weapon, and would grind to a halt there. The "greed" and "curse" arguments would probably take centre stage in the explanation, leaving ethnic enmity in the background. I sought, instead, to go beneath the surface of conventional theories conceiving oil as tool of power or strategic commodity with the purpose of getting deeper into the many transformations that one decade of hydrocarbons exploitation has exerted on Kurdish society. The previous chapters took into account the layering of the oil economy to illustrate how subterranean wealth was territorialized as a sovereign property of the nation and translated into a symbol of collective upheaval in search of redemption, given a much contested political status; the manifold ways the extractive regime relates with the political regime were also put under scrutiny by exploring inter- and intra-party strategies of survival amid the wild hunt for a bigger slice of the prize. Both chapters dealt with the KRG elites. Finally, I add here another layer of meaning, which tells the lesser-known side of the story and, consequently, one of the most interesting parts of the empirical assessment. As seen, enforcing an energy landscape in Kurdistan was not neutral and, in fact, had a pervasive imprint. In particular, extractivism – understood as a mode of accumulation based on the exploitation of primary commodities to be exported on global markets with no local value-adding – also drove mechanisms of social exclusion. The last part of the research contextualizes this point and looks at the emergence of grassroots resistance against the top-down resource imaginary of ruling elites.

6.1. Petro-capitalism and the logics of expulsion

In the introduction to the comparative volume *Oil Wars*, Iraq is taken as a metaphor of *old* and *new* wars fuelled by the enormous rent petroleum generates. According to the distinction, the former refer to classic inter-state geopolitical conflicts of which control on valuable resources is part and parcel, whereas the latter "take place in the context of failing states, (...) are fought by networks of state and non-state actors, where out-and-out battles are rare and violence is directed mainly against civilians or

symbols of order, and they are characterised by a new type of political economy involving a combination of extremist politics and criminality" (Kaldor, Karl, & Said, 2007: 5). It goes without saying that Operation Iraqi Freedom launched in March 2003 would fall under the first category given that the seizure of energy assets was a primary goal of the US-led military campaign. On the ruins of the Ba'athist regime, however, a *new* type of conflict soon came up when a heterogeneous front of insurgents moved against the Coalition forces. Confrontation precipitated into country-wide sectarian violence, while oil – "mingled as it is with identity" (ibidem: 10) – engulfed the race for refiguring Iraqi institutions. It follows that the link between oil and violence should be understood in terms of rent-seeking behaviour. Despite the co-existence of analytical levels (from geo-strategic to local) and type of interests (public and private) involved, it is suggested that the capture of petrodollars is the essential dynamic leading petro-states to outbreaks of violence. In a nutshell, oil wars are always rentier wars. Iraq is portrayed as proof of such perverse relationship given that the oil rent "shaped the state as the chief distributor of wealth and oppression in equal measure" (ibidem: 2). Since the downfall of Saddam Hussein the country has been dangerously on the edge of two phases of a four tiered rent-seeking cycle: i) predation, in which distribution of oil revenues and mechanisms of repression define the state totally, while identity politics channels competition for the rent; and ii) state failure, occurring when the state capacity to retain the monopoly of legitimate violence and/or the monopoly on the oil sector is disrupted by non-state actors. Nevertheless, the authors stress that oil can mitigate to some degree the intensity of conflict since the collapse of state institutions makes the exploitation of hydrocarbons impractical and, consequently, even warrying parties would share an interest in keeping viable conditions for tapping and commodifying petroleum. The resilience of ISIS crude sales on the local black market and through intermediaries also on the international ones, despite the militarization of the war theatre and airstrikes on ISIS-controlled energy installations, gives a recent test.

Although this line of reasoning, which fundamentally achieves a synthesis of well-known theories examining oil-related drivers of conflict, provides a basis for discussing the Iraqi petro-state as a whole and sub-state resource exploitation in the Kurdistan region at a lower scale, is in my view, the framework is bounded to a narrow understanding of extractive regimes and their modus operandi in relation to other contexts than the state and other properties than the monetary rent. I already discussed the still influential paradigms of rentierism and its attendant offshoot (the curse theory), as well as the *trap* of methodological nationalism, in chapter II. *Oil Wars* builds on those foundations and postulates oil revenues as the independent factor unleashing disorder, but fails to spot or adequately point out that the financial and military ramifications of transnational oil ventures are often the cause of institutional weakness and eruptions of violence in oil-producing areas. An additional remark is that the on-site socio-economic and cultural processes transforming territories into extractive frontiers are overlooked. Political ecologists have provided correctives to both aspects. Watts' analysis of the violent oil economies in the Niger Delta, in particular, is quite instructive in this regard. In his view, the oil

complex is the dense institutional setting through which oil concessions reconstitute local communities. In the Nigerian case the oil complex is the sum of:

> "(1) a statutory monopoly over mineral exploitation (...); (2) a nationalized oil company operating through joint ventures with oil majors who are granted territorial concessions (blocs); (3) the security apparatuses of the state (working synergistically with those of the companies themselves) protecting costly investments and ensuring the continual flow of oil; and (4) an institutional mechanism (...) by which federal oil revenues are distributed to the states and producing communities, and not least the oil-producing communities themselves" (Watts, 2004: 60)

With due proportions, the same structure of relations can be found in most extractive frontiers, but the general dynamics of petro-capitalism are important here: if the alliance between foreign capital and the state begets a particular fiscal sociology making central institutions reliant on whopping unearned income (the rentier aspect to which the analyses on petro-states devotes much attention), on the other hand "the presence, and activities, of the oil companies constitute a challenge to customary forms of community authority, inter-ethnic relations, and local state institutions" (ibidem: 54). In the latter sense, Watts clarifies that the logic and practice of extractivism interfere with the manufacturing of so-called "governable spaces", that is to say divergent configurations of identities, forms of rule, and territory. He illustrates in great detail the ways in which the emergence of an oil-producing community left a heavy footprint on the various spaces of chieftainship, indigeneity, and nationalism in Nigeria. Such turbulent reorganization of territorial allegiances and hierarchies is conflictive and contradictory. For one thing, albeit disguised as the engine of progress, petro-capitalism resulted in the expropriation of wealth and rights in the Niger Delta, where insurgents and protesters in opposition to multinational oil operators are just the tip of the iceberg of popular resistance against the dramatic reverberations of extractivism, from near ecological collapse to ethnic marginalization.

An impoverished, contaminated, and unstable *oil-blessed* sub-state region, however, is anything but a paradox of plenty; it is instead one gloomy outgrowth of capitalist expansion at the confluence of unbalanced commodity exchange and ecological debt that binds nodes of consumption to subordinate supply zones at the fringes of the global economy. Therefore, the unequal or unfair distribution of *goods* (e.g. income) and *bads* (e.g. environmental harm) from oil exploitation mirrors well-established power asymmetries, not externalities or market failures that take the direct consequences of economic activity out from the equation (Martinez-Alier, 2003). Cyril Obi, who dug into the same case study, corroborates Watt's fine-grained conceptualization of a crucial interdependence between oil-based capitalistic formations and local dispossession, for which a rapacious alliance of ruling elites and foreign investors feasts on a multitude of excluded and vulnerable groups. In the context of a "privatized state" aiming to secure a stream of profits by means of coercion, the removal and transfer of natural resources from sites of production to those of consumption abroad literally implies enclosure of land, appropriation

of common rights over nature, and destruction of previous orders (Obi, 2010). As said, this pattern is common to all the extractive frontiers inasmuch unfolds reciprocal relations between capitalist cores and *their* reservoirs of raw materials and cheap labour. How the pattern materializes across time and space and what conditions must be present is an empirical question, but distant extractive localities such as the Niger Delta and the KRI are equally anchored to the lower tier of an oil-based capitalistic system.

The reader will have recognized the influence of David Harvey's writings in these pages, which are intended to deepen the digression on commodity frontiers and commodity chains sketched in chapter IV. In his adjustment of theory of primitive (or original) accumulation of capital to the present time, accumulation by dispossession exemplifies the exit strategy to chronic pressures of over-accumulation, which Marx notoriously identified as the internal contradiction threatening to cripple capitalistic systems cyclically. Based on Rosa Luxembourg's insight that the occupation of non-capitalist formations is required to confront periodic surpluses of capital, Harvey points out that capitalism craves for seizing lower input costs and opening up markets as a way out of the crisis tendency; when a pre-existing "outside" is no longer available, however, capitalistic forces will manufacture it by releasing or devaluing assets at a very low cost (Harvey, 2003). This is not extraordinary, but a regularity. Hence, violent dispossession is organic to the expanded reproduction of capitalism, which occurs through the typical processes of primitive accumulation. Nonetheless, Harvey specifies that in the current advanced phase new practices of exploitation have come to light or stretched the previous ones to extreme levels. He takes as examples the rampant privatisation of public utilities, the retreat of labour protection schemes, the depletion and degradation of environmental commons.

The reinvention of mechanisms for primitive accumulation is also central is Saskia Sassen's reflection on the sheer and relentless growth of inequality. She suggests with sharpness that transaction chains of contemporary advanced capitalism end in the brutal, large-scale, and acute expulsion of growing masses of people from the core social and economic orders (Sassen, 2014). The closing down or dismantling of welfare and health programs, increasing foreign acquisitions of stretches of land, the transformation of natural environments into "dead land and dead water" by virtue of unrestrained resource extraction all share a common pattern of expulsion – from the social contract underpinning liberal democracies, from livelihoods and life projects, and even from the biosphere. These "expanded modes of profit extraction" are far from being exceptional or transitional. Rather, they indicate a "systemic deepening of capitalist relations", reflect the loss of value of the bourgeoisie for the reproduction of the economic system, and are executed through complex technologies or opaque financial derivatives such as subprime mortgages and credit default swaps – to mention two speculative tools that caused the 2008 financial crisis. The resulting extensive destitution runs counter the belief, widespread in early 1990s, that global imbalances and absolute poverty were about to gradually diminish, if not disappear, under

the shield of the so-called unipolar moment. On the contrary, the "radical reshuffling of capitalism" after the end of the Cold War led to unbridled de-regulation policies on one side and the repositioning of resource-rich territories as sites of extraction on the other.

The latter logic deeply concerns also recent transformations sweeping Kurdistan. Harvey (2003) commented that the US-led military interventions in Iraq in 1991 and 2003 were imperialist wars par excellence dictated by the goal of controlling the global oil spigot. As regards unexploited reserves in Kurdish-inhabited areas in the north, there was no need to open up the region forcefully. With re-privatisation of the Iraqi petroleum industry the KRG elites were quick to jump on the bandwagon of a neo-liberal economic model and offered remunerative PSAs to foreign wildcatters. The injection of fresh crude into the global arteries bolstered up the request for a major role in the federal re-composition of the country, but only the Kurdish upper-crust benefited from the inclusion into the sphere of interests of energy traders. For everyone else extractivism is synonym for social dismemberment and a new geography of exclusion.

Taking post-structuralism seriously: a political ecology of extractive regimes

Applied to the material realities engendered by petro-capitalism, the couple of concepts reviewed above (accumulation by dispossession and expulsion from socio-economic cores) falsify international energy relations by showing structural inequalities beneath the circuits of capital. Under this premise, social and environmental harm at the point of extraction come into focus as a transfer of production costs from the centre to the periphery, from producers to the oil-producing communities. This is nothing new: Kapp (1953) signalled that the performance of capitalistic systems relies precisely on the possibility of shifting production costs to third persons or to society at large. What I am concentrating on are the channels through which the exogenous logic of extractivism was inserted into a contentious environment and with what consequences. Unlike the mainstream, my interpretation is that the KRG-corporate nexus has meant more than a seductive rent-seeking machinery dispensing profits and enabling violence; at the same time and relatedly, the oil complex is a powerful engine of social change arousing collective imaginaries and the device (*dispositif* in Foucaldian terms) for maintaining a hegemonic structure of power. Hence, the idea that extractive regimes are constitutive of political orders.

I will get back to this argument later. The conceptual toolbox from the Marxist tradition is helpful to ground the study of extractive localities into the diagnosis of systemic contradictions of capitalism. However, treating the oil commodity chain as a globalised material network of production and dispossession is insufficient to grasp the variety of lived experience in affected communities. Paradoxically, it risks fetishizing petro-capitalism at the macro-level of globalization processes without

looking into the functioning in context. Conversely, a political ecology approach has much to offer in this sense, and it is worth reminding why before presenting the empirical findings. I already sketched it out as a field of inquiry, a research programme, and a practice in the theoretical framework, but I should like to reiterate a few fundamental aspects since they informed the ethnographic observations upon which this last chapter is largely built. Notwithstanding its eclectic and various perspectives, political ecology can be defined as a way of thinking struggles over access, ownership, control, and use of natural resources that is attentive to how power relations mediate interactions between society and nature. For one thing, a critical engagement with the politics of nature suffusing in modern societies contextualizes the "embeddedness of environmental issues in global networks of production and exchange" (Rousselin, 2018: 23). Not least importantly, it also suggests that political economy and ecology are specific forms of knowledge (Escobar, 1996). As a sum of both, the construction (or production, if embracing a Marxist view) of nature is seen as material and discursive at once.

To go back and forth between theory and empirics, the petroleum cycle is a good example of such hybrid process of co-constitution. Drawing crude from the bowels of the earth is just one link in the long commodity chain ending up in petroleum products. Still, already at the point of extraction upstream activities occur within a composite setting of concession contracts, geological surveys, advanced technologies, transportation infrastructures, security services, military deployments, skilled labour, capital-intensive investments, and commercial agreements. In brief, a multi-centred and multi-scalar relational space whose material practices, nonetheless, presuppose certain discursive articulations: at the very least, regulatory frameworks, technical expertise and knowledge, risks assessments, geopolitical strategies, energy and development policies, financial instruments (and the list is not exhaustive); further up on a ladder of abstraction, situated economic rationalities, social imaginaries, and imaginative geographies filling up contemporary petro-cultures. As seen at length already, the determination of any resource through the purposive transformation of nature encapsulates a broader spectrum of meanings than those derived from natural properties. Watts reminds that the resourcefulness of petroleum "rests upon an appraisal – a state of knowledge and practice – that is social, technological, and historical" (Watts, 2005: 158), from which a contingent rendering comes from. Put it differently, use and value of petroleum are not inscribed beforehand in the chemical composition. Despite this might appear quite obvious, the general qualities bestowed upon *black gold* are usually taken for granted. That same iconic metaphor, which frames oil as extraordinary source of wealth and linchpin of the metabolic processes reproducing industrial economies, signals the mutual inscriptions of materiality and morality. Recent contributions on ecological distribution conflicts have focused, indeed, on how moral claims (Turner, 2004) and emotions (Sultana, 2011) are implicated in material struggles over access and management of natural resources. Not merely the product of materially-motivated interests, Turner emphasises that "ethical stands about proper resource use"

incorporate the many images and forms of a community. I have examined one of those images, in particular, by dissecting resource nationalism in the previous pages.

Making a case for an integrated perspective holding material and non-material worlds together, the post-structural turn in political ecology has been cognizant that social and environmental changes, though rooted in patterns of production and market forces, are also specific reverberations of the knowledge-power nexus (Escobar, 1996; Peet & Watts, 1996). A fundamental question to inquire into the politics of nature from the inside out concerns, then, which actors have the authority to impose a language of valuation among many others and with which practices (Martinez-Alier, 2003). The view of plural epistemologies and valuations implies contestation between and across social groups. It is precisely in this sense that Peluso and Watts (2001) see the environment as "an arena of contested entitlements" within which a substratum of material assets is entangled with discourses about nature and development. Now, an orthodox Marxist analysis would be somewhat blind to the phenomenological side of the matter. What historical materialism reduces to emanations or instantiations of unchanging structural conditions that reproduce society through its economic base, post-structuralism reclaims it as inseparable instead. As lines of distinction between nature and culture are rather fluid and intractable (Watts 2005), the making of "resource environments" (Richardson & Weszkalnys, 2014) encompasses practices of production as much as practices of signification. Aside from capitalist expansion to generate and reinvest profits, extractive frontiers burst into local environmental histories with a complex bearing on livelihoods, cultural norms, and social relations. In other words, extractivism restructures socio-natures as a whole. Territorial transformations are one pertinent example: although sites of extraction cover a much narrower area than the one licensed once operations are underway, the existence of a concession entails shifts in land ownership and use, and with them also new perceptions of risks, uncertainties, and opportunities (Bebbington, 2011). The commodification of the underground has a ripple effect on the economic prospects of people and the environment they inhabit. It is not hard to imagine that disruption of agro-pastoral livelihoods or quick transition from a rural economy in order to make room for a weighty extractive enclave is destabilizing by and large: displacement, eviction from survival systems, decay of traditional norms, and deterioration of the ecosystem are often around the corner. Foreign land grabs, to borrow from Sassen, "transform sovereign territories into a far more elementary condition – land for usufruct" (Sassen, 2014: 82). The extraction of value goes hand in hand with a loss of rights. Furthermore, it is not a one-off transaction, but a long-term rearrangement forging a stable, export-oriented regime.

Nonetheless, even if the historical trend suggests adverse outcomes, one should not infer the conclusion that the by-products of extractivism are straightforward; otherwise, there would be a sort of commodity determinism. Tensions inside mineral or oil producing communities are evidence for social bodies riven with open and latent conflicts in which many "realities" come out, often in

contradictory ways. These inconsistencies catch and deserve attention. The foundation of an extractive regime in Kurdistan has not happened in isolation. In the first place, oil and natural gas have been pivotal in the political economies of the Middle East for almost a century, regardless of haves and haves not. The lure of petrodollars designed a predominant mode of communication with the outer world, as well as shaped internal mechanisms of rent circulation between 'rich' and 'barren' countries. Glassy skyscrapers grown "out of nothing" upon underground natural treasures, mighty tales of oil kingdoms and oil sheiks, the far more prosaic web of energy hubs at the crossroads of global routes all entered the imagination of the Middle East, giving a peculiar geo-strategic and cultural connotation. It might be said that the spatialisation of the region as such drew strength from that vision. Consistently, expectations outweighed suspicion when oil talks hit Kurdistan, belatedly. Notions of sovereignty and international recognition were promptly attached to resource governance. This is not to say, however, that Kurds in Iraq were in agreement. In fact, the oil-dependent model of development pursued by the KRG is but one of many options. Moreover, the energy debate polarised political competition. We have seen, indeed, that the oil nationalist discourse internalized an extractive imperative spilling over the ideological boundaries of statehood, nation, and citizenship. The establishment reinvented patrimonial geometries, symbolic repertoires, and relations between economic and extra-economic realms in such a way to accommodate the smooth landing of the oil and gas industry. In so doing, it goes without saying that the official discourse was selective and silenced alternatives. Therefore, a specific resource imaginary was discursively enacted and has been materially reproduced since then to the exclusion of other conflicting imaginaries.

An environmental imaginary is "a way of imagining nature, including visions of those forms of social and individual practice which are ethically proper and morally right with regard to nature" (Peet & Watts 2004: 226); in short, the discursive textures within which normative visions on nature collide and organize social relations with the natural world. Generally speaking, imaginaries are constructed through conscious and unconscious inter-subjective processes of meaning-making, though embedded into the slow stratifications of sense giving structure to social life. Values, symbols, norms, and institutions find a place in the image of a social whole as represented by a particular group inside society. In a more limited sense, resource imaginaries are situated knowledge about ethics, aesthetics, and teleology of resource use, and focus on the ways in which the transformation of nature is thought and practiced within a community. The focus on resource imaginaries draws attention to the textuality informing material nature. In my view, the concept appropriately integrates Marxist analysis of commodity chains on the ground of the irreducible cultural roots underlying the modes of production and exchange. Since a social body is not unitary and is never occupied by a single imaginary, hegemonic conceptions in the foreground coexist with peripheral and subordinate ones, which may engender forms of resistance:

"This gives the category 'resources' a certain instability because, while it may be widely shared, it is never a universal view of the non-human world. Conflicts over large dam construction, for example, readily expose the range of value systems that can converge on the non-human world and demonstrate how one group's natural resource can be another's dispossession. (...) From dams to mines to plantations and conservation reserves, resources 'become' only through the triumph of one imaginary over others" (Bridge, 2009: 1221)

As seen, dispossession stemming from the appropriation of nature comes into the dual form of expropriation of rights and costs-shifting on local communities by virtue of a transnational assemblage of actors. In this light, to use the words of Obi, resistance refers to "collective action directed at blocking further alienation, expropriation, and environmental degradation" and "represents a mass project of restitution and self-determination" (2010: 220). Embracing a critical commitment to emancipation, I was instead attentive to the disproportionate exposure to socio-economic and environmental harm, and how affected groups (often already disadvantaged or discriminated in other respects) reacted to the perils of extractive activities. Whereas the accusation of pocketing the petrodollars pouring in from abroad is commonplace in the public debate, the socio-environmental outputs of the extractive industry are generally overlooked. Therefore, against the backdrop of the KRG policies, I approached Kurdish society with this set of questions: have alternative resource imaginaries challenged the vision of ruling elites? If so, how do these relate with the contestation of the KDP-PUK order? Which symbols and practices were pitted against the processes of resource extraction? Under what conditions collective actions were mobilized?

Obviously the petroleum industry has not been the sole determinant of socio-ecological crises in Iraq. The country has experienced at least three decades of continuous warfare, which caused the contamination of the Mesopotamian floodplains. Heavy metal poisoning is the dramatic indicator of a compromised environment where the adverse impact on health of toxic war remnants comes on top of persistent droughts, which have drained at increasing pace over time large swathes of once fertile farmland and placed an extreme strain on local communities[228]. As a consequence, post-conflict deterioration of the environment has heightened the humanitarian toll and made it abiding. The most recent peak was reached with renewed fighting on the wake of the ISIS insurgency as the Salafi-jihadist group made extensive and ruthless use of scorched-earth tactics by weaponising water infrastructures (King 2015) and setting oil wells on fire (Zwijnenburg & Postma 2017). Rather, it might be said that the upshots of oil and gas exploitation have operated as a threat multiplier to the means of livelihood.

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[228] With regard to the KRI, see the following reports: Drought Impact Assessment, Recovery and Mitigation Framework and Regional Project Design in Kurdistan Region (UNDP 2010), Post-Conflict Impact Assessment on Environment in Kurdistan Region of Iraq (UNDP 2015).

Either way, the pressure on livelihoods arising from environmental degradation draws attention to the fact that resource governance is mingled with issues of democratic participation and socio-economic inclusion. This is the reason why I began peeling off the layers of oil politics to see what is underneath federal disputes. Yet, I found that the dialectic between KDP-PUK and anti-establishment parties was not enough to get nearer to a full picture since formal oppositions were not dissimilar in content with respect to the tropes of the dominant discourse. Marginalized positions were not represented. Therefore, although interviews took place mostly in urban settings and that narrowed down the range of voices, during my second stay I increasingly shifted emphasis on social activism in order to contrast other viewpoints. Hence, I developed relations of trust and collaboration with environmental activists in Sulaymaniyah. As already mentioned in the chapter 3, I considered myself an activist and contribution to local campaigns went beyond research interrogatives and needs. The stories I got from my comrades helped me greatly to reconstruct how the uneven oil-driven development challenged customary claims on land, exhausted local ecologies in rural areas, and bolstered up top-down mechanisms of social control. They gradually brought into focus the sub-regional contours of the extractive regime. I make no secret that representing their agency with my work was both a motivation and a responsibility. Concern to emancipation and self-empowerment of affected communities are inherent in a commitment to environmental justice. It would be implausible, of course, to have covered and filtered all the dialogues informing local imaginings of nature and resource use. In principle any act of translation is partial and provisional; it is even more so for a non-native translator, who requires the mediation of local actors. The multitude of audiences tells that much of it goes inevitably lost in the process; this being compounded in the case at hand by the lack of well-organized social movements, meaning that instances of protest are scattered and not connected into a unitary frame. I was doing fieldwork on almost virgin plots. Yet, these empirical and cultural limitations notwithstanding, a reflexive and participatory methodology of knowledge co-production shined a light on forms of oppositions against hegemonic representations and practices. What follows is an ethnographic account of social and environmental activism in the KRI.

6.2. Sparks of defiance: the thirst and the outcry

> "Kirkuk is unbearable. You cannot live there. Since oil was found the city has never been pacified. It's like a boulder on the shoulders of people. Erbil completely changed in recent years. Before the oil boom, there was nothing there, beyond the Citadel. It was a piece of land in the middle of desert. Now, it's better than Suli [Sulaymaniyah], but they've been following this model of the Iraqi Dubai. I cannot understand what such a model would be good for. Just think at all the Asian people enslaved in Dubai or Doha." (Kani, on a taxi ride near Koya, May 2018)

The viscous trail of petroleum is ubiquitous and tangible everywhere in Iraq. It came at a much later time in Kurdistan, but its pervasive presence is etched deep into the fabric of the region. The endless line of trucks and petrol stations along the way, the air fresheners carrying (with a hint of black humour) the logo of Rosneft inside taxis, the acrid smell released by makeshift refineries and smoke plumes billowing dark in the sky, the shiny five-star hotels and fancy malls standing next to skeletons of empty buildings and junkyards (somehow making tangible the bust-boom cycle of petrodollars), even the street protests of teachers and civil servants over unpaid salaries and vanished revenues – all convey the impression that oil left a trace in everything. This does not mean that everything is about oil, of course. Nevertheless, the oil and gas industry casts a long shadow on everyday lives in Kurdistan.

Besides economic and political considerations, that perception is very much sensorial. The strong smell of oil in the open air was precisely one of the first things that caught my attention. I almost believed that I was conditioned by the purpose of the research to such an extent that my senses were somewhat mislead. They were not in the end, as my interlocutors shared the same discomfort, but I was hardly relieved: "The air is so polluted. Just outside the city, the oil smell is so acute. You feel that something must be wrong"[229]. Rebwar is an advocate of human rights and nonviolence. At the time we met, in an aseptic mall in Erbil, he was involved in the implementation of inclusive education programmes in the IDP camp of Arbat for a local NGO. He does not hide scepticism about an independent Kurdistan: "I don't believe in borders. We are no longer suffering because of others, but because of our own government. Arabs or Kurds, frankly there is no difference". He then described how oil explorations had threatened villages lying in geologically prospective areas. I would have heard pretty much the same sequence of events in every elucidation I got from the other informants I came in touch with thereafter: de-mining and seismic acquisition in the license area; setting-up of camps to accommodate working personnel; enclosure and militarization of exploration sites; initial testing and start of production, in parallel to construction of processing and transportation facilities. IOCs staff was usually assisted by local contractors (e.g. housing companies, mine action groups, private security firms), typically linked to influent party members, and escorted by KRG security forces. The extractive process disrupted local means of subsidence more often than not: loss of farmland, soil depletion, diversion and degradation of water resources[230], restricted freedom of movement due to road blockades and forbidden areas were concurrent and interrelated features. Despite the accuracy of his account, the most vivid and reiterated image in Rebwar's description remained the unpleasant odour of refining, as if it evoked the nefarious effects of crude commodification as directly as possible.

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[229] Interview n. 23

[230] I came to know later that in certain sites (i.e. Qara Dagh) the extraction of one barrel of oil requires the consumption of three-four barrels of water.

Many people whom I asked how the oil boom had changed their lives frequently gave back a similar sensory experience, and they made sure that I could experience it myself. With Ako, a young hydraulic engineer from Sulaymaniyah, I visited a few endangered sites few miles out of the town of Chamchamal, where development of substantial gas reserves by Crescent Petroleum and lack of public monitoring have exposed farmland and farmers to heavy pollutants. One of this site was a bizarre irrigation well where bubbling water on the surface was mixed with high flames, an apparently contradictory natural phenomenon caused by combustion of hydrogen sulphide, a poisonous asphyxiant that can be found in oil- and gas-fields and easily detected because of a distinguishable odour of rotten eggs. For Ako, that sinister and unfenced attraction on the edge of ploughed fields was evidence of neglect towards local inhabitants, abandoned to dangerous exhalations and a contaminated food chain. By the same token, Soran showed me an illegal oil refinery at the southern outskirts of Sulaymaniyah, in a poor suburb nearby the municipal open dumpsite looking out onto the banks of the Tanjaro River. "There are twelve illegal refineries in the surroundings of the city", he said. Toppling units would be a more accurate description for these small refineries at the margins downstream business (Jassim & al. 2013) – lower-ranking workhorses of the oil industry that constitute, nevertheless, untouchable fiefdoms operating without licenses and selling refined crude for personal gains or to finance militias. When interviewed on this issue, MNR officials had expressed frustration about the connivance of private and party interests in these grey bubbles of impunity, which proved to be difficult to regulate for political reasons – in contrast to IOCs that, perhaps counter-intuitively, enjoy a lower degree of manoeuvre since they have a reputation to uphold internationally and, in principle, are bound to abide by national laws and international standards[231]. As seen at length in the previous chapter, oftentimes service companies are a reward for obedience and revenue distribution inside KDP and PUK zones[232].

Hence, I had a specific interest in getting a first-hand outlook of how patrimonial relations in the oil business relate within a broader social context, beyond anecdotal evidence. We walked around the refinery from a distance. Oil runoff leaked freely into irrigation canals and seeped through blackened farmland; it presumably polluted waterways all the way down to Darbandikhan Lake, which not by accident is heavily contaminated and has a high incidence of water- and food-borne diseases, though remains the main source of drinking water for some 500.000 people. Soran helped me to approach some farmers working over bleak patches of land nearby. One of them handed me a bunch of loquats, which looked beautiful: "It's bitter. You can't eat it. The land became unproductive, but I keep working it every day because it's all I have. I have nowhere to go. I would go crazy otherwise". They complained about pollution and reported severe health problems. It was apparent that the whole sub-urban area had suffered a disproportioned impact from recent industrial expansion; uncollected piles of waste of all kinds, inadequate sanitation, and lack of access to improved water sources portrayed a state of

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[231] Interview n. 41. See also Othman (2017).
[232] Interview n. 45

disrepair. We were told that the owners of all private companies in sight were somehow connected to PUK strongmen, and that had prevented both public intervention and a collective mobilisation. Fear of repercussions was tangible indeed. Local environmental NGOs would have later confirmed that they are denied access to most factories in the area because of political linkages. Although concerned, residents said to be unable to leave or adopt measures to reduce health risks because of economic hardship.

The fact that the oil economy is the carbon copy of the party system is certain and easy to tell; spotting the contours and lining up the consequences is much harder, instead. Albeit noticeable, following the trail of petroleum through the Kurdish society is problematic. In the first place, the institutional level is unresponsive: just like regulatory and monitoring bodies were found to be either inoperative or ineffective, bureaucrats and party members were unavailable to comment on thorny issues. Actually, they were not even knowledgeable in most cases. That was not surprising: as illustrated by the example of private service companies affiliated to KDP and PUK, the oil business is an extension of a tight oligarchy. Beyond centralization of revenue distribution, however, the microcosm of parallel actors and deals on the ground appears to be rather untidy and liquid. The suspension of the rule of law makes it difficult to disaggregate the fluid relationships that govern the sector. Therefore, non-transparency is an additional hurdle: information on operators, contractors, or sub-contractors from official sources are sparse. Approaching the IOCs was unsuccessful even more. Informality was much more promising instead, but I preferred to keep a low profile. As mentioned elsewhere, I was afraid of harming my collaborators and avoided sticking the nose into murky affairs. To take one example, oil smuggling into Iran via the three border crossings of Bashmakh, Parwezkhan, and Haji Omaran. Though limited in terms of barrels exported daily, cross-border traffic of oil tankers is politically dense and done in plain sight, with the involvement of party militias, service companies, and the complicity of politicians even in Baghdad. Illegal trucking of unrefined crude and fuel was widespread in Iraq at the times of the Ba'ath autocracy and it is still common nowadays. It is no secret that KRG officials made profits out of reselling for private gains some of the fuel purchased by the Iraqi central government (Muttitt, 2011). However, bribes and military connections running through the commodity chain recommended not investigating the blind spots of criminal entanglements too much. On the other hand, I realized that people in urban environments were largely unaware of what happened or was ongoing in remote mountainous areas hours away from Erbil or Sulaymaniyah, or within the opposite *zone* more generally. Hence, also the intention of mapping cases of displacement and environmental degradation related to extractivism across the region was unrealistic for a number of reasons (not least, logistics and budget). Field observations such as the ones with Ako and Soran remained on the surface of things. I was able to catch a glimpse, but not to lift the blanket.

As a result, I felt like I was vacuum-sealed – unplugged and clueless. What was truly discernible was the "emotional and ideological gap"[233] between the political class and the rest, with the former thoroughly entrenched in the ivory tower and the latter feeling betrayed and scammed by the leadership. Undoubtedly, the oil economy widened the gap. For many Kurds it brought down the alibis of ruling parties. Corruption is the most popular word someone would hear by talking about politics, no matter if seated inside a shisha café or on a gold-striped sofa inside the Council of Ministers. The accusation of pocketing the petrodollars pouring in is so commonplace that any politician known in public to have some sort of connection with the oil business would be denigrated even in absence of factual evidence. Despite relatedness between the protests burning under the ashes and the uneven distribution of oil profits, neither political oppositions, nor the civil society at large countered the establishment with an alternative vision of resource governance. Needless to say that pro-government forces have kept glorifying the image of a petro-state with nationalistic fervour: preservation of a viable and competitive extractive industry is a matter of survival and the primary means to act like (or pretend to be) a state. As economic growth came to a halt, however, the KRG oil discourse started losing credibility and popular dissatisfaction has dwelt on its *cursed* reality ever since, from corruption to foreign interference. A few excerpts from interviews bear witness to emergent perceptions that are at odds with the dominant imaginary:

> "Perhaps people from all over think about oil as a source of progress, but for us became a source of war and something for which we lost our rights. I was born here and I can tell you that I wish we had no oil under our land. We don't know how to get benefit from it. We lost Kirkuk some months ago because of oil. If we were like Djibouti, I think that we would be independent now."[234]

> "I grew up as a refugee. Will my son be a refugee too? If so, oil would have been useless. As a nation, we need stability. They told us that oil was meant for building a state and giving everyone a salary. Unfortunately, what they have done with oil in the last fifteen years was against us. We suddenly got into a hole and nobody knows when we will get out."[235]

> "The priority was getting oil money, that's it. They had no plans for building a nation. What they claim to be nation-building was just a change of clothes, from Arab to Kurdish."[236]

In the passages above, oil is perceived in terms of negation of the state-building process and even of national solidarity. I was surprised to find, nonetheless, that only small pockets or circles of resistance put into question the petro-narrative outright, with all the attention focused instead on the mismanagement and misappropriation of the rent. A general lack of ecological awareness is one reason

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[233] Interview n. 16

[234] Interview n. 44

[235] Interview n. 33

[236] Interview n. 37

for the absence of a large and organized movement advocating for a more sustainable, more equitable, and more balanced model of economic development. The patrimonial structure of Kurdish society is a second and more stringent explanation. As one of my informants observed, "society is strangled by political parties". That is not a hyperbole, and tells more than repression as one might suspect. It is generally known that for the most part CSOs are strictly aligned with the hegemonic party in each zone, which amounts to saying that every issue passes through the close scrutiny of Barzani and Talabani families. Though on a much smaller scale and by less coercive cliques, anti-establishment parties have similar fingerprints. Regardless of colours or wings, the bond of vertical dependence permeating society expresses a strategy of social control by other means than brute force. As stressed, cracks in the power bases of KDP and PUK became noticeable when the short-circuit of increasing public spending and dwindling fiscal resources made both parties unable to comply with the exchange 'bread for consent', to put it bluntly, upon which citizens get integrated into the KRG distributive apparatus. On the supply side, prices swings (to which rentier petro-states are chronically exposed) concocted a more meaningful turn of events for the KRG than federal budget cuts. This is not secondary in the analysis given that many Kurds gained conscience that the path of a single-commodity exporter was not as rosy as depicted only after the drop in oil prices[237]. It should be emphasised here, however, that the overlap between party politics and civil society ended up locking the channels of social change. And this, in turn, has made it difficult for a divergent resource imaginary to emerge and mobilize large sections of the population.

For all intents and purposes, the stalemate has its roots in the reconstruction process after the end of the Ba'athist rule, which was took over by the KDP-PUK duopoly:

> "Almost any political leader from any party has a company, even Gorran. When the reconstruction began after 2003, companies from the old parties took a step in and invested a lot in that. Truth be told: they did a great job on the ground, but that created an alarming conflict of interest between political parties and society. This overlap has translated into money laundering, sometimes. Some NGOs managed to remain somehow independent, but always under the influence of this or that party. Take the Barzani Charity Foundation, for example. It is clear by the name to whom it belongs. You cannot really think that there is no impact on the selection of proposals, which is to say the allocation of funds. I would take months to get the permission for running a project in Erbil, a few

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[237] "We are in one of the richest places on planet for the resources we have, yet we are not able to pay salaries to civil servants. I could even accept that when price of a barrel of oil was at the historical minimum, but what about now? The truth is that they robbed people of their future". This is one of many daily conversations I had; in this case, with a taxi driver who was telling me his situation while driving back to Sulaymaniyah from Erbil, at full speed on a dangerous and busy bumpy road as usual. He had lived eight years in Manchester before coming back home to teach English at a local elementary school. However, pay cuts from a monthly salary of around 1000 dinars to less than half had forced him to opt for a second job. He shared the hope that the two major political parties would have suffered a total wipe-out in the forthcoming elections.

days here in Sulaymaniyah. There is no much a difference between yellow and green zones. Of course, the more the issue you are working on is sensitive, the stricter will be control from the party: providing food to IDPs is surely not as sensitive as oil."[238]

A senior project manager of an important CSO in Sulaymaniyah used these words to illustrate the constraints of civil society. Actually, a difference does exist between the two territorial spheres of influence splitting Kurdistan: whereas, historically, the KDP has laid down a more disciplined and solid system of power in its half, there has always been more room for dissent in PUK's green zone, partly because of the fragmented Politburo and partly as a legacy of the cultural vitality for which the city is renowned. Either way, it is inside the interstitial spaces of patrimonial relations that some sparks of defiance ignited resistance and brought new themes to public attention. I am referring to mostly urban minorities with various biographies: typically, middle-aged Kurds returned from some European country in the 2000s or youth born after 1991 – university students, human rights advocates, NGO practitioners, artists and intellectuals (these categories should be understood as concentric circles whose boundaries frequently overlap, rather than separate categories). I engaged with some social groups and not with others not by coincidence, of course. Although I avoided spending time with international expats, the network of locals with whom I interacted shared certain characteristics that I felt more familiar or pertinent (in terms of cultural background, attitudes, professional interests, political views, English command), and those characteristics assembled a unique lens on Kurdish society. Any outlook is arbitrary, but the rationale behind the selection of informants was not a matter of serendipity. As outlined in the methodology, beyond the research fellowship at AUIS, I accessed the field as a volunteer for the Save the Tigris and Iraqi Marshes Campaign (STC). Two partner organizations had an office (UPP) or were headquartered (Waterkeepers Iraq) in Sulaymaniyah. The choice was not opportunistic given that my commitment was not related to fieldwork and has continued after[239], but was propitious since it put me in touch with social and environmental activists who were pushing ahead almost solitary struggles, habitually in difficult conditions. One of them, Karzan, clearly explained why he preferred to stage solo actions:

> "Gatherings of people are dispersed promptly. You would never get a formal permission. If I am on my own, it's safer. I actually encourage people to join me, but even the more sympathetic ones make excuses. Nobody wants to be exposed too much here."[240]

Karzan was arrested by the Asayish several times during manifestations against pay cuts. He was not scared to keep taking to the streets nevertheless, but psychological pressure was there. Soran, who is a leading environmentalist in the region, also pictured himself standing in the front line of a lonely fight:

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[238] Interview n. 34
[239] See infra p. 116
[240] Interview 15

"I feel sometimes I don't get anywhere with this kind of work. A guy asked me what I have done. I said I have done a lot, but at the same time I have done nothing. Yet, I cannot afford not to struggle every day because it's not a fair fight. I feel totally lost sometimes, but going out into nature, up to our mountains and along our rivers, give me new strength and motivations to start it again."[241]

I am dwelling a bit on the description of local activists to point out why, in a considerably politicized context under the tight surveillance of major parties, themes of social justice and environmental protection have hardly awakened large movements of protest. Yet, there are relevant exceptions. Hanging out with activists was fundamental not only to chart the social struggles in their immediate environs, but also to learn about collective instances of resistance against extractive activities elsewhere in the region. They became, then, precious intermediaries to fill a knowledge gap about the reality of oil and gas production in extractive localities. Albeit sporadic, those spontaneous mobilizations brought to light a different symbolic repertoire with regard to the use of nature and also Kurdish self-determination in a disputed homeland.

Protests against IOCs in Shawre Valley and Khor Mor

Below two case studies of resistance against extractive projects in Kurdistan are presented: from an environmental justice perspective, a success story and arguably a less fortunate one. The contextual analysis reveals under which circumstances collective action emerged. Moreover, it gives an insight into the many "realities" in which oil producing communities are fractured.

Sirwan was a key informant for both. I did not manage to find him during my first stay; he was at the top of my list the second time. As I expected, he walked me through the situation of human rights, gender issues, and coexistence in the region, and how (as activist aimed at strengthening the civil society and offering a pathway for the nonviolent transformation of forms of oppression) has to work within very narrow boundaries. We turned to oil politics. I shared the impression that the oil machine can be found in almost every domain, directly or indirectly.

"It is so. I am sure you have a background on what happened, but you have to know that when the big companies started arriving after 2003 it was a shock, especially for those who lived in villages in rural areas and all of the sudden saw the Asayish taking possession of their lands, where their ancestors had lived from time immemorial. Media don't pay attention to the social impact of the extractive industry, how people were expropriated of the land that had nourished them for centuries, and the environmental damage that ensued."[242]

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[241] Interview n. 1
[242] Interview n. 29

Sirwan gave me an overview on local reactions. Requests of compensation were common and IOCs had allocated, in turn, funds for infrastructures and the delivery of services to somewhat redress land losses. Such indemnities, however, were siphoned out by the KRG and never reached destination in most of cases. All the more so after losing oilfields in disputed areas, Sirwan commented that it was just a matter of time before the KRG turns the attention to mineral deposits in unexplored areas inside KRI, such as Atroush or Bazian for instance. "There will be new abuses, but the future has yet to be written", he added with a drop of optimism. Unexpectedly, he went on about a bunch of small villages that few years before had sabotaged ExxonMobil explorations until the point to make it impossible for the energy titan to stay. That story seemed to be close to what I was looking for. I asked to know more and meet with the villagers. What I heard is reported in the next couple of pages.

ExxonMobil started exploration and drilling activities in the Betwata block in May 2013, pursuant to the PSA signed in October 2011. The block was named after one of the many villages lying across the Shawre Valley stretching north of the town of Ranya, in the Sulaymaniyah Governorate. Whereas protests against extractive projects had been mild or ineffective elsewhere, the mobilization against upstream operations in the valley was instead unprecedented in scale, coordination efforts, and outcome. To date, it is the only case inside the KRI in which the refusal by local communities induced an IOC to withdraw the investment. During the first half of 2013, the Bureau of Geophysical Prospecting Ltd. (a subsidiary of the China National Petroleum Corporation) was contracted by ExxonMobil undertake initial seismic explorations with the use of dynamite explosives and to conduct a geological survey. Then, the oil major appropriated, with the KRG consent, around 18 hectares of orchards and vineyards in between the villages of Hajji Ahmed and Sartka in the Shaqlawa district to build a first 3,000-meter deep oil well. Those preliminary activities prompted concerns throughout the valley, where the sustenance of 5,000 people depend on agricultural yields. About 30 villages (Gullan, Daraban, Allawa, and Sorabani to mention a few others) staged concerted demonstrations to oppose land confiscations. Activists played a fundamental role in raising public awareness and reaching out to independent oil engineers to assess the effects of oil drilling. An association (*Assembly for the Protection of the Environment and Public Rights*) was formed to organize grievances and support local councils.

As ExxonMobil set up a camp to explore potential drilling sites nearby, restricted access to farmland and consequent loss of annual harvest, soil depletion, disruption of traditional farming livelihoods, and release of excess gas were documented. Temporarily suspended during 2014 on account of growing uncertainty related to the evolution of the ISIS insurgency, drilling operations were resumed in February 2015. Degradation of groundwater quality and disappearance of natural springs were the main sources of apprehension for farmers. Campaign slogans said "we won't exchange water for oil", "the beauty and abundance of our land is our oil", or "do not destroy our environment for the leaders' pockets". The fact that the company hired only KDP or PUK affiliates also fuelled fire. The meetings with

ExxonMobil's representatives, who promised benefits to *mukhtars*[243] , were not sufficient to allay concerns. Many villagers refused amounts of money from the company, while others did not receive adequate compensation. However, compensation for losses was secondary to the demand of withdrawing from explorations and any other future development in the valley. As laid down in a document prepared by the NGO Christian Peacemaker Teams – Iraqi Kurdistan (CPT IK), which helped out residents to voice their claims, the requests included "the full consultation with, and free and informed consent of, area residents as a precondition to KRG permits for hydrocarbon exploration or development"[244]. Some activists were threatened and arrested. Even the Head of the Natural Resources Committee of the Kurdistan Parliament, Sherko Jawdat, was denied access to the ExxonMobile's site in March 2015.

Despite deployments of security forces, villagers defied the KRG at their own peril by organizing protests to dissuade ExxonMobil from carrying explorations further. Shawre people are renowned for a revolutionary and tenacious temperament, which has its roots in a history of resistance. The revolt against the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in March 1991 caught fire right in Ranya and spread from there across the entire region. The town came to be known as the gateway of insurgency (*darwaza-i raparin*). A villager from Gullan, Sarwar, believes that the KRG refrained from taking strong measures because of that legacy: "They knew we were ready to put our lives in danger to protect our valley"[245]. Therefore, security convoys did not intimidate dwellers. Protests increasingly targeted the KRG, blamed to be an accomplice in the destruction of a delicate environment for the purpose of seeking easy profits. On August 15, 2013, between 80-120 protesters gathered in Daraban and blocked the main road with wooden logs in order to interrupt the passage of ExxonMobil SUVs and trucks. Kurdish media broadcast the collective action, which had an echo throughout the KRI[246]. Although acts of civil disobedience were nonviolent with no exceptions, protesters came to the point of threatening the use of arms as a last resort, but the conflict did not escalate. Amid heightened protests and non-prospective findings, ExxonMobil stopped the project and eventually abandoned the Betwata block at the end of 2016.

Even though unsatisfactory oil discoveries had an influence on the relinquishment of the exploration block, locals consider with much pride the withdrawal of ExxonMobil as the direct result of their firmness. What is certain is that the resolute and coordinated mobilization of villages across the valley was a factor and, moreover, created awareness about the potential dangers extractive industries pose to traditional practices and connectedness of ecological processes. Whereas there was no prior knowledge

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[243] In many Arab countries the *mukthar* is the head of a village or a district.

[244] Kurdistan: villagers seek support as gov't eyes oil, Christian Peacemaker Team, October-December 2013, vol. XXIII, n. 4.

[245] Interview n. 52

[246] Locals protest oil exploration in Exxon block, *Iraqi Oil Report*, November 8, 2013.

on the matter, the involvement of NGOs and experts allowed villagers to raise demands with greater effectiveness. Even more importantly, it led people to interpret events in their courtyard as consistent and related with an overall pattern unfolding in many other places in the region and Iraq in general. That was a click in the head, a cognitive milestone of a process of sense-making going towards the emergence of a counter-narrative. The interview with Sarwar is striking in that regard: "We realized that where there is an oil well, there is pollution. We saw that in Kirkuk; we see it happening now in Basra. Once you're drilling you cannot stop the consequences from happening"[247]. The emotional attachment to the natural landscape was also crucial for the mobilization to grow and endure, despite power asymmetries. As confirmed by another villager, Ako, affected communities internalized the message that "once you lose your land, you have already lost most of your culture". Figuratively speaking, the protests in the Shawre Valley represented the symbiotic relationship between Kurdishness and the mountainous environment that is central to Kurdish collective memory and binds ethno-national consciousness to a strong sense of place. Furthermore, the development of a network coordinating sparse and relatively unconnected villages in a vast mountainous area was most likely the key to success.

The local disavowal of a PSA signed with one of its biggest clients much embarrassed the KRG. Besides the reputation loss, a domino effect in other licensed blocks was feared. That has not occurred, nonetheless. The resolve exhibited in the valley remains an isolate case. Where the four enabling factors weaving together Shawre people – a culture of resistance, a sense of community given by belonging to a unitary ecosystem, co-production of knowledge with experts, support network of social activism – were not in place, similar concerns about IOCs' activities did not arouse mobilizations of the same magnitude. Even when resignation to the circumstances was not the first option, collective actions were short-lived and intermittent.

A good illustration of this is popular grievances around Khor Mor. Since 2007 the UAE-based Crescent Petroleum and Dana Gas were given exclusive rights for appraisal and development of the substantial gas reserves in the area upon signing of a service-type contract that extended also to the Chamchamal block further north (Mills, 2016). In 2011, two European minority shareholders – the Austrian OMV and the Hungarian MOL, which also have stakes in Sarta and Shaikan respectively – joined the consortium, known as Pearl Petroleum[248]. Through a 180-kilometres long pipeline completed in record time in August 2008, the gas processing plant in Khor Mor supplies the two major power stations in Bazian and Erbil generating about 60% of electricity in the KRI. After settlement of a lengthy arbitration with the KRG, Pearl Petroleum agreed on boosting production on top of a total investment

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[247] Interview n. 52

[248] The German-based energy-trading house RWEST entered the consortium with a 10% share in 2015. Pearl Petroleum is the largest private investor in the gas sector in Iraq.

of already USD 1.3 billion. Gas production, which is over 86,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day on average with additional 12,800 barrels of condensate[249], was increased by one-third in November 2018[250]. The plant also produces liquid petroleum gas (LPG) and natural gas liquids (NGLs) for domestic markets and industrial users.

Dana Gas and Crescent Petroleum released a 92-page assessment report to highlight the downstream socio-economic benefits of their operations, besides electricity supply powering economic growth[251]; several initiatives were taken for the well-being of the widest number of beneficiaries. Nevertheless, there is counter-evidence that local communities suffered collateral damage. Since 2014, CPT IK was invited several times to Kormori Bchwk, a remote village of 22 families three-hour drive south of Sulaymaniyah in the middle of barren and earthy lands, to see first-hand the situation. Villagers showed that all the springs nearby had dried up for the water-intensive needs of the processing plant[252]. Kormori Bchwk became dependent on a small tanker provided by the company. The lowering of the underground water table went hand in hand with degradation of water quality. CPT IK delegations were told that Dana Gas had confiscated 400 hectares of land and closed the main road to access the village. Despite provision of services, the company did not hire workers in the area except two and did not offer adequate compensation. Poisoning from gas fumes was also reported. CPT IK documented a peaceful blockade, as a result of which the leader of the village was arrested and released on bail, though with a court case to face. Protests did not undermine gas extraction in any way and complaints remained unheard.

Quite differently from the ExxonMobil case, operations in the Khor Mor plain were well beyond the exploration phase, drove a flagship project for the expansion of the still underdeveloped gas sector, and affected a much smaller community. The lack of employment opportunities outweighed environmental concerns, which were present nonetheless. Any economic activity bears seeds of discord, and one could argue that the energy-driven transformation of the whole region is worth the sacrifice of a depressed and scarcely populated area. However, contamination of water streams and air poisoning were not restricted to the few dwellers and the bare hills of Kormori Bchwk. As confirmed by in-situ visits, the toxic footprint is apparent in the entire agricultural area around the Chamchamal block. Moreover, citizens and local administrations were neither consulted, let alone involved, in planning the future of their territory, despite the sour impact on livelihoods. No wonder, hence, that distributional issues emerged when people realized that households in the gas-rich district were

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[249] Information draw from the Crescent Petroleum website: http://www.pearlpetroleum.com
[250] "Crescent Petroleum and Dana Gas to Increase Gas Production from Khor Mor Field by 25% in 2018", press release, March 21, 2018; available at: https://bit.ly/2I1cxS6
[251] Gas Project in Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Socio Economic Benefits Report, Dana Gas and Crescent Petroleum, 2015.
[252] "Kormori Bchwk - the Forgotten Village", CPT IK, December 13, 2016.

delivered with much less electricity supply than the cities of Erbil or Sulaymaniyah. After vehement protests against power cuts in January 2017, rockets were fired at the power plant in Chamchamal[253]. The attack caused quite a stir, but proved to reach the target given that supply was immediately turned on and without interruptions. That was not a single incident, by the way. A year before a section of the Khor Mor-Erbil gas pipeline blew up near the village of Qadr Karam knocking out power for hours[254]. The outspoken leader of the Gorran branch in Chamchamal had threatened to damage the infrastructure, though he was not held responsible for the rupture[255]. The violent turn of demonstrations was there to prove the jangled nerves of an inequitable allocation of benefits, as well as the explosive combustion with latent civil unrest against the KDP-PUK oligarchy.

6.3. Divide and rule

The Kurdish experience reiterates some classic features of extractivism. Understood as a mode of accumulation of primary commodities, its practices are neo-colonial in essence. Petroleum and mining industries are not designed to create value in the territories where they operate: the lion's share of raw materials appropriated by multinational enterprises is not processed for domestic consumption, but exported hundreds of miles away. This circumstance leads to the only apparently anomalous situation for which oil-producing countries usually have very limited refining capacities and are forced to import petroleum products. The KRI does not set a departure from the general trend. Instead, what is left on the ground – the footprint of extractive regimes – are social and environmental costs transferred to local communities not benefiting from resource exploitation. These not-so-hidden costs are sold like a necessary sacrifice for the sake of progress and modernization. On closer inspection, in fact, the production of value from the commodification of nature entails rather consumption of life and environment in extractive localities (Bebbington 2011: 5). Then, the whole set of activities referred to as extractivism looks like a machinery of plunder. Extractive enclaves are also cordoned off from the rest of the economy, being unable to absorb unskilled labor and generate employment (Kohl & Farthing 2012: 225). Insularity is compounded by the overall distortion of economic structure and allocation of production factors (Acosta 2013): the gargantuan influx of cash via royalty payments accrues to the top, while standards of living fall at the bottom. In absence of fair redistribution, the scale of extractive activities is such that concentration of wealth in a few pockets equals the parallel impoverishment of large fractions of the population. As it is typical, highly-productive systems and subsistence-based systems are aligned on separate tracks, this engendering a mirrored contrast between a greater sense of

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[253] "Power Station Attack a Sign Iraqi Kurdish Protestors Are Ready to Use Violence?", Niqash, January 19, 2017.
[254] "Explosion shuts down critical Kurdistan gas pipeline", Iraqi Oil Report, January 29, 2016.
[255] "Local leader threatens key Kurdistan gas pipeline", Iraqi Oil Report, January 21, 2016.

affluence spurring a consumerist boom and widespread backwardness aggravated by disruption of livelihood strategies.

It is worth emphasizing that these processes of profound transformation are inflicted by the welding of private and privatized interests with little or none civil oversight. Hence, the spiraling of social tensions. As seen, distributional disputes and lack of deliberation on extractive projects made it clear that the pact between the KRG and IOCs was totally insensitive to local rights or claims. The latter were disregarded and emptied into a development model whose agents are corporate actors that are not socially accountable to the citizenry, and in which distribution mechanisms rely on patrimonial transfers through the coffers of ruling parties. There is a sad irony that IOCs were held responsible of addressing and relieving social pressures, whereas the KRG acted merely as a security provider. Despite the nationalist master-frame, a national policy can be barely recognized. Even more so, a striking paradox is there: the oil nationalist discourse mobilized by the establishment critically depends, in practice, on transnational capital and foreign acquisitions of public assets. Since PSAs are awarded by bilateral negotiations behind the scenes and not by public auctions, as noted in the previous chapter, institutional control is out of question.

Then, indigenous claims reasserting ownership on land and natural resources opened loci of contestation where a debate had been foreclosed from the outset. In the Shawre Valley, participation in the process of knowledge production made villagers conscious of their agency. Though that is not the same as deliberation, confrontation with the corporate-government nexus let a counter-discourse to gradually emerge. The human-nature mythology and the longing for rural self-sufficiency were opposed against the extractive imperative backed by nationalist propaganda. Preservation of natural beauty and traditional customs overrode the tempting prospect of oil windfalls. The presence of those same themes in the Kurdish collective memory made the appeal effective and sustained collective action. Walking backwards into the future, Shawre people appealed to the primordial belonging to the valley where their ancestors had settled in the mists of time, thus claiming to protect the real backbone of Kurdishness. That said, however, Bebbington is right in saying that "the effects of extraction in any given territory and the ways in which these are negotiated depend very much on the prior political economic history of that territory as well as national political economic history" (2011: 223). Kurds' attitudes towards extractive activities are mixed. Occupational and economic concerns were predominant in Khor Mor and Chamchamal. Moreover, the tangible effects of the oil and gas industry are unseen in urban settings.

The glove: oil and social control

"No friends but the mountains"[256] is a saying frequently attached to the Kurdish misfortunes. Actually, it is not even of Kurdish origin, tough it entered the symbolic universe of Kurds, particularly in Bakur. Many proverbs, songs, and literary works express the same vision of the mountain as refuge. Nowadays, such protective bond is more ritualized in the mythology of Kurdish origins than practiced. The mountain is no longer a shelter for freedom fighters or the primary economic resource for tribesmen; it is not even the actual setting of social life for most Kurds, who predominantly moved to the cities downhill, as much as stargazing is not a social practice anymore. Modernization shifted the centre of gravity, inevitably. Nevertheless, the urban-rural divide tells more than the passing of time. "Kurdish parties completed what Saddam Hussein had started", Sirwan told me. He meant that Kurdish ruling elites have been consistent, paradoxically, with a resettlement process aimed at dividing the social texture and creating forms of economic and political dependency:

> "Working for the KRG is the only source of income for some 1.5 million people, out of a total population of 5-6 million. It's a form of social control. Households are not autonomous, economically. My family, on the foothills of the Halgurd, is an exception. They produce what they eat, except for rice and tea. If you control the economy, you make people dependent. Capitalism, of which the petroleum industry is one aspect, destroyed the economic independence of Kurdish society"[257]

His biographical account takes up many points already discussed in the previous chapter, most notably the patrimonial attributes of leading parties and the consumerist boom that gripped the region on the heels of the oil bonanza. It also suggests, however, other key elements making clearer the indirect link through which the commodification of petroleum allows room for strategies of social control. Overall, this link might be understood as a "peripherization" process that, according to Fischer-Tahir (2010), follows from the development policies of the KRG. She eloquently shows that technocratic, academic, and political representations of the district of Qaradagh, south-west of Sulaymaniyah, is good example of a discourse of governance contributing to disconnection and othering of rural areas, at the margins of oil-driven development and dependent on cities in terms of "income, food supply, and political decision-making" (Fischer-Tahir, 2010: 2). Such a dominant discourse of governance, which favours the urban cores of the three Kurdish governorates, promotes a pair of tendencies that hit the region since the mid-1990s: the decline of agriculture as a result of lack of planning and neglect by Kurdish authorities and, consequently, the emptying of countryside with the exodus of labour force into the cities to earn state salaries, either as civil servants or members of security forces. Once in the middle of

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[256] Most probably an Arabic proverb – لا أصدقاء سوى الجبال, it has been used profusely to name books (i.e. Bulloch & Morris, 1992), articles, and documentaries on Kurds and Kurdistan, and this chapter as well.
[257] Interview n. 29

pasture lands, villages in Qaradagh are no longer self-sufficient in terms of food and goods production, but also marginalized in terms of political representation with respect to the dominance of urban-based party bureaus. The focus on centre-periphery relations inside the KRI (which is innovative since research along these lines has typically framed the Kurdish north as a peripheral space of the Iraqi state without entering the regional dynamics) offers a different angle on the structural imbalances of the oil economy. Until the development of the petroleum industry, the rain-fed highlands of Kurdistan were the granary of the country, accounting for about 70% of total wheat production in early 1950s (Natali, 2010: 3). Despite isolation and underdevelopment, the region not only supplied the domestic market, but also exported foods to neighbours and Europe. Additionally, agriculture was the most important tax base, providing one-third of the national income (ivi). However, the petrolization of Iraq quickly undermined the agricultural sector: already in late 1950s Iraq was a food importer for over two-thirds of its needs. This obviously had repercussions on the agrarian economy of Kurdistan, whose villages were also hotbeds of resistance against central institutions and, not coincidentally, became targets of repression campaigns. When Kurdistan itself undertook the development of the oil potential on its own, ruling elites chose the same path and the decay of the agrarian society continued unabated.

Why did the KRG leadership set foot on the same dysfunctional path of the Iraqi petro-state? In 2003 Kurdistan was not a rentier economy. The exploitation of oil and gas reserves was an intention at best and the region was self-sufficient in terms of local products, though in a state of poverty. In a few years, Kurdistan went through a total transformation heading towards what I have described more than once in these pages as a de-facto petro-state. As a matter of fact, path-dependency was due to a general lack of administrative expertise and experience. Kurdish leaders were basically unprepared to run a government: from professional state-destroyers and guerrilla specialists, who had fought for their entire lives up the mountain, all of the sudden they came to be improvised state-builders in charge of reconstructing a region left in ruins and dealing multi-millionaire deals with giant corporations such as ExxonMobil or Rosneft. Albeit faithful, such an explanation alone would be overly simplistic. There are deeper social reasons also. Iraq under the Ba'ath Party used to be a centralized and socialist state providing health care, education, employment in the public sector, and welfare more generally (Marr, 2018) with the bulk of state revenues generated by oil production. Kurdistan was not included in a proportionate manner in the redistribution of the oil rent; as said, it was penalised on purpose in terms of infrastructures, services, and professional opportunities. Economic policies went in parallel with political objectives: segregation and backwardness were meant to weaken Kurdish society, further impeding political claims to acquire strength. Therefore, even more so given a legacy of resentment, there were expectations that the KRG would have subsidized the same level of well-being once opened the golden valve of oil exports.

What happened next is known and already examined in chapter V. People's expectations of living on oil were not realistic, but matched the patronage networks of ruling parties and oil contracts pumped up government spending at unsustainable pace, with the salaries of civil servants draining over 60% of the operational budget. The vicious circle of centralization, tribal socio-political structures, and rent-seeking behaviour "made economic reform unsuccessful and accelerated economic crisis" (Noori, 2018: 2). However, the lack of diversification of the income base and the resultant exposure to food insecurity were not merely the unintended outcome of a rentier mentality, inherited from the previous regime and endorsed with indolence by the Kurdish leadership. If the extractive regime developed into the engine of patrimonial relations, KDP and PUK leaders were mindfully in the driving seat. A handful of leader within the two ruling parties reserved to themselves the reins of the oil economy as the ultimate strategy of social control. From Durkheim onwards, sociology has revolved around this very concept, which lies at the heart of society-individual relations. A general definition from any textbook would place emphasis on the socialisation of norms that discipline behaviour (individually and collectively) by drawing the line between what is culturally deemed to be acceptable and what is not, or between the normal and the pathological as Foucault would say. Here, social control is used with a slightly different accent since it focuses on the regulation of political orders through techniques of domination[258]. The mechanisms through which it is played out constrain political agency and reduce social mobilisation against the establishment. For all the variety of modalities of power, social control is typically exerted through normation and normalization. As seen, the restructuring of territories via enforcement of a legal framework for the concession of exploration rights and the subsequent creation of an extractive milieu organize hierarchies and functions of the community. From this perspective, the commodification of petroleum and reliance to a single-commodity economy engendered dependency relationships putting a glove onto society. This has occurred directly, through distribution of monetary rewards to party affiliates and repression of dissent, and indirectly. Displacement of rural livelihoods and discouragement of productive activities are illustrations of the latter. Either case, the outcome is unequivocal, in my view: laying the foundations of a consumer society on the payroll of the KDP-PUK oligarchy.

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[258] Many political ecologists, Watts included, adapted the concept of governmentality. Foucault wrote that the art of government is the right disposition of things. More than sovereignty, which defines and is exercised upon territory, governmentality means shaping and managing a population. However, in my view the application of the concept can be problematic. Foucault's excellent critique of liberal democracies and their microphysics of power is rooted in the Western tradition and a landscape of nation-states. It is specific in time and space. Even though it is impossible to decolonise one's way of thinking and representing social reality, caution must be taken. Once in Kurdistan I realized that the lines of separation between private and public spaces, tribal allegiances and citizenship, land and territory may be seen and practiced in quite different terms compared with the cultural background I am accustomed to. For this reason, I preferred refraining from using governmentality here as analytical shortcut and adopting, instead, the more general umbrella of social control.

It is no doubt that the enclave nature of the oil complex was an asset: the ruling parties outsourced upstream activities to foreign investors and simultaneously occupied the whole space of midstream and downstream services, from refining to transportation, with their affiliated companies. So, besides oil revenues channelled into the party coffers, KDP and PUK leaders got a grip on the entire commodity chain. No longer productive inhabitants of a region that used to be the breadbasket of Iraq, ordinary Kurds were flattened into a horizontal society in which survival strategies depend on monetary allocations falling from the top, whilst any social grouping other than the party (neo-tribal confederations according to McDowall's perceptive insight) is hindered. As noted by Noori, "political parties lobbied for controlling people through the labour market" (2018: 18). His analysis on the incentives that brought 1,400,000 people on public payroll is severe but accurate: "transferring employees from other sectors to the public sector was inspired by the desire for absolute power" (ivi). This conclusion came out several times during interviews when I asked my interlocutors about the submissive attitude of some of the poorest and most marginal sections of Kurdish population:

> "A producer is granted political will. Consumers, instead, are fed by the government. That's why people don't revolt"[259]

Far from reaching economic independence through oil exports, according to this interpretation ordinary people found themselves powerless and, moreover, betrayed by a predatory political class. When I crossed paths with Hassan, an old farmer living at the outskirts of Kirkuk, on a scorcher day, he wearily pointed the finger at the dark clouds cresting over gas flares of oil facilities in the distance: "they left us with nothing but smoke" – a striking metaphor of what the advent of extractivism brought to Kurds.

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[259] Interview n. 45

CONCLUSIONS

Poetry and oral literature command a prominent position in the construction of Kurdistan and Kurdishness. I often introduced the previous chapters with few lines of famous poems to convey the emotional and symbolic baggage that permeates the liberation struggle, any more directly than my fleeting interpretation of it. A popular poem circulating also in KRG official documents (though its author and origin are unknown to me) describes the troubled history of Kurds as "one of a thousand sighs, a thousand tears, a thousand revolts and a thousand hopes"[260] – etched and seared into collective memory, the sufferings of the past reverberate through the present and foreshadow a lasting battle to attain self-determination on a partitioned homeland. Kurdish identity is firmly anchored to this narrative: whatever the personal beliefs or political visions, such inheritance mediates a powerful sense of belonging that is common to any Kurd, dare I say. This research has endeavoured to make a journey into the mythology of Kurdistan, as practiced in the Iraqi side and through an unusual route. Most IR analyses would not look at resource politics as constitutive of political communities, if not in terms of financial bedrock for power consolidation or strategic commodities to be secured. In line with an interdisciplinary and interpretive approach, I laid instead the proposition that resource geographies should be primarily framed as socially constituted fields of power within which the struggles over the commodification of nature intersect with the constant remaking of collective identities. Hence, starting the journey from this point of departure implied exploring the role of resource governance in the spatialisation of rule.

The opening up of a frontier of accumulation across the beloved mountains of Kurdistan and the exploitation via transnational capital relations of the abundant fossil fuels buried underground has had a bearing on feelings of national belonging, inter-ethnic competition, forms of authority, and mechanisms of enclosure and dispossession. Although not the foundation of the state-building process initially driven by international aid during the 1990s, when Iraqi Kurds made the first tentative steps towards self-rule, the creation of an extractive regime became essential to the consolidation of autonomy within the federal framework. Tribal politics and patrimonial ties got transformed as well through extractive activities. While oil wealth rewarded cronies and clients of ruling parties, internal feuding and impoverishment of large sections of the population broke up the national body along old and new lines. In parallel, energy issues put Erbil-Baghdad tensions on a collision course even more and thus contributed to the near collapse of the federal commitment. After the central government reasserted control over disputed areas (and disputed oilfields), half of the KRG oil output vanished

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[260] See, for instance, The Oil & Gas Year Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2009: 33).

overnight and the ambition to realise autonomy upon crude exports began to crumble. The political setback has been painfully compounded by the ongoing financial crisis, as a consequence of which the resource nationalist narrative is growing weaker, while opposite beliefs framing oil as constraint to economic and political independence are emerging.

What does the KRI case teach us? If generalizations travelling freely to other contexts would be misleading as explained at length in the methodological chapter, a point about resource politics can be made and put forth as the main theoretical advancement that might be drawn from this piece of research: resource environments are not merely descriptive, nor solely regulative of politics, but productive of orders. The argument begs for explanation. The Marxist critique to capitalism as an energy-hungry system is a useful foothold in this respect. Developed by ecological economics specifically, the application of the concept of entropy to the economic processes of contemporary fossil-fuelled world bubbles up here and there in these pages as a major assumption on socio-natural interactions. In particular, the extractive industry stands out as the ultimate exemplification of how the accumulation of capital is historically and logically inseparable from the accumulation of increasing amounts of energy (cf. Bellamy & Diamanti, 2018). Note that the assumption does not imply a deterministic relationship for which energy shapes social life. My understanding, instead, is that social life happens through an energy dimension at the metabolic interface between nature and society. After all, the notion of 'natural resources' precisely conjures up the image of the "second-nature" Neil Smith reflects on, whereby the commodification of nature through labour and technology extracts exchange value out of the environment. Chapter II already points out that the production of nature is as much material as ideological. Throughout the three empirical chapters I tried to go one step further by demonstrating that extractive regimes are involved, to paraphrase Jasanoff (2004), in ordering the social worlds within the extractive community.

Framed as such, the petroleum industry is not a tool of power as it is generally intended in a rather minimal sense, though it can certainly be a source of authority and an element of social control. Rather, and most importantly, resource environments articulate a relational and meaningful space that interacts with the political community along multiple axes: through the negotiation of political hierarchies, juridical norms and ideological values, the modes of production and the related economic structure, social stratification and inequalities, down to the ecological relations that place a population within the ecosystem. As Rasmussen and Lund (2018) guessed, frontier dynamics destroy and reorder space anew. These changes do not happen in isolation and, moreover, involve the deployment of physical and/or symbolic violence (Peluso & Watts, 2001). Hence, resource environments are inevitably conflict-torn spaces. In brief, the processes stemming from the appropriation of nature tend to be all-encompassing in that they dismantle and rearrange the political, economic, social, and ecological orders in a given place and at a given time.

Conceptually, order is wider than regime or system, yet more specific than society or community: it conveys an idea of regularity in the disposition of things and of patterns that organise social life. Put it differently, an order is an arrangement of principles, norms, and rules that is crystalized in institutions and everyday practices. The adjectives above (political, economic, social, and ecological) define which sphere of relations any particular order refers to. Anyway, what does it mean that resource environments are productive of orders? In such general terms, although it builds on empirical analysis, this stand-alone proposition is of little benefit and may sound obscure. Moreover, the wording seems to suggest a causative role since regularities appear to be broken and patterns altered by the exploitation of resources and all that that entails, but this interpretation would get us out of the way as I will point out in a moment. Then, it is crucial to link the argument to the overall purpose of this work, as it is laid down in the introduction: namely, understanding something more about how the governance over natural resources and the constant remaking of collective identities are tethered to each other.

Looking back at the research question, the case study highlights that the establishment of an extractive regime in the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq has reoriented the whole set of material incentives, values, and imaginaries within which the bonds of loyalty (to the Kurdish nation, the party, the tribe, the city or village, and the Iraqi federal constitution) are being made. As a result of the prominence given to extractivism as the accepted basis for the reorganisation of the political economy underpinning Kurdish society and the historical plea for self-determination, in-group and out-group identities (i.e. belonging and alterity) are re-forged again in the furnace of the petroleum industry, adding new meanings and implications to an already dense alloy. Pre-existing conflicts are therefore remodelled by and through resource politics. To give one but relevant example, it is apparent that the emergence of the oil complex has had a contradictory influence on the political regime in that it has strengthened the monopoly on violence of ruling elites, though undermining at the same time their legitimacy and even fragmenting the forms of authority. In a manner of speaking, extractive activities hardened the KDP-PUK hegemony to such an extent of cracking the social base underneath. The upshot is that the nationalist narrative built upon the oil dream shored up the state-building process, but paradoxically debilitated national (and transnational) solidarity.

Albeit a powerful motor of change, the outcomes on identity formation remain open-ended nonetheless: extractivism is resisted, ideologically and politically, depending on the social formations affected by the processes of enclosure and commodification that come with it. In this light, resource environments offer another terrain for contestation around the core values of a given community. Hence, keeping together material and discursive entanglements between ecologies and power shines a light on the co-production of the many dimensions mentioned above. However, what are the pathways through which these processes take place? To answer this question and substantiate the argument further, some empirical findings are commented below with more theoretical breadth in what follows.

1. *Extractive regimes contribute to the territorialisation of authority*

The foundation of an energy landscape was pivotal in the re-territorialisation of KRG jurisdiction in northern Iraq, most notably through oil concessions granted to IOCs and the construction of pipeline networks in order to trade crude independently. Assertion and expansion of control over hydrocarbons was indeed fundamental to fix regional authority in space by legal means (PSAs, institutional bodies, separate legislation) and military practices (checkpoints, deployments in disputed areas), which sedimented into de-facto boundaries that challenge nominal arrangements beyond the Green Line. This territorial function had real consequences even without crude effectively being pumped up from the bowels of earth. As already noted, this first finding is in line with Rasmussen and Lund's insight (2018) about the erasure of previous borders and institutions by commodity frontiers. The case at hand is all the more interesting when considering that the territorializing actors are sub-state entities, namely the two main political parties and the KRG as a sum of both. KDP and PUK are distinguished from the regional administration as a whole to highlight that resource control does not set the frontline against the central government only, but it is also integral of equally contested internal boundaries between partisan (and very much territorial) spheres of influence. However, the emergence of property regimes comes with a paradox since it simultaneously provides incentives for the de-territorialization of economic activities, or rather for the recomposition of the bulk of the economy at the scale of energy operators, which are typically entrenched into enclaves detached from the real economy at the local scale. From here, private gains depart from the purported public goal of oil-based national development. Given that collective identity is socialized through spatial categories, as Walker (1993) and Campbell (1992) elucidate, territorialisation practices are worthy of note, especially in view of unsolved territorial disputes arising from competition among ethnic groupings.

2. *The opposite logics of territory and capital coexist within resource environments*

The petroleum industry spells out the interplay between the opposite logics of capitalism and territorialism (Arrighi, 1994). Though antithetical in terms of pursuit (capital accumulation vs. consolidation of sovereignty), spatiality (continuous flows of capital circulation vs. discrete territories), and social constituency to which an actor is held accountable (circles of investors vs. groups defined along citizenship, privilege, class, or kinship lines), these modes of power are not incompatible but rather intertwined (Harvey 2003). The "slick alliance" (Watts, 2003) of corporate agents and territorial rulers reveals continuity of interests between energy operators, financial traders, and foreign states on the one hand, and the ensemble of ruling parties, local militias, and patronage networks on the other hand. The two logics are not in disagreement, I argue, precisely because they operate at different scales, albeit interrelated. On

the side of the KRG, resource nationalism supports the legitimacy of regional development and management of the oil and gas industry against federal sovereignty. The portfolio of investors is pitted against vetoes in Baghdad. On the side of foreign (state and non-state) actors, instead, the neo-colonial inclusion of the KRI into global energy relations pleads in favour of the privatisation of an unexploited frontier. It would seem a win-win solution up to this point. The incongruities created by the friction of opposites are in plain sight, nonetheless: the oil complex is the most solid keystone of the KDP-PUK duopoly and reproduces a neoliberal economic orientation, but the sheer dependency on crude exports and capital inflows contradict the touted isomorphism between national and resource imaginaries. Whereas self-determination is built upon the ancestral ethnic belonging to the mountainous landscape, the nationalist discourse that postulates the exploitation of natural endowments as an intrinsic national right goes towards, in fact, the sale of national assets, the uprooting of citizens from land, and dislocation from livelihoods. Despite the potency of the symbolic apparatus mobilised by the KRG, this tension eroded social cohesion, let alone the KDP-PUK legitimacy. In this sense, it reminds the contradictory dialectic that Michael Watts ascribes to petro-capitalism[261]. The performativity of scalar processes (Alatout, 2008; Harris & Alatout, 2010) appears to be a promising avenue to further analyse the divergent tendencies and spaces articulated by capital and territorial logics.

3. *Oil geographies cannot be analytically reduced to state-centric frameworks*

This stands as a methodological corollary of the two arguments above. From the oil rig to the pump (that is to say from the site of extraction to the point of consumption) the uneven, discontinuous, and untidy geographies of oil do not match the narrow conceptual boundaries of the petro-state (which examines the causative role of oil on state-formation and statecraft), nor fit into the framing of inter-state geopolitical scrambles for energy supplies. The empirical assessment underlined, instead, that various social formations are impacted by the oil commodity chain. This corroborates Watt's notion of oil complex, which captures the relational and point-to-point spatiality of extractive regimes. Following the trail of oil along production networks and transit routes, from hand to hand, shows that state actors are quite often less significant than non-state ones (such as energy operators, brokers, contractors,

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[261] "Petro-capitalism, contains a double movement, a contradictory unity of capitalism and modernity. On the one hand oil is a centralizing force, one that rendered the state more visible (and globalized), and permitted, that is to say financially underwrote, a process of secular nationalism and state building. On the other, centralized oil revenues flowing into weak institutions and a charged, volatile federal system produced an undisciplined, corrupt and flabby oil-led development that was to fragment, pulverize, disintegrate and discredit the state and its forms of governance. It produced conditions, which challenged and undermined the very tenets of the modern nation-state." (Watts, 2004: 61)

smugglers, political parties, and armed groups). Without looking at these players, the contentious texture of oil-producing areas is not intelligible. Furthermore, value creation is not limited to the price tag traded on the energy markets insofar as resource materialities are equally imbued with moral and aesthetic attributes, which infuse imaginaries on resource use and recommends a broader outlook than that commonly used in IR. Theoretical imports from critical geography, political ecology, and anthropology are of benefit to decenter state-centric studies on resource geographies, more generally, and oil geographies, in particular.

4. *Resource imaginaries provide a discursive space for the re-negotiation of collective identities*
    The matrix of conflicts inside and beyond the KRI bears witness to the imprint of the extractive regime on the mechanisms of identity formation, as an emergent discursive space within which collective groupings re-align perceptions, goals, and visions upon a changed material context. KRG elites incorporated the extractive imperative into the weft of the nationalist narrative to find a political outlet for the problem of statelessness and maintain the grip on power. The dominant discourse strives for naturalising an organic unity between the exploitation of hydrocarbons and the national self-image. In so doing, as Gellner (1983) suggested, nationalist frames seek to achieve political legitimacy. However, the fragile construct of an oil nation thins out in front of two opposite nation-building projects undertaken by KDP and PUK leaderships. In this respect, the oil complex acts like a double-edged sword: the persuasive impulse for both the strategic rapprochement between KDP and PUK after the civil war and the subsequent creation of the KRG to maximise profits, but at the same time the source of inter-party and intra-party fragmentation, also resulting in divergent alliances with external powers. After all, national identity shares the stage with complementary and contrasting ones. Assuming that nationalism occupies a preordained space would be a normative stretch (Hobsbawm, 1990): the Kurdish case shows clearly that other criteria of social identification (based on tribal allegiances, social stratification, or the rural-urban divide) are by no means residual. From this perspective, social divisions already cracking the political community were amplified by the inception of the oil economy. In some cases, alternative resource imaginaries coming from the grassroots of society supported local claims against the establishment, with environmental activists and the rural communities most affected by extractive activities emphasising the life function of the ecosystem (in place of the productive function of extraction). I stressed on several occasions that the natural environment is perceived as integral to Kurdish ethnic consciousness. Therefore, resource environments enter a broad universe of meaning and relates with social practices of signification drawing in-group and out-group identities. Resting upon reconstructions of the relationships between nature and society, resource imaginaries are inevitably conflictive and expressive of selective representations of political subjectivity.

5. *Extractivism is deployed to exert social control within a global chain of dispossession*

Petro-capitalism is only one dimension of global capitalist relations. Manuel Castells (1996), for instance, discussed rise and consequences of the information technology revolution, which is another side. Nevertheless, fossil fuels determine the pace and the extent of the entropic metabolism of capitalism, being the basic input for contemporary modes of production, mobility infrastructures, and consumerism. On this account, the illustration of the case study shows the Janus-faced nature of petro-capitalism, which mirrors the power-laden dialectic between local enclaves and the global economy. James Ferguson (2006) gave a striking description of these connections[262] spanning the globe without covering it, by which he meant that extractive peripheries are "perversely" globalized in "highly selective and spatially encapsulated forms". It is in this sense that the petroleum industry looks like a global chain of dispossession: enclosure and appropriation of raw materials correspond to destitution and eviction in extractive localities. Hence, the discrepancy between resource domains and rights domains (Feitelson & Fischhendler, 2009; Boelens, Getches, & Guevara-Gil, 2010). The petrolization of society inside the KRI validates the pattern. With regard to local dynamics, petrolization also widened the gap between predatory elites and masses of expelled at the margins of wealth. The massive rents accruing from transnational investments have flowed into the parties' coffers and financed disproportionate social payments rather than development programmes, consistently with the survival strategies of neo-tribal political organizations keeping the region under their hegemony.

6. *Political ecology is an interdisciplinary glue for inquiries on society-nature relations*

It is worth recalling that a political ecology agenda offers a way out of the environmental determinism that has plagued the focus on resource conflicts in IR. Political ecologists reject apolitical discourses on environmental triggers or stressors based on the acknowledgement of the mutual constitution of natural and social orders. Against the background of the oil curse thesis that still features high despite lack of robust evidence and similar models reproducing natural realism, the analytical values of historicising and contextualising the politics of nature have been stressed throughout this work. Political ecology re-politicizes the environment, and in so doing discloses the agency of those involved in the purposive transformation of nature. In addition, from a methodological viewpoint, it should be also noted that attentiveness to the

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[262] "But it is worth noting how such enclaves participate not only in the destruction of national economic spaces but also in the construction of "global" ones. For just as enclaves of, say, mining production are often fenced off (literally and metaphorically) from their surrounding societies, they are at the same time linked up, with a "flexibility" t is exemplary of the most up-to-date, "post-Fordist" neoliberalism, both with giant transnational corporations and with net- works of small contractors and subcontractors that span thousands of miles and link nodes across multiple continents" (Ferguson 2006: 13-14)

context does not overemphasise locality at the expense of broader trends. The KRI case is situated, indeed, within the patterns of the global oil economy, of which it represents a specific frontier. Therefore, the in-depth investigation into the extractive regime established in northern Iraq says something meaningful about extractivism in general, though the findings listed here cannot be generalized automatically to similar scenarios, sight unseen.

7. *The Middle East as a regional space mediating situated understandings of environmental governance*

The original aim of this research was a comparison between the resource ecologies in Bashur and Rojava, replicating the same analysis carried out in the KRI in the western (Syrian) side of the Greater Kurdistan. The civil war raging across the country wrecked the idea, which was justified on the basis of the polarization of glaringly opposite resource imaginaries. Both in Bashur and Rojava, indeed, discourses on resource use are merged with the nationalist narrative, but crucially lean towards divergent models of governance: whereas the KRG resembles a neoliberal rentier economy, extracting wealth and legitimacy from crude exports, the communal and rural-based economy promoted in the emergent Democratic Federation of Northern Syria programmatically refrains from the commodification of natural resources, as mentioned in passing. Social ecology is one of the main principles behind the revolution defended in Rojava. Such a contrast points out the complex re-imaginings of the Kurdish question with regard to antithetical ideologies of nature, upon which in turn economic development and institutional arrangements somewhat rely. Therefore, the comparison held the promise of providing a more comprehensive overview on Kurdish identity and from a very unusual entry point, which highlights the intersections of environmental practices and forms of political action, even more so given geographical contiguity and political connections. Such a study would reinforce the proposition that political communities assert collective identity also through contingent visions of resource ownership and use. Albeit unexplored for the moment, the insight suggests the opportunity of rethinking the Middle East as a regional space crossed by various and dialectical understandings of environmental governance. Inter alia, this might be helpful for decolonising the exceptionalist arguments resonating in Western-centric accounts and bringing back local epistemologies to the center.

All in all, the seven considerations above outline the constitutive role of resource environments in the fabrication of new orders replacing or transforming previous ones. This is not to say that oil captures or moulds or seduces politics. Rather, it recognizes the centrality of oil as a material and discursive setting through which politics is played out. Within a federal framework economically dependent on oil production and still undergoing an overlong adjustment period, riddled with aftershocks and dangerous setbacks, oil comes with many faces for Iraqi Kurds. This dissertation was an attempt to sketch some of them, at least, by illustrating the complexities of the emotionally and politically charged

geographies of an oppressed people. However, oppression comes with many forms as well. Nowadays, Kurds are confronted with a sultanistic political regime keeping the region under martial law through the privatisation of security apparatuses and co-opting social segments into patrimonial dependencies through the strict control on every source of income. This is in stark contrast to the rhetoric of the KRG as a thriving democracy or "the shining star of the Middle East and the vanguard of the fight against terrorism", reminded to the international community by Bafel Talabani in a televised speech on October 12, 2016, in an effort to placate the winds of war blowing on Kirkuk and also gather a disunited PUK together behind "the Mam Jalal's way".

It is said that in 1956 King Idris of Libya replied to a US *chargé d'affaires* who had just notified him new oil discoveries within the kingdom: "I wish your people had discovered water. Water makes men work; oil makes men dream". After the end of Ba'athism, Kurds dreamed of independence and peace, but neither the much praised "Dubai model" has brought prosperity, nor warfare and infighting have abandoned them. The oil and gas industry has greased the wheels of the strategic agreement signed in 2006 by the two single-party administrations in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Since then tiny elites within the oligarchy are living on oil, scamming dividends and sharing benefits under the ceiling of the KRG, which became a system for the allocation of public resources to party clients. In absence of civilian control on the military and parliamentary oversight on the executive, with contracting and revenue management highly centralized in the MNR and the Regional Council for the Oil and Gas Affairs, the extractive regime exacerbated further the authoritarian and violent lineages of a neo-tribal political system mainly tied to the fortunes of Barzani and Talabani families. It also reinforced the internal division of the region along partisan lines and the interference of foreign powers breathing down the neck of Kurdish elites.

Yet, both traditional leaderships in the yellow and green zones are right in front of a generational turnover. Broken dreams and the failure of KRG policies make people's ever-increasing demands for democratic reforms more pressing. These are long overdue, and hopes for change are there. Despite financial distress and the toughness of the elites, Kurdish society has shown to be capable of raising the head and staging nonviolent protests. Disaffection against cronyism and corruption runs through KDP and PUK lower ranks as well. Also, economic diversification going beyond the dysfunctional rentier model might hopefully open a breach into the crony capitalism upon which ruling parties desperately rely. It should not be forgotten that significant progress has been made with the emergence of a more varied political landscape, which created space for oppositions and debate. There is growing awareness on fundamental rights and freedoms to be respected. Not a Kurdish passport, but getting and enjoying those rights is what Kurds strive for and deserve.

In conclusion, a few methodological comments are also in order. Knowledge is inseparable from the social context within which intersubjective processes of sense-making take place. Embracing the

phenomenological critique of positivism, I set my own research goals accordingly, privileging immersion to detachment and engagement to neutrality. I shall not repeat here the epistemological debate on authoritative knowledge and reflexive positionality; the views expressed in chapter III are sufficient. Rather, a reflection on the margins of my fieldwork experience might be interesting for anyone approaching an empirical research with participatory and site-intensive methods. In recent years, doing research in politically unstable or conflict-prone areas has been brought to attention as a security concern for the risks it may entail. For the most part, the securitization of academic practices resulted in restrictions to ethnographic approaches. I faced these restrictions myself. Especially after the murder of Giulio Regeni, an Italian colleague carrying out a participatory study on trade unions in Egypt who was brutally tortured to death by Egyptian security officers (still unidentified and unpunished), the need for stricter procedures and protocols got renewed emphasis, though leading oftentimes to the designation of forbidden areas or countries where field research should be prevented in advance. In my opinion, delimiting supposedly safe geographies and less risky methods of data collection is short-sighted, and it would be likely to validate over time a monotheistic quantitative paradigm of inquiry. From the perspective of conflict and security studies, seeing and daring explanations from afar would be definitely deleterious.

Against the common wisdom, I realized while doing fieldwork that being immersed was not only key to access situated understandings through the lived experiences of the people populating that social setting, but also a guarantee of safety and for both sides. This might seem counterintuitive at first since proximity to frontlines or venturing inside an authoritarian regime imply exposure and vulnerability. If risk-free research on politically sensitive issues is unrealistic and caution must be taken in planning each aspect of data collection, participatory methods are actually risk-averting to the extent that prolonged interaction and embeddedness in the context allow for greater capacity to assess the proper conduct to pursue. This is integral, by the way, to the construction of epistemic evidence about the power relations inside a community. In a number of situations, the web of activism within which I was operating made fieldwork safer, beyond feasible, by reducing information asymmetries and giving me the chance to tap into the social capital of CSOs, activists, and journalists. I hope that this filters down through the recounting of my stays in Iraq. It should be borne in mind, however, that informants/collaborators incur in much higher risks than researchers; they do not share the privilege of being outsiders and turning off the immersion moment at some point. I detailed the practical steps undertaken not to harm the participants of the research, with particular care for those who might have been persecuted for political reasons. I can briefly add that the little support I gave to local activists by advocating for and reporting on the same campaigns contributed to smooth hostility against those initiatives given that the involvement of internationals diminished the incentives for repression. Sometimes visibility can turn exposure into an advantage and further empower emancipatory changes. This commitment, I believe,

should inform the ethos of research in social sciences and make scientific knowledge the space for critical reflection and creative thinking.

APPENDIX I - INTERVIEWS

The list below includes all the formal interviews conducted for this study. Follow-ups are not considered; hence, the date reported refers to the first meeting I had with the interviewee. If not otherwise specified, they were all in-person interview. The list does not include the informal talks with informants, activists, and ordinary people that constituted the material for my ethnographic field notes. In the writing of the analytical chapters I frequently changed the first name of some interviewees listed below in order to protect them from whatever reprisal. Interviews were numbered randomly and without indicating dates for the same reason.

Interviews

Abdulkarim, Jamil; Professor, Cihan University; Sulaymaniyah (May 4, 2017)

Ahmed, Salar; Project Coordinator, Al Mesalla; Erbil (June 5, 2017)

Ayboga, Erjan; Initiative to Keep Hasankeyf Alive; Brighton (November 3, 2016)

Ala'Aldeen, Dlawer; MERI President, former KRG Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research; Erbil (June 5 2017)

Ali, Ghalib Mohammed; Head of the Oil and Gas Committee, Sulaimani Provincial Council; Sulaymaniyah (May 21, 2018)

Alwash, Azzam; Nature Iraq founder; Skype interview (November 9, 2017)

Anonymous; Gorran member; Sulaymaniyah (May 17, 2017)

Anonymous; Journalist; Kirkuk (June 14, 2017)

Anonymous; Oil and Gas Consultant; Skype interview (May 4, 2017)

Askari, Ahmed; Head of the Oil and Gas Committee, Kirkuk Provincial Council; Kirkuk (June 15, 2017)

Askari, Asos; Legal Advisor, Secretary of the KRG Cabinet; Sulaymaniyah (May 11, 2017)

Askari, Hallo; Health, Safety and Environment Advisor, KRG MNR; Erbil (June 5, 2017)

Aziz, Sardar; KRI Parliament Adviser; Sulaymaniyah (May 17, 2017)

Aziz, Shilan; Nature Iraq; Sulaymaniyah (May 4, 2017)

Bakir, Falah Mustafa; Head of KRG Department of Foreign Relations; Erbil (May 15, 2018)

Bijnens, Toon; STC Coordinator, UPP; Sulaymaniyah (May 4, 2017)

Chomani, Kamal; Journalist; Erbil (June 6, 2017)

Dawood, Ismaeel; Civil Society Officer, UPP; Pisa (March 3, 2017; January 29, 2018)

Dolamari, Ali; KRG High Representative to France; Skype interview (March 12, 2018)

Ezat, Sabir Esmaeel; Head of the Parliamentary Committee of Finance, PUK MP; Sulaymaniyah (May 18, 2017)

Maria Fantappie; Senior Adviser, Crisis Group; Skype interview (March 23, 2018)

Faris, Mohammad Amin; Director General of Water Resources, KRG MoAWR; Erbil (June 6, 2017)

Fakhir, Rezhiar; CPT – Iraqi Kurdistan; Sulaymaniyah (May 6, 2018)

Fatah, Rebin; Journalist, Iraqi Oil Report; Erbil (May 9, 2018)

Hamamin, Dara Faeq; Lecturer, Department of Geology, University of Sulaimani; Sulaymaniyah (May 22, 2017)

Hussein, Mohammed; Journalist, Iraqi Oil Report; Skype interview (April 23, 2018)

Ibrahim, Anwar; Director General of Research and Extension, KRG MoAWR; Erbil (May 8, 2017)

Ingram, Jamie; Gulf Editor, Middle East Economic Survey; Skype interview (May 16, 2017)

Jawdat, Sherko; Head of the Parliamentary Committee for Natural Resources; Sulaymaniyah (May 14, 2017)

Kader, Rezan; KRG High Representative in Italy and the Holy See; Rome (March 8, 2017)

Khailani, Dara; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, KRG Council of Ministers; Erbil (May 8, 2017)

Khalid, Hawre; Photojournalist; Sulaymaniyah (May 4, 2018)

Lück, Andreas H.; Senior Project Officer, UNESCO Office for Iraq; Erbil (June 4, 2017)

Mahdi, Mohammad Salah; CPT – Iraqi Kurdistan; Sulaymaniyah (June 15, 2017; May 13, 2018)

Mohammed, Younes; Photojournalist; Erbil (May 8, 2018)

Musa, Nabil; Waterkeepers Iraq; Sulaymaniyah (May 2, 2017)

Najmadeen Noori, Nyaz; Lecturer, Komar University; Sulaymaniyah (May 14, 2017)

Omer, Salam; Journalist; Sulaymaniyah (May 20, 2018)

Raoof, Ziyad; KRG Representative to Poland; written interview (February 21, 2018)

Rashid, Diary Muhammad; Nature Iraq; Sulaymaniyah (May 3, 2017)

Rasul, Akram Ahmed; Director General of Dams and Reservoirs, KRG MoAWR; Erbil (May 8, 2017)

Sadiq, Yusuf Mohammed; KRI Parliament Speaker; Sulaymaniyah (May 17, 2017)

Salih, Ali Hama; Gorran MP; Sulaymaniyah (May 14, 2017)

Salih, Bakthyar Ahmad; General Director, CDO; Sulaymaniyah (May 7, 2018)

Sameen, Ghafoor Salih; PUK Official; Kirkuk (June 14, 2017)

Schwartzstein, Peter; Journalist; Skype interview (March 20, 2018)

Siwaily, Hoshyar; KDP Head of Foreign Relations and former KRG Minister of Electricity; Erbil (May 9, 2017)

Talabani, Rebwar Fayq; Deputy Chairman, Kirkuk Provincial Council; Kirkuk (June 14, 2017)

Tahir, Ahmed; KRG MoAWR; Erbil (May 8, 2017)

Tahir, Karwan Jamal; Deputy Head of KRG Department of Foreign Relations and High Representative to the United Kingdom; Skype interview (February 27, 2018)

Ul-Islam, Tarik; UNDP Programme Manager; Erbil (May 23, 2017)

Zulal, Shwan; Political Risk & Energy Analyst, Carduchi Consulting; Skype interview (May 17, 2018)

Zwijnenburg, Wim; Researcher, PAX; Skype interview (February 13, 2019)

Meetings

- Workshop "Emancipatory Transformations: Engaging Radical Democracy in Kurdistan", University of Sussex, Brighton (November 3-4, 2016)
- Workshop "Impact of Daryan Dam on Sirwan River and Darbandikhan Dam", University of Sulaimani (May 29, 2017)
- Seminar "Beyond the Oil Curse: A Political Ecology of Oil", American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (June 12, 2017)
- UE-UNESCO High-level Workshop "Building a Roadmap for Effective Groundwater Management in Iraq", Treviso (July 10-11, 2017)
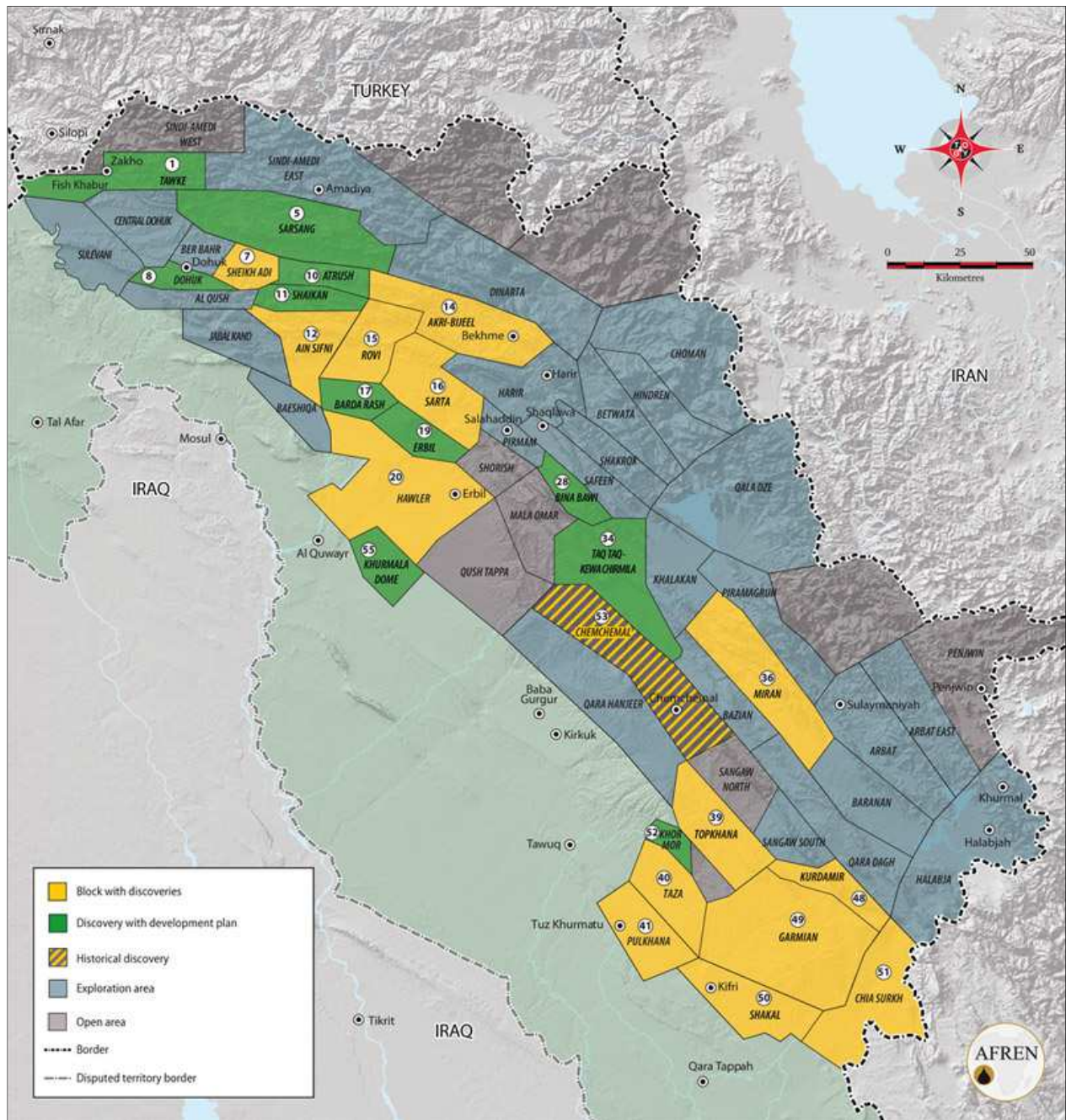
APPENDIX II - MAPS

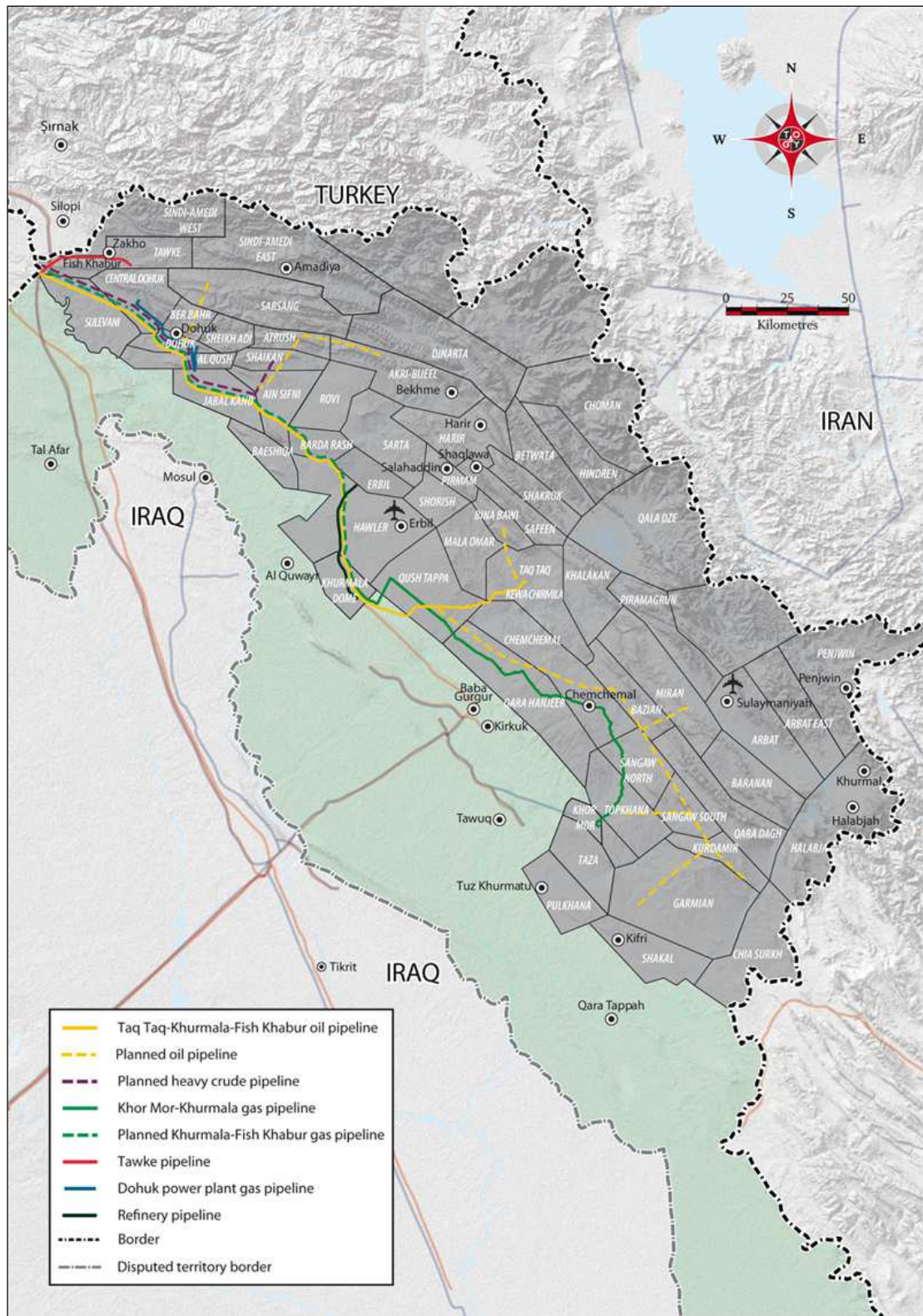## 1. LICENSES AND ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURES (source: KRG MNR)
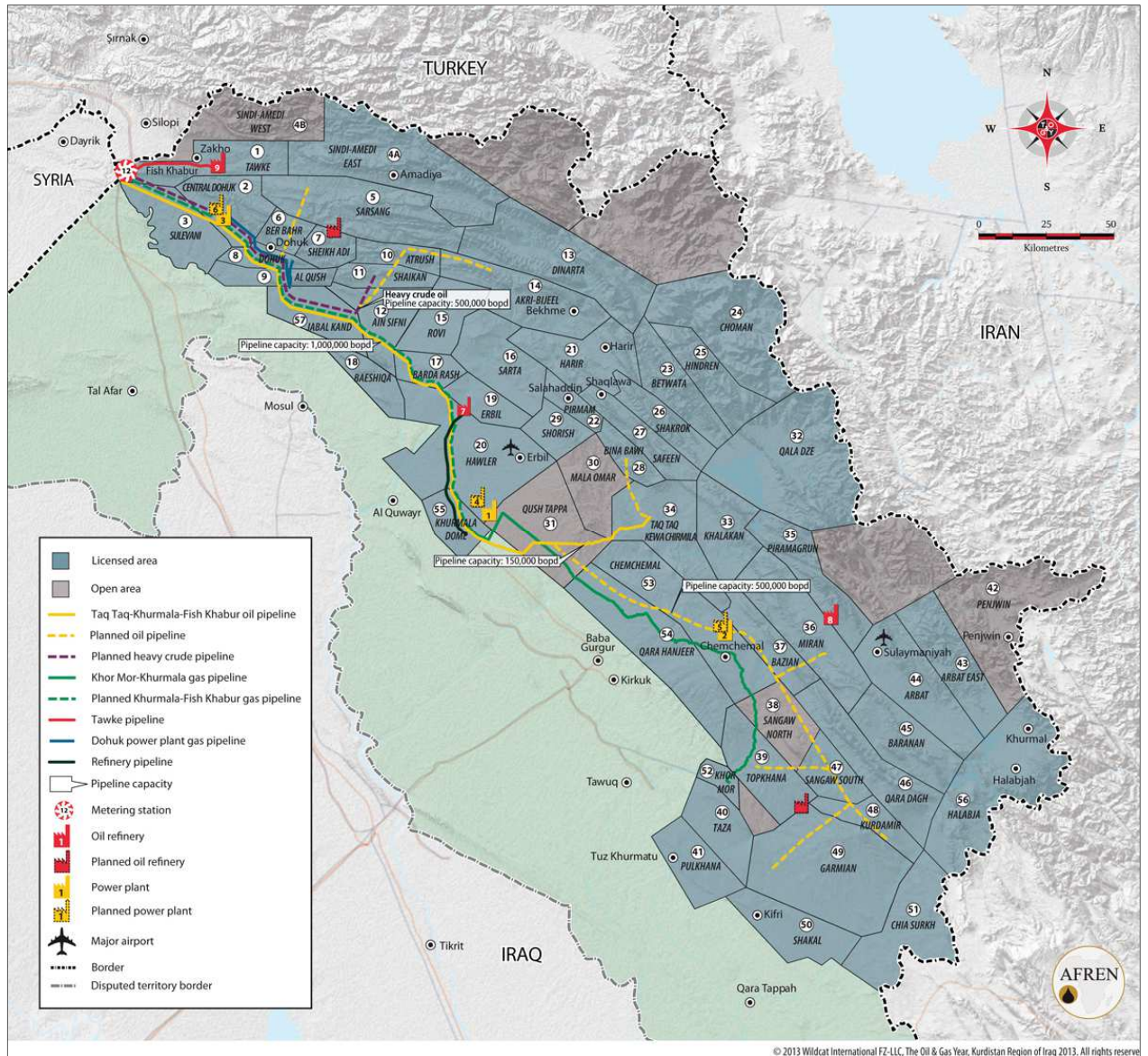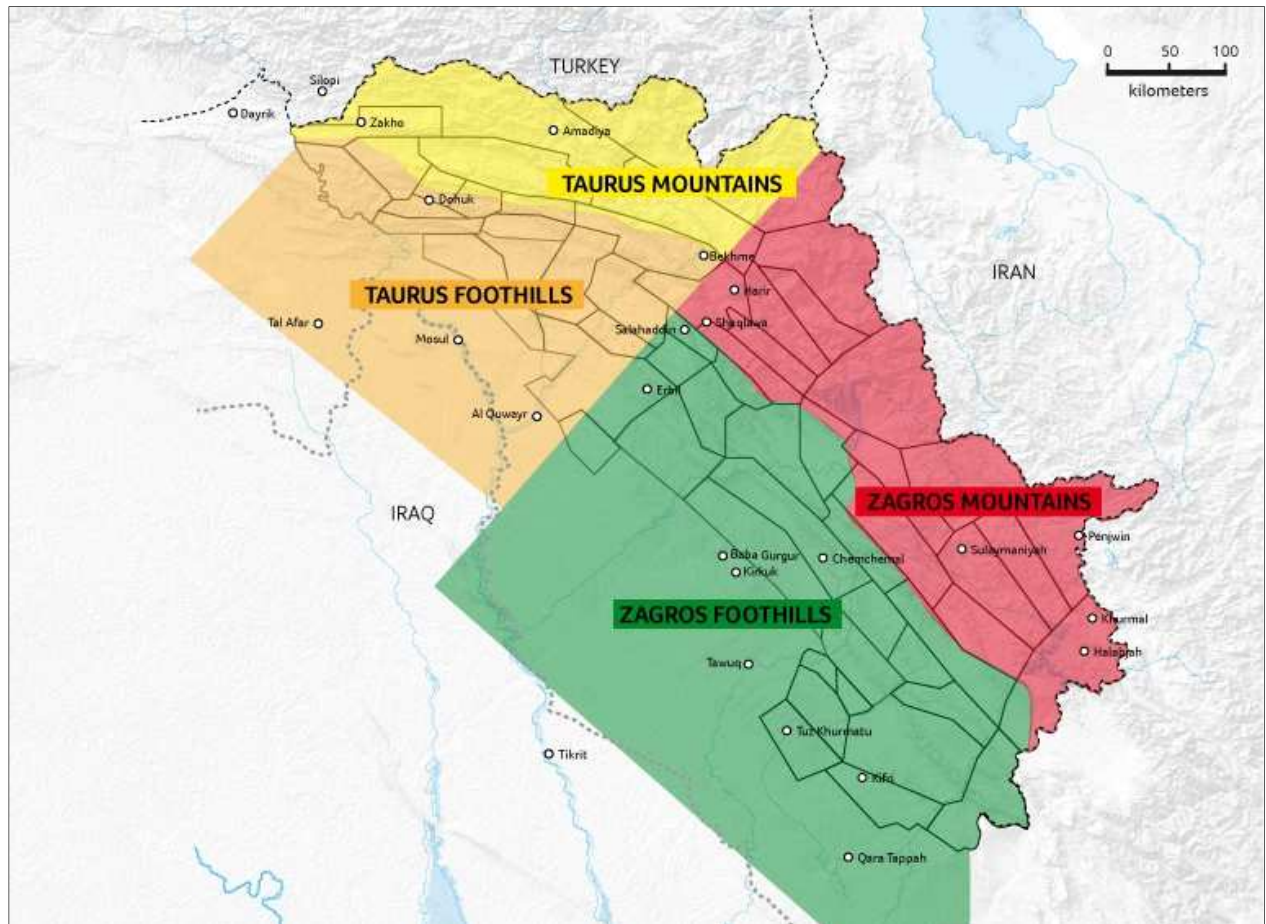
2. DISCOVERIES AND DEVELOPMENT (source: KRG MNR)
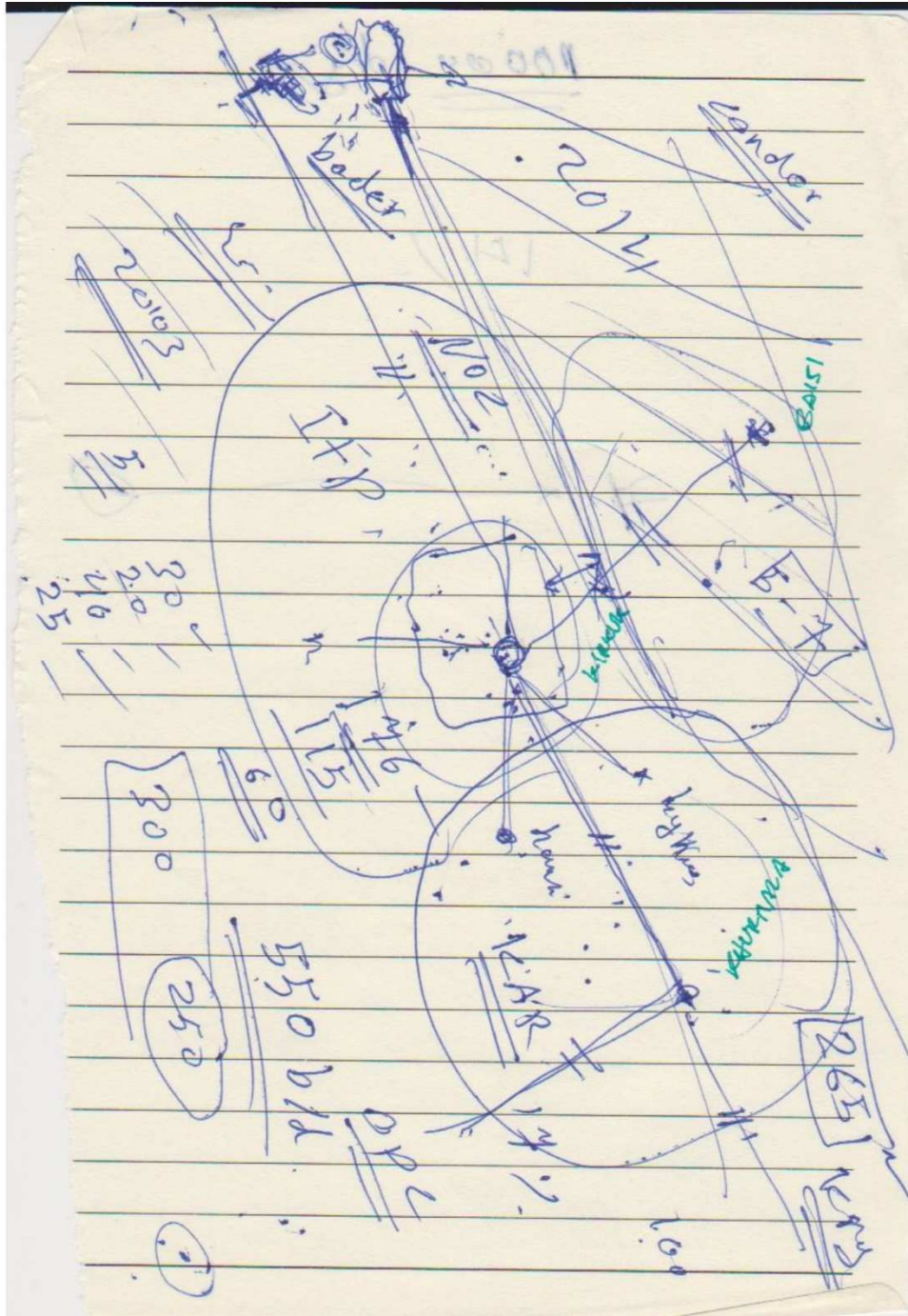
3. PIPELINE INFRASTRUCTURE (source: KRG MNR)

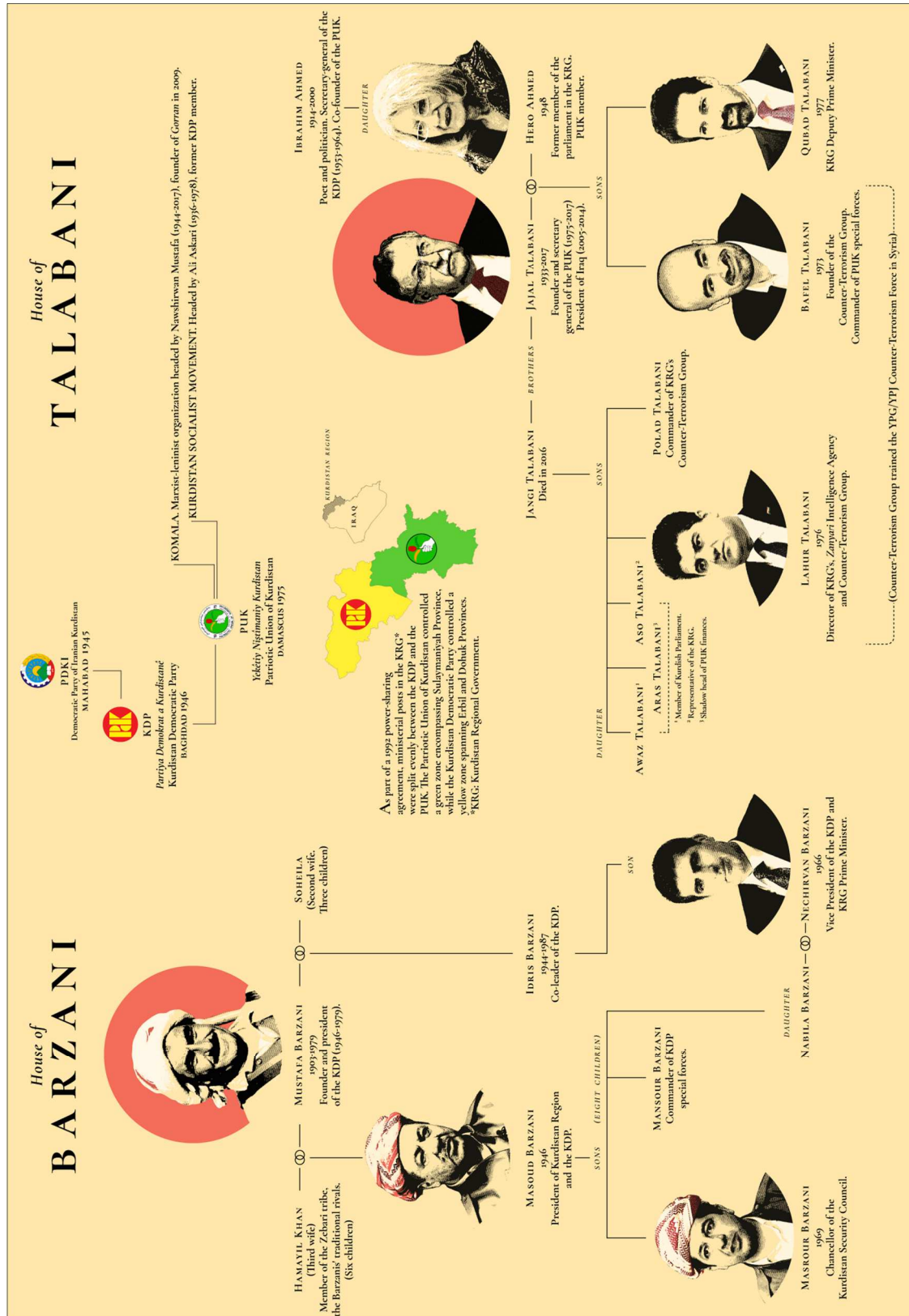4. STRUCTURAL DOMAIN (source: KRG MNR)

5. A back of a napkin sketch of transportation networks, output levels, distribution to downstream refineries in the Kirkuk oilfield by one of my interviewee.
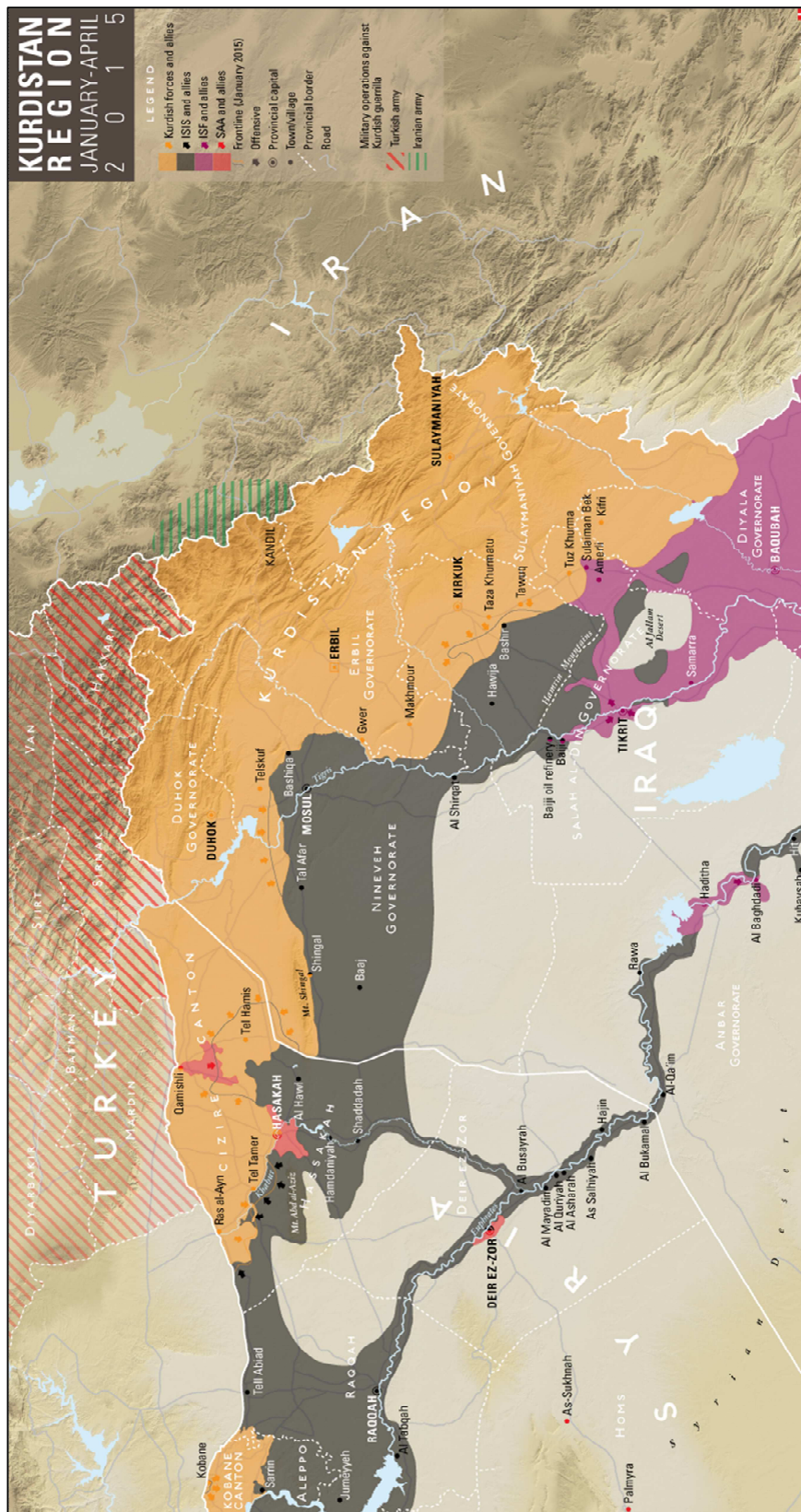
7. KRI, disputed territories, and national minorities in northern Iraq (source: @LCarabinier)

8. The ISIS insurgency across Syria and Iraq: the situation on the ground between January and April 2015 (source: @LCarabinier)

9. Ethnographical map of Eastern Turkey in Asia, Syrian and Western Persia - Kurdish-populated areas in
   yellow (source: Royal Geographic Society, 1910)

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