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ABSTRACT

The aim of this project is to identify the underlying interests of U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds over time and how they have influenced the Kurdish position in the Middle East. Furthermore, it shall be investigated how these interests have possibly shifted over time. In order to examine and explain U.S. foreign policy interests, the theoretical framework is mainly based on offensive and defensive realism theories - following the ideas of John. J. Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz. On the basis of a qualitative inquiry, the design of the project incorporates a historical and interpretative approach. The project's findings illustrate that the U.S. foreign policy approach did not change over the course of history. The USA has been following realist thinking in order to fulfil its national interests. Nonetheless, historical events have triggered certain adjustments within U.S. foreign policy. Throughout the project, this will be illustrated when analysing U.S. foreign policy behaviour in terms of either offensive or defensive realism. The project will end with the group's afterthoughts concerning the future position of the Kurds based on the knowledge achieved throughout the project.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

DTK – Kurdish Democratic Society

IAEA - International Atomic Energy Agency

IS - Islamic State

KDP - Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG - Kurdistan Regional Government

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty

PKK - Kurdistan Worker's Party

PUK - Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

UN - United Nations

UNCSR - United Nations Security Council resolution

UNSCOM - United Nations Special Commission

U.S. - United States

USA - United State of America

USD - United States Dollar

WMD - Weapon of mass destruction

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Area

The current military support by the USA for the Kurds in the fight against the terrorist group IS, represents a major shift in the U.S.-Kurdish history and has strengthened their link. “Indeed, Kurdish forces in northern Iraq and, to a lesser extent, northern Syria have become a bulwark against jihadi groups such as ISIS and a bastion of stability in a region fracturing along sectarian lines” (Werz, Hoffmann 2014:1). The USA has acknowledged this development and is aware of the consequences regarding its foreign policy – especially, since its traditional partners in the region, such as Egypt, are currently experiencing an internal crisis themselves and are not able to secure the interests of the USA in the Middle East (cf. *ibid.*). However, this is not the case for its traditional partner Turkey, which is still considered a close ally to the USA. Although Turkey has not yet resolved its own *Kurdish question*, the settlement of the conflict has become more likely than ever. “The increasing diversity of Turkish society, intermarriage, the shift away from strict Kemalist state ideology, and the costs of the violent struggle mean there is new political space for a negotiated settlement; two-thirds of Turkish society favour the settlement [...]” (*ibid.*:16). However, the rise of the IS in Syria and Iraq has an enormous impact on the neighbouring states and their Kurdish population, too. The armament of Kurdish fighters from Turkey against the IS has worsened the relationship once again (cf. Lawson 2014:1354pp).

The U.S.-Kurdish interactions have a long history. In order to understand the current events, this has to be analysed carefully. “Despite Kurdish frustration with many aspects of the U.S. policy toward the region, Washington has not been explicitly positive or negative – nor even particular consistent – toward the Kurds” (Werz, Hoffmann 2014:36). The historical connections between the USA and the Kurds are multifarious and have changed often over time. Therefore, it is important to have a detailed look on the historical context and possible shifts in order to understand the contemporary change in the foreign policy of the USA and its relation with the Kurds. The current interactions between the USA and the Kurds could have an effect on the future position of the Kurds in the region, the regional power balance and the possibility of a sovereign Kurdistan. Therefore, we decided to analyse how the

interests of the USA have been affecting the position of the Kurds in the past, at the present and in the future, which has led us to the following problem formulation.

1.2 Problem Formulation

What underlying interests have caused the shifts that the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds has undergone over the period from the Cold War era to the present – especially in the light of the current events triggered by the expansion of the IS?

1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the historical background of the links between the USA and the Kurds?
2. What are the interests behind the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds?
3. How does U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds reflect an assumed offensive/defensive realist approach?
4. How can these interests affect the future partnership between USA and the Kurds and the position of the Kurds in general?

2 METHODOLOGY

In the following chapter, the methodology of the project will be outlined shortly. Firstly, the underlying motivation for choosing the topic will be introduced. The motivation is closely linked to the empirical and scholarly relevance of the project within the framework of *Global Studies*. Secondly, the chapter includes the design of the project in order to have a better understanding of the structure of the paper. In the following, the choice of methods, sources of errors, conceptual clarifications and possible delimitations will be presented.

2.1 Motivation

Our main motivation arose from a discussion about the possibility of Kurdistan becoming a sovereign state. Since we all agreed that the Kurds would most probably need external support in order to achieve their long-term goal, we ended up in a debate about the interests of powerful external actors towards the Kurds as an important minority group in the Middle Eastern region. The USA – as the most powerful state in the world – became a focal point of our discussion due to its historical entanglement with the Kurds and its general interest in the oil-rich region. Particularly, we are interested in the past and present foreign policy of the USA towards the Kurds and how this has affected the position of the minority group throughout history.

Empirically, our main motivation comes from the immense relevance of the topic to the current international politics. The international community is highly concerned about the situation in the countries affected by the IS expansion. The evolving crisis has been shaping world politics since the outburst of the conflict. The international community is concerned about a possible further spread of the crisis and the ideologies of the IS. This could be linked to a new wave of terrorist attacks and the overall destabilisation of the Middle Eastern region. This will be further elaborated in the following chapters. In the light of *Global Studies*, it is, therefore, empirically extremely relevant to analyse the topic more in detail. We have decided to focus on the role of the Kurds since their position and status is of great importance in the current conflict. In general, the *Kurdish question* is and has been an often discussed topic in world politics. However, the answer to the *Kurdish question* is largely

dependant on the countries inhabited by the Kurds and the influence of external powers. Over the course of history, the USA has maintained ambivalent relations to the Kurdish minority and, thereby, influenced their regional position several times. Therefore, we chose the USA as an example in order to analyse great power politics and interests with regard to the role of the Kurds.

This leads to the scholarly relevance of our project: With regard to the realism theories and great power politics, the project aims to examine offensive and defensive realism theories in the light of U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds. Furthermore, the project touches upon relevant theoretical concepts in the academic field of *Global Studies* and *International Relations* such as state sovereignty, great powers and the anarchy of the international system. Therefore, we consider the project to be a valuable contribution empirically as well as theoretically.

2.2 Project Design

The project is structured into seven chapters. In the first one, the problem area, problem formulation and the respective research questions were introduced. This chapter focuses on the methodology of the project. The following part offers an overview of the theoretical framework, on which the project is based on. We follow a realist approach – more specifically, offensive and defensive realism – in order to find theoretical explanations regarding the U.S. foreign policy behaviour towards the Kurds over the course of history and at the present. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the historical background of the relationship between the USA and the Kurdish minority and the respective states inhabited by them. In particular, we focus on the U.S. foreign policy and how it has influenced the Kurdish population in the course of the 20th century until the present. The following chapter combines the theoretical foundations with the historical events and empirical findings described in the fourth part. Thereby, the analysis focuses on the possible shifts in U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds over the decades and the underlying motives for this development. The last two chapters consist of a discussion sections and a conclusion, which includes some afterthoughts and an outlook on the future position of the Kurds with regard to U.S. interests.

2.3 Choice of Methods

Considering the analysis of our research question, we decided to use qualitative methods. In opposite to the quantitative approach, qualitative methods aim to describe variations and not quantify them (cf. Denzin 2007:3pp). The qualitative approach has been chosen mainly due to the non-statistical/numerical nature of our sources. The research was mainly based on data collection and literature review, covering both the empirical and the theoretical aspect of the project. In this regard, we considered that historical tracing is an important feature for the analysis in order to illustrate the development and shifts in the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds. The documentary research model and secondary analysis of qualitative data, namely academic papers and books on the topic, has been a valuable addition to our research design (cf. Seale 2011:347pp). Therefore, eventually, we decided to use a combination of the historical and interpretive approach in order to get a better understanding about the contextual framework that had implications for the past as well as for the present U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds.

The theoretical framework is based on realism theories. Especially, the project focuses on the approaches of offensive and defensive realism thinking – following mainly the concepts of John J. Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz. This will be further elaborated in the next chapter, which is dedicated to the theory used in this project.

2.4 Sources of Error

Documents on the U.S. foreign strategy in general are difficult to solely rely on due to the reason that U.S. rhetoric and practise in terms of foreign policy do not go hand in hand (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:23p). Furthermore, it is challenging to find primary sources that illustrate a foreign policy strategy towards the Kurds since they do not represent a sovereign state but a minority group. Therefore, a lot of information about U.S. interests in the Kurds – especially, from the Cold War period– are based on certain assumptions by historians and scholars. Although they were empirically proved in most of the cases, this could represent a source of error. Eventually, this leads us to a second source of error: Since we were to a largely dependent on secondary analysis of qualitative data, we do not have such a detailed insight as primary researchers have (cf. Seale 2011:347).

2.5 Conceptual Clarifications

Throughout the project, different terms will occur that need a more detailed clarification in order to understand how we intend to use them.

Balance of Power: Throughout the project, we will follow this definition of the Balance of power-concept: "Balance of power, in international relations, the posture and policy of a nation or group of nations protecting itself against another nation or group of nations by matching its power against the power of the other side. States can pursue a policy of balance of power in two ways: by increasing their own power, as when engaging in an armaments race or in the competitive acquisition of territory; or by adding to their own power that of other states, as when embarking upon a policy of alliances" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2014).

Islamic State: The terrorist group dealt with is known by more than one name. In 2006, it was created as the *Islamic State in Iraq* (ISI). A few years later, the names *Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL) and *Islamic State in Iraq and Syrah* (ISIS) became commonly used by the terrorists themselves, Western media and politicians. Another acronym that is often referred to is IS, meaning *Islamic State*. Thereby, the terrorist group shows its aspirations that it is willing to expand further (cf. CNN 2014). For our project, we decided to use the term IS since it is most known and vividly depicts the group's aspirations. However, we are aware of the ongoing debate about the names. Furthermore, in order to quote properly, we need to use one of the other terms from time to time.

Kurds/Kurdish minority: The Kurds do not all originate from one ethnic group. However, they belong to a single amalgam. Furthermore, the Kurds do not all follow the same religion but the majority belongs to the Sunni Islam. They do not all speak the same language and are spread over four different countries in the Middle Eastern region. Nonetheless, they claim to be a distinct community (cf. McDowall 1992:3). Therefore, in the project the terms of *Kurds* and *Kurdish minority/population* are used in a generalised manner. Even though we are aware of the fact that there are many factors that distinguish them from each other, we have decided to see them as one minority group since it serves the purpose of the project. However, when it is needed

– for example with regard to a specific national Kurdish minority – their distinguishing factor is indicated throughout the project.

Kurdish region: When writing Kurdish Region we refer mostly to the Iraqi Kurdistan, which is the main point of investigation in this project. We do recognise and acknowledge that especially Syria and the Syrian Kurds have been a very important and main character of the current events. However, following the structure of the project, we will mainly – but not only - focus on the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

Kurdish question: In his 2004 article, *The Kurdish Question in Perspective*, Michael M. Gunter presents the concept of the *Kurdish question*. The article states that there are about 25-28 million Kurds living as minorities within the four countries connected to the Kurdistan region – Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. The Kurds strive for more autonomy and, eventually, for recognition as a sovereign state, and have done so for many years. They are the biggest nation without a state. However, being split over four different states makes the path for autonomy and recognition difficult. This historical difficulty has become known as the *Kurdish question* (cf. Gunter 2004:197).

Sovereignty: By using the concept of sovereignty, this project refers to the notion that a state is able to make authoritative decisions on behalf of its population and that the state in question is in control over its territory. Furthermore, a sovereign state must have a government and be able to interact with other sovereign states. Lastly, it is necessary to be recognised by other sovereign states. Therefore, in order to be considered as sovereign, a state has to have independency, authority and recognition by other states (cf. Pace 2014).

Zero-sum mentality: In his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer introduces his thoughts on state behaviour by great powers. He presents the assumption that great powers have the tendency to act under the principle of the zero-sum mentality because: “[...] the claim that states maximise relative power is tantamount to arguing that states are disposed to think offensively toward other states [...]” (Mearsheimer 2001:34).

2.6 Delimitations

As already outline above, the Kurdish minority spreads over four different countries in the Middle East. In order to give a more diverse and detailed analysis of the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds, it has to be examined more carefully in the view of U.S. relations with each of these four countries and their respective Kurdish minority. However, due to the limited timeframe, it was not feasible to analyse four different interstate relations. Therefore, the focus lays on the Kurds as one large minority group and the states inhabited by them are only considered when their presence is important for understanding the motives behind the U.S. foreign policy or the position of the Kurds.

As introduced in the project structure, we will focus on the future position of the Kurds and what this might entail. In the course of the afterthoughts section, the project will touch upon the concept of regional power balance in the Middle Eastern region. However, the project will not go into a further analysis and conceptualisation of regional power balance. It will only be used in the afterthoughts section where it provides some relevance for the project.

Furthermore, in the theoretical part, we touch upon ideas from the *English School* – also known as *Liberal Realism*. However, they are not further elaborated. In our view, these ideas were helpful in order to define the concept of a *great power*, which is an important concept in the realism branch. Nonetheless, a further discussion on the *English School* was not necessarily needed for our analysis, mainly following offensive and defensive realism theories.

3 THEORY

The following section will introduce and describe the chosen theory of this project. We considered the debate between the two branches of *Realism* - offensive and defensive realism – to be of great relevance for the project. The section begins by defining offensive realism, and in relation to this, further introduces the *Great Power* concept and the *Great Power Politics* debate. Finally, the section focuses on the relevant aspects of defensive realism.

Since offensive and defensive realism both have their roots in the realism branch, they both pursue the objective of state survival and national security in an anarchical international state system. Therefore, “[...] other countries and governments can never be relied upon completely” (Jackson & Sørensen 2010:60), which underlines a pessimist view on state behaviour in general. This is one of the main characteristics of realist thinking. Furthermore, according to realism theories, all actors are preoccupied with their own interests and the state is the overall protector of the individual well-being (cf. *ibid.*). “The state is the pre-eminent actor in world politics” (*ibid.*:59). Due to the underlying motives and the background of the project, the theory part is focusing on offensive and defensive realism in particular. A more extensive overview on realism theories in general is, therefore, not provided.

3.1 Offensive Realism

This section is mainly based on John J. Mearsheimer’s approach to offensive realism. Firstly, the theory of offensive realism will be introduced in general. This part will be followed by a deeper look into the term *great power* and the underlying assumptions of state behaviour in an international system that is shaped by great power politics.

In his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer, Political Science Professor at the University of Chicago and International Relations theorist, fully introduces the concept of offensive realism. In opposite to defensive realism, offensive realism claims that states are seeking for power rather than for security in order to survive. “Offensive realism predicts that states will be acutely sensitive to the balance of power and will look for opportunities to increase their own power or weaken rivals. In practical terms, this means that states will adopt diplomatic

strategies that reflect the opportunities and constraints created by the particular distribution of power” (Mearsheimer 2001:329). Therefore, the theory of offensive realism implies that great powers always try to increase their strength. That means they are never satisfied with their current level of power. Consequently, their overall aim is to become the regional hegemon¹ (cf. *ibid.*:21pp).

Offensive realism and the great power politics debate are relevant for the project since the theory seeks to explain great power behaviour including the power relations between the USA and the Soviet Union/Russia. “American foreign policy has usually been guided by realist logic, although the public pronouncement of its leaders might lead one to think otherwise” (*ibid.*: 26). This approach can be applied to certain events during the Cold War period where both states were involved. Eventually, their struggle for power and competitiveness had an enormous influence on other parts of the world – including the Middle East. Mearsheimer argues that “[...] great powers [...] have the largest impact on what happens in international politics. The fortunes of all states – great powers and smaller powers alike – are determined primarily by the decisions and actions of those with the greatest capability” (*ibid.*: 5). Some decisions made by the great powers – the USA and the Soviet Union in this case – have, therefore, directly influenced the fortune of the Kurds – for better or for worse. This will be further elaborated in the following chapters.

3.1.1 Great Power

According to Hedley Bull (1977), former Professor of International Relations, one can talk about great powers if three aspects are fulfilled. Even though Bull comes from the theoretical tradition of the *English School*, also known as *Liberal Realism*, his definition of great powers is considered to be useful for the project. Firstly, Bull claims that two or more states have to be considered to be a great power. Otherwise, the term could be mixed up with the meaning of an *empire*, which implies a unique position within the global order - in opposite to great powers. Secondly, great powers have to have significant military capabilities at their disposal; “[...] that is to say that countries which are great powers are comparable in military strength, and that there is no class of power that is superior to them” (Bull 1977:195). And finally, great powers

¹ "A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system" (Mearsheimer 2001:40).

are considered to have special rights within the framework of the international community but also special duties (cf. *ibid.*:194p). Therefore, Bull claims that great powers, such as the USA and the Soviet Union/Russia, play a leading role in world politics. This means that all states are equal theoretically, however, in practise they are not. According to Mearsheimer, “[g]reat powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power; on the contrary, they face a constant incentive to change it in their favour. [...] Since no state is likely to achieve global hegemony, however, the world is condemned to perpetual great-power competition” (Mearsheimer 2001:2). Mearsheimer has outlined five assumptions, which illustrate the reasons why great powers always seek for more power.

3.1.2 Assumptions of State Behaviour in Offensive Realism

The first assumption is seen in the setting in the anarchy within the international system. Since there is no central authority over independent states, the sovereign state itself has the decision-making power and, therefore, acts accordingly to its own interests (cf. *ibid.*:30). Secondly, as already mentioned by Bull, great powers maintain stronger military capabilities than other states do, “[...] which gives them the wherewithal to hurt and possibly destroy each other” (*ibid.*). The third assumption is linked to the intentions of great powers. According to Mearsheimer, it is not obvious to guess the intentions of the states as these change quickly. Therefore, the possibility that one state uses force against another state is never completely off the table (cf. *ibid.*: 31). The fourth assumption rests on one of the basic realism aspects, which views state survival as the main objective. “Specifically, states seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order” (*ibid.*). The final assumption claims that states act rational in order to survive. That makes them a strategic actor that carefully observes its environment and acts accordingly (cf. *ibid.*). To sum up, Mearsheimer’s five assumptions of state behaviour in offensive realism claim that there are three incentives, which trigger an offensive behaviour: “[...] fear, self-help and power maximization” (*ibid.*:32). Fear is an important factor in terms of shaping the international system, which leads to the conclusion that great powers act offensively not because it is in their nature but because the international system provokes them to do so (cf. *ibid.*:42pp). An offensive realist would argue that offense is the better defence in order to survive (cf. *ibid.*:36). However, that does not mean that the offensive behaviour of states necessarily culminates in war. Therefore,

peaceful international order to which the U.S. leaders had paid lip service, is just the by-product of the self-interested behaviour of great powers (cf. *ibid.*:48).

3.1.3 Great Power Politics

According to Mearsheimer, “[...] great powers seek to maximize their share of world power [...]” (*ibid.*:140). This major aim shall be achieved through increasing their influence in four minor objectives: Firstly, great powers want to become the regional hegemon. Secondly, in economic terms, great powers seek to maximise their share of the world’s wealth. Thirdly, “[...] great powers aim to dominate the balance of land power [...]” (*ibid.*:145). And finally, they seek for more nuclear strength and capabilities in order to be superior over their counterparts (cf. *ibid.*:140pp).

The Cold War period is a good example in order to illustrate and examine the hypothesis of the offensive realism. During the Cold War period, the USA wanted to keep the Soviet Union out of its sphere of influence in the Middle East and vice versa. “The United States acted to check Soviet expansion almost immediately after World War II ended, and it maintained a formidable containment policy until the Soviet threat disappeared some forty-five years later” (*ibid.*:323). The European states were not able to balance the Soviet Union at that time. Therefore, in order to keep its influence and possibly maximise its power, the USA had no other chance than to be the balancing power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union (cf. *ibid.*:327). The containment policy during the Cold War can be interpreted as a power-maximising strategy, too. However, Mearsheimer further confirms that it is difficult to empirically prove the assumption of offensive realism during the Cold War era since it represents the first period in history where the threat of nuclear weapons was present (cf. *ibid.*:358).

3.2 Defensive Realism

This section will clarify the aspects of defensive realism that will be applied for the upcoming sections. Firstly, the term will be introduced and defined. In the following, aspects that are relevant for this project will be underlined with arguments from a theoretical article by Kenneth Waltz. And finally, the concept of defensive realism will be further analysed by using a discussion article by Jeffrey Taliaferro who draws inspiration from Waltz’ theoretical approaches.

In their textbook, Jackson and Sørensen describe a defensive realist as “[...] someone who recognizes that states must and do seek power in order to be secure and to survive, but who believe that excessive power is counterproductive, because it provokes hostile alliances by other states” (Jackson & Sørensen 2010:85). This definition illustrates the difference between offensive and defensive realists. However, one aspect where the defensive and offensive realists agree is that the behaviour of states is characterised by the anarchical structure of the international system. Major differences can be found by viewing the way states chose to behave within the anarchical system. For a defensive realist, a state’s actions will not reflect on a notion of maximising relative power but more on how to keep the position in the system and how to maintain relative security (cf. *ibid.*) (cf. Waltz 1993:49). This point is further underlined by Kenneth Waltz’ 1993 book, *The Emerging Structure of International Politics*, where he elaborates on the point of why security will always be important and present with regard to states’ behaviour. One of his argument claims that no matter how many changes occur, or challenges the structure between states and nations will meet, the system will always be anarchical. The states will seek to protect themselves within the international system - with or without cooperation from other states (cf. *ibid*:59). Additionally, Waltz states that “[a]narchy places a premium on foresight. If one cannot know what is coming, developing a greater resource base for future use takes precedence over present prosperity” (*ibid*:60). Another point Waltz makes is that, even though economic prosperity is important as it affects interstate relations, it cannot be compared to the importance of military power and security. The tendency to value security over economic prosperity was a very defining moment for the USA in the aftermath of the Cold War. Today, the claim has lost some of its value since today’s conflicts are more dominated by economic and technological aspects. However, security will always be very present in the actions of a defensive realist (cf. *ibid*:66).

Jeffrey Taliaferro, International Relations and Security Studies Professor, discusses in his 2001 article, *Security Seeking Under Anarchy – Defensive Realism Revisited*, defensive realism in contemporary times. With regard to the two approaches of offensive and defensive realism, he claims that expansion is another aspect where they differ. The offensive realists believe that there are many incentives for states to seek expansion within the international anarchical system. Whereas the defensive

realists believe that it is only under few circumstances that the international anarchical system will provide incentives for expansion (cf. Taliaferro 2001:129). He elaborates on this point by stating that “[d]efensive realism predicts greater variation in internationally driven expansion and suggests that states ought to generally pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security” (*ibid.*).

3.2.1 Assumptions of State Behaviour in Defensive Realism

According to Taliaferro, defensive realism has certain assumptions that are interesting to notice with regard to the foreign policy behaviour of a state. Firstly, he elaborates on issues of the security dilemma, which is an important and persistent factor to consider within the anarchical system. It is the uncertainty of anarchy that triggers states to increase their own security, this, however, will have the effect of decreasing the neighbouring states’ security – hence the dilemma. (cf. *ibid.*:136). His second assumption states that the security dilemma is not the only factor that can generate competition and conflict. Other factors, such as geographical proximity, access to materials and regional military balance, can generate just as much tension, if not more (cf. *ibid.*:136pp). He draws an example: “States that lack defensible borders or have strong neighbours will have a powerful incentive to build strong central institutions, maintain large standing armed forces, and adopt offensive military doctrines” (*ibid.*:140). This point will be interesting to investigate further in the analysis part when discussing the position of the Kurds that have no defined border and, therefore, no defensible borders either. Moreover, they are confronted with strong neighbours in their respective region. Thirdly, Taliaferro presents an assumption regarding the uncertainty of how the distribution of power affects the decisions of the state leaders and their choice to strategise their foreign policy. (cf. *ibid.*:141pp). And finally, the last assumption implies that domestic politics influence foreign policy. How a state reacts to the external environment can depend a lot on its domestic politics: “For example, during periods of imminent external threat, the calculations of central decision makers are paramount” (*ibid.*:142). This assumption is quite relevant for the project’s analysis since it provides an aspect of how governments, for example the U.S government or the KRG, choose to respond to external threats, for example the threat of the IS.

4 BACKGROUND

4.1 U.S. Interests towards the Kurds – 1916-1990

The Kurdish history is a history of many struggles in terms of identity and territory. The Kurds, an ethnic group that is spread over the four countries is “[...] the largest nation in the world without its own country [...]” (Yavuz, Gunter 2001:33). The Kurds have always been a nation without a state. However, since they were equal members of the society in the Ottoman Empire, they did not have the explicit desire for self-determination. In 1916, within the framework of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the situation changed dramatically. With this agreement, Great Britain and France agreed upon the division of the Ottoman territories and, thereby, put the Kurdish region under the rule of two more states: Iraq and Syria – additionally to the Ottoman Empire and Iran (cf. Barkey 2009:4). The division of the Kurdish-inhabited area has become one of the major aspects regarding a possible solution of the *Kurdish question* and has enormous influence on the states inhabited by the Kurds and their national and international politics. Hence, the *Kurdish question* and its history has multifarious dimensions that have to be analysed carefully.

However, in the following part we will primarily focus on the historical relationship between the Kurds and the USA – especially highlighting its numerous ambivalent features and shifts. In this regard, the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds shall be illustrated more in detail. The U.S.-Kurdish relationship in general is rather unique in its nature since Kurdistan is not a sovereign state but a region that spreads over four sovereign countries in the Middle East. The USA maintains external relations with these four countries while having informal foreign policy interests in the position of the Kurds as a non-state actor in the region. Over the past decades, the U.S.-Kurdish relations remained ambivalent. In various cases, the U.S. government was seeking support from the Kurds in order to pursue its external policy objectives. However, the Kurds never benefited from the situation in terms of achieving their long-term goal of statehood. Understanding these historical connections is of utter importance regarding the following analyses of how the U.S. interests could shape the future role of the Kurdish people in the Middle Eastern region – especially, in the light of the further expansion of the IS.

4.1.1 Post-World War I Developments

According to Michael M. Gunter, Professor of Political Science and expert on the Kurdish history, the “American involvement in Kurdistan dates back to World War I and President Woodrow Wilson’s famous Fourteen Points, the twelfth of which concerned a forlorn promise of ‘autonomy’ for ‘the other nationalities [of the Ottoman Empire] which are now under Turkish rule’” (Wilson 1918) (cf. Gunter 2011:95). After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds - at least the Turkish ruled Kurds – had the legitimate hope that a world that was shaped around the Wilsonian principle of self-determination could give them the chance to gain sovereignty. Therefore, the USA indirectly supported the Kurdish attempt for independent statehood. However, due to the efforts of the Turkish government, the British occupied Iraq and imperial interests of the great powers in Versailles, the Kurds remained a nation without a state (cf. Gunter 1999:427). “They were promised their own state in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, which officially carved up the remnants of the Ottoman empire. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk turned that treaty into a dead letter when he fought back under a resuscitated Turkish force to establish a modern Turkish state with new borders in the early 1920s” (Fuller 1993:109).

4.1.2 Cold War Period

During the Cold War, the relationship between the USA and the Kurds changed often due to various geopolitical reasons. However, at this period of time, the U.S. involvement with the Kurds differed from country to country and has to be seen from different perspectives. In 1952, in the course of the Cold War geopolitics, Turkey joined NATO, and, therefore, became - in the Middle Eastern region - one of the most important allies of the USA and other Western powers. “For the Americans [...], the relationship with Turkey was largely determined by broad expectations about the future balance of world power” (Athanasopoulou 1999:vii). The paramount goal from the U.S. perspective was keeping the Soviet Union out of their oil-rich sphere of influence in the Middle East. In terms of geopolitics, the polarisation of the *Kurdish question* represented a threat to the important ties between the USA and the new NATO member Turkey. Therefore, the USA officially supported the policy of the Turkish government that aimed to further suppress Kurdish minority rights in order to prevent any tensions and the risk of a territorial disintegration (cf. Gunter 1999:427). The continuous suppression of the Kurds by the Turkish government gave rise to

rather radical rebel groups, such as the PKK, that was founded in 1978 (cf. Marcus 2007:75). In 1997, the PKK was added to the list of terrorist organisation by the U.S. Department of State (cf. U.S. Department of State). Thereby, the USA underlined once more its position towards the Kurdish minority in Turkey and the importance of its relationship with Turkey.

The opposite was true in terms of the Kurdish minority in Iraq. In the Cold War period, the USA used the increasing Kurdish demand for autonomy in order to pursue its own objectives. With the help of the Kurds, the USA tried to contain the pro-Soviet regimes in Iraq. In his 2010 article, Douglas Little, U.S. American History Professor at Clark University, identifies various cases such as the containment of the pro-Moscow regime of Abdel Karim Qassim (1958-1963) who was removed from office by a violent coup d'état in 1963 (cf. Little 2010:69pp). Although no Kurdish representatives were present at the coup d'état, the Kurdish leader, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, was largely responsible for the weak position of Abdel Karim Quassim at the time of the coup. The USA supported and welcomed the developments. In return, Mulla Mustafa Barzani expected U.S. support in the Kurdish fight for autonomy that the superpower eventually did not provide.

The attempt to remove Saddam Hussein in the 1970s demonstrates another event, where the USA indirectly or directly supported the Iraqi Kurds in order to keep the Soviet Union out of the Middle East as far as possible. In 1972, “[...] Saddam Hussein decided to sign a fifteen-year ‘Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation’ with the Soviet Union [...]” (*ibid.*:74). This treaty posed a great threat to the USA and the neighbouring Iran that were considering an empowerment of the Iraqi Kurds in order to contain Saddam Hussein’s regime. However, in the end the Kurds were left alone by the USA and its ally Iran (cf. *ibid.*:63pp)². “In each case, the U.S. government exploited long-standing anti-Arab resentments among the Kurds, secretly supplied U.S. guns or dollars or sometimes both, and helped ignite an insurrection in Kurdistan, only to pull the plug unceremoniously when events threatened to spiral out of control” (*ibid.*:64).

² For supplementary information on the specific cases, please refer to: Little, D. 2010, *The United States and the Kurds: A Cold War Story*, in. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Fall 2010, pp. 63-98.

For the sake of completeness, the situation of the Iranian and Syrian Kurds should be noted shortly. However, in terms of the further development of this background chapter and the analysis part, we limited ourselves and focus mainly on the Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Turkey. Both cases illustrate the ambivalent interests of the USA in the Middle East very well. Based on the Turkish and Iraqi example, one can see the different approaches the USA took over the course of history and how national self-interests shaped its foreign policy.

Compared to the Turkish and Iraqi Kurds, the Iranian Kurds enjoyed relative freedom throughout the Cold War period. They were allowed to present themselves in their culture and language – even after the Islamic Revolution. The different governments largely accepted the Kurdish role as a minority group as long as they were not striving for self-determination and statehood. Nonetheless, the Iranian government rather preferred to assimilate the Kurds and, therefore, emphasised the “[...] common ancestral and ethnic roots of Persians and Kurds” (Barkey 2009:9). In terms of the *Kurdish question*, the Syrian government has been the most suppressing one. However, at the same time, the Syrian Kurds have been rather reluctant in terms of emphasising their own cultural identity and nationhood (cf. *ibid.*: 10).

As one can gather from the paragraphs above, the USA had a very ambivalent behaviour towards the Kurds. The Iraqi Kurds were – generally speaking - supported while the Turkish Kurds were rather suppressed during the period of the Cold War. Geopolitical thinking mainly drove the actions and involvement of the USA. On the one side, the USA had to stand by its new ally Turkey that represented an important security partner in the region. In this regard, the Kurdish minority was considered as a threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey and, eventually, as a threat to the stability of the country. On the other side, the U.S. government was interested in the oil reserves in Iraq and, therefore, was even favouring a rebellion by the Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani in the 1970s. As mentioned above, the USA welcomed this offer since they aimed to contain Soviet Union’s expansion in Iraq. Furthermore, before that, Barzani had promised cooperation and, most importantly, access to the oil reserves as soon as the aim of a sovereign Kurdistan was achieved. However, in 1975, the U.S. ally Iran made an agreement with Saddam Hussein and, consequently, the USA let go of the Iraqi Kurds once again and the possible uprising collapsed (cf.

Gunter 1999:427pp). “Almost invariably, [...] once the Kurds no longer served the immediate political goals of the external powers, they have been abandoned” (Fuller 1993:108). Obviously, in terms of geopolitics, the regime of Saddam Hussein did suit the foreign policy interests of the USA at that period of time.

Summing up, during the times of the Cold War, the Kurdish expectations for a sovereign state were encouraged by the USA for several times. However, eventually, these expectations were never satisfied. “The seeming double standard the United States applies to the Kurds, of course, is really explained by perceived U.S. national interests [...]. Although a double standard for the Kurds, it seemingly makes perfect sense in terms of immediate U.S. national interest” (Gunter 1999:437). Nonetheless, the Kurdish minority did not give up on their dream of self-determination and statehood even though they felt betrayed by the USA (cf. Little 1999:96). This will be further elaborated in the following chapters.

4.2 U.S. Interests towards the Kurds – 1990-2003

In the summer of 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. This occupation had sparked reactions from the international community, which led to the establishment of *Operation of Liberation of Kuwait*, also known as *Desert Storm*. The USA was in coalition with other countries but in terms of military contribution, it was the leading nation. Nevertheless, this operation was not successful in toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime (cf. Amiri 2011:189p). During Saddam Hussein’s occupation of Kuwait, a leading Kurdish politician, Jalal Talabani, arrived in Washington in order to offer U.S. officials military support in Kuwait, however, this offer was rejected (cf. Shareef 2014:146). “We had every reason to believe that they would be of very little help to us in the goal of the operation which was the liberation of Kuwait” (Mack, D. 1990 (Deputy Assistant Secretary State), cited in Shareef 2014:146).

The general U.S. resentments towards the Kurds were further shown in 1991 when Saddam Hussein’s regime increased the brutality in order to control the Iraqi heartland. Saddam Hussein’s increasing violence against its own people caused an uprising among the Kurds (cf. Meho 2004:24). Simultaneously, in Washington, the Iraqi Kurdish delegation was not welcomed officially but in a coffee shop by junior

officials. U.S. Senator Peter Galbraith argued that "Turkish sensibilities [were] a main reason for the cold shoulder [...]" (Galbraith 1991, cited in Shareef 2014:147). This event was soon to be followed by U.S. Senator Galbraith and U.S. Senator Pell chairing an inter-parliamentary consultation on the Iraqi Kurds. Kurdish leaders were present and expressed their general support for U.S.-American politics and, at the same time, stressed the possibility of an uprising against the Iraqi regime. When speaking with his deputy, Sandy Charles, Senator Galbraith stressed that it is within the U.S. policy interest to "[...] get rid of the regime [...]" (*ibid.*), however, Charles replied: "Our policy is to get rid of Saddam Hussein, not his regime" (Charles 1991, cited in Shareef 2014:147). Moreover, on the 15th of February 1991, President George W. Bush senior stated: " [...] it would be good if the Iraqi would take matters into their own hands and kick Saddam Hussein out and I still feel that way and I still hope they do" (Bush 1991, cited in Charountaki 2011:169). In a further speech on the Iraqi crisis, held on the 16th of March 1991, he emphasised: "We don't intend to involve ourselves in the internal affairs of Iraq" (Bush 1991, cited in Shareef 2014:148). The Kurdish uprising that followed these events will be further elaborated in the following subchapter.

4.2.1 The Kurdish Uprising

The U.S.-American rhetoric made clear that the nation had decided not to intervene and, thereby, support the rebels (cf. Meho 2004:24). The reason can be seen in the strong relation of the USA with its close ally Turkey. Turkey had become very dynamic in terms of its economy and, thereby, increasing its influence both regionally and globally. Even though Turkey had been depending on its NATO allies, however, its expanding economy and military had helped to strengthen its position (cf. Zanotti 2012:5). With regard to this, it is relevant to mention that, in terms of the Turkish-Kurdish relations, in the 1980s the Kurdish minority in Turkey had been severely suppressed by the regime (cf. Güzeldere 2009). "According to the CIA, 'Turkish policies have fallen short of promoting a liberal multiethnic society' because of the minimal level of Turkish tolerance 'for the cultural and political distinctiveness of the Kurds'" (Charountaki 2011:175). As mentioned before, the continuous suppression of Turkish Kurds gave rise to rebellious movements, such as the PKK, which threatened Turkey's territorial integrity.

The 1991 uprising among the Kurds represented one of the strongest internal challenges to the regime of Saddam Hussein. The majority of the main cities in the North and the South were captured by rebels (cf. Human Rights Watch 1992:29). “By this time the American commander of the allied forces general Norman Schwarzkopf and his Iraqi counterpart were in agreement to allow the Iraqi military to use helicopter gunships and armored cars to crush the rebels” (Meho 2004:24). When the attack began, important cities started to fall back into the hands of the Iraqi government forces. Eventually, the Kurds fled in order to not be captured by the government forces and get executed (cf. *ibid.*). The events had an enormous impact on the neighbouring countries of Iran and Turkey, where Kurdish civilians were experiencing mass exodus (cf. Amnesty International 1995:7). Following this uprising, the UNSC passed the Security Council Resolution S/RES/688 (1991) at the requests of France, Turkey and Iran that aimed to cooperate in the distribution of humanitarian aid for the Iraqi civilians (cf. *ibid.*) (cf. S/RES/688).

4.2.2 Operation Provide Comfort I & II

Eventually, as a result of the S/RES/688, *Operation Provide Comfort I* was launched in April 1991. The operation was led by the USA and aimed to establish a *safe heaven* in the North of Iraq in order to protect the Kurdish population (cf. Charountaki 2011:169). Prior to the operation, U.S. President George W. Bush senior justified this decision by saying: “We simply could not allow 500,000 to a million people to die up there in the mountains” (Bush senior 1991, cited in Shareef 2014:149). Further he stated that “[...] all we are doing is motivated by humanitarian concerns” (Bush senior 1991, cited in Shareef 2014:150). The intervention of the USA in Iraq was the first of its kind; meaning that it had its foundation based on humanitarian grounds and heralded on the stark approaches of U.S. foreign policy in the 1990s. However, actually the USA was driven more by realist thinking than by humanitarian concerns (cf. *ibid.*). This will be further elaborated in the analysis part.

At the end of April, Saddam Hussein’s forces had no other choice but to leave the Northern part of Iraq (cf. Charountaki 2011:169). *Operation Provide Comfort I* ended in July 1991 and simultaneously *Operation Provide Comfort II* started. *Operation Provide Comfort II* consisted of a military force that had the task to combat a new Iraqi attacks on the Kurds. Thereby, the second operation did not put as much

emphasis on the humanitarian aspects as the first did. The operation ended in 1996. “The US saw the Kurdish client as a useful weapon against Baghdad. The US had again, for the second time, become pro-Kurdish for reasons not too dissimilar to the 1972-1975 period” (Shareef 2014:150p).

After the violence against the Kurdish minority by the Iraqi government forces, the Kurdistan Front, consisting of the two main parties, PUK and KDP, decided to discuss with the Iraqi government about the possibility of more autonomy. Both Kurdish parties had different ideas in various terms. Eventually, in the 1992 elections, they both received almost equal votes (cf. Charountaki 2011:172). Kurdish elections were held in 1992 while *Operation Provide Comfort II* still provided a certain level of protection. The elections aimed at overcoming the internal conflicts between the PUK and the KDP, and to establish a democratic alternative opposing Saddam Hussein’s regime (cf. Ofteringer, Bäcker 1994:42). The elections were largely welcomed by the U.S. administration, although the USA did not intend the creation of the KRG. The Kurdish government was a by-product of *Operation Provide Comfort I* and *II*. The spokesperson for U.S. government, Margaret Tutwiler, expressed that the USA hopes the elections “[...] help lead to a better life for all the people of Northern Iraq [...]” (Tutwiler 1992, cited in Shareef 2014:151).

The establishment of the KRG was received negatively in Turkey as it led Ankara to deal with opposing Kurdish movements. Furthermore, the U.S. government was worried that the elections could have an impact on its relations with regional governments, such as Turkey (cf. Charountaki 2011:172). The election and the establishment of the KRG led to a more institutionalised Kurdish-U.S. relationship. “So when Kurdish leaders were speaking to the Americans, it was not only a key element of the Iraqi opposition but also as one that represented a genuine constituency” (Shareef 2014:152).

4.2.3 PUK and KDP Clash

The beginning of 1994 was signalled by the collapse of the already uneasy power-sharing KDP and PUK-coalition. The conflict escalated into armed clashes over territorial control and shared benefits (cf. Katzman 2010:2). The USA became more concerned when KDP asked the Iraqi government forces to help by suppressing the

PUK. Therefore, President Clinton sent a delegation letter to both Kurdish leaders stating: “We will no longer cooperate with the other countries to maintain security in the region if the clashes continue” (Clinton 1994, cited in Shareef 2014:152). Moreover, when Iran expressed its willingness to mediate the U.S. Country Director for Northern Gulf Affairs at the State Department, David Litt, made clear that “[...] if the fighting did not stop, and if Iranian intervention was accepted, the US would halt Operation Provide Comfort, stop protecting Kurds and leave the Kurds to Saddam” (*ibid.*:153).

In 1998, after several failed attempts, the USA had invited both leaders of KDP and PUK and reached a settlement, the so called *Washington Agreement*, between the two parties (cf. Shareef 2014:153). After the agreement, the U.S. State Department stressed that the USA still views the Kurds as “[...] close friends and strong allies [...] ”(Stephenson 1998, cited in Shareef 2014:155). At the same time, President Clinton’s power in the Congress was weakened and the U.S. republicans took the opportunity and managed to pass the *Iraq Liberation Act*. The *Iraq Liberation Act* opened the possibility to ask for military assistance from Iraqi oppositional groups, such as PUK and KDP, in order to achieve the goal of overthrowing Saddam Hussein (cf. *ibid.*:155). Through the Congressional decision, the Iraqi opposition was granted USD\$97 and brought the USA again closer towards the Kurds (cf. Charountaki 2011:187). The act “[...] officially revealed Congressional support for removing Saddam from power and replacing his regime with a democratic government” (*ibid.*).

4.2.4 The 21st Century - 2001-2003

The 21st century marked a change in the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds. The relationship between the USA and the Kurds became more institutionalised – especially, after the events of 9/11. This will be further elaborated in the following subchapter.

In early 2001, in a meeting of deputies of state, the Secretary of Defence, Paul Wolfowitz, had already advised the Bush junior administration to further empower Kurdish opposition in order to trigger a regime change. Along with this advice, Wolfowitz also suggested to not include the Kurdish region in economic sanctions by the UN, even though that would have an impact on the relation with its NATO ally

Turkey. Therefore, he brought up the idea to create an Iraqi Kurdish enclave instead of an enclave that includes the whole Kurdish region (cf. Shareef 2014:155). The Kurds were still seen as an important asset in the region and the Kurdish representatives had developed close connections with the Bush government (cf. *ibid.*). However, the events of 9/11 changed the U.S. foreign policy towards the Iraq. In a speech to the U.S. Military Academy on June 2002, Bush stated that the USA “[...] could no longer rely on a strategy of deterrence for its security post 9/11” (Wheeler 2003:184). One year later, he stated: “The danger is clear: Using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country or any other. [...] we will do everything to defeat it. Instead of drifting toward tragedy [...] this danger will be removed” (Bush 2003). The new *war on terror* justification provided the U.S. foreign policy with tools to focus on states that could possibly host terrorist groups. However, with no direct evidence linked to the 9/11 attack, as Barber explains, because the “[...] doctrine is designed to apply to known terrorists perpetrators who have committed aggressive and destructive acts but whose location and origins remain uncertain; it has been applied however, to states whose location is known and identity obvious even though their connection to actual aggression is far less certain” (Barber 2003, cited in Wheeler 2003:187). Thereby, despite there was no clear evidence as such, the USA justified its Iraq invasion in 2003 (Wheeler 2003:187).

After 9/11, the already established links between the Kurds and the Bush junior administration became even more important. For the USA, the Kurds represented a group that was suppressed by its own ruler, Saddam Hussein, and, thereby, played an important emotional role in the U.S. rhetoric (cf. Shareef 2014:156). “Furthermore, Iraqi Kurdistan was providing a model for Iraqis who did not live in the northern zone, of how good life could be for Iraqis not living under Saddam Hussein. If any questions were raised before the invasion about democracy and freedom in Iraq, the Americans and those who supported them, could point to the Kurds in the north and their success” (*ibid.*) Consequently, in the search of regional support for the invasion, the Kurds were once again the only reliable partner that was considered (cf. Logan 2003:167). However, the Kurds were very aware of the previous betrayals from the USA and, thereby, prolonged their decision. The Iraqi Kurds knew that their decision

could influence their future position after the invasion (cf. Shareef 2014:157). “They had enjoyed semi-independence for more than a decade, and hoped to keep it this way” (Logan 2003:167). Prior to the invasion, Kurdish representatives were invited to meet high U.S. officials and were told “[...] if they played it right, kept silent about nationalist aspirations, stood by the US, supported American goals and didn’t make trouble [...]” (Shareef 2014:157), they will maintain their favourable position. The USA was in favour of a united democratic Iraq with one central government in order to guarantee the stability in the region. Therefore Kurdish support for a federal system was rhetorically rejected (cf. Logan 2003:167).

Furthermore, from the beginning of 2002 onwards, the USA had tried to strengthen the cooperation with its ally Turkey. The Turkish government was informed about the invasion. The USA was also aware of the fact that Turkey had financial problems due to the gulf war and the wave of Kurdish refugees. “In the light of this, the US prepared a generous aid package” (Shareef 2014:158). Even though the Turkish government was assured by the USA that there would be no independent Iraqi Kurdistan, it had its resentments towards an U.S. invasion since it was fearing the stability of its own territorial integrity (cf. *ibid.*). Eventually, the Turkish parliament refused to grant the U.S. army access to the Turkish territory in order to have a favourable strategic position when invading Iraq. This led to severe tensions between the two allies. Particularly, President George W. Bush junior was threatened by the possibility that Turkey could occupy the Kurdish Iraqi region (cf. *ibid.*:159p). After the Turkish refusal, the U.S.-Kurdish relation improved again. “The closer the US got to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the more Kurdish influence became evident” (*ibid.*). Due to the Turkish refusal, the USA was not allowed to establish its own military front on the Turkish-Iraqi border. Therefore, the Kurds became an even more important strategic variable, which further strengthened the U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in fighting Saddam Hussein’s regime (cf. *ibid.*:159). However, the USA was still aware of the strong bonds to its ally Turkey. The USA did not want to be seen biased regarding the Kurds and, thereby, possibly triggering a Turkish military presence in Iraq (cf. *ibid.*: 161). Summing up, Saddam Hussein’s regime had, eventually, “[...] empowered the relationship between the United States and Iraq’s Kurds” (Charountaki 2011:201). Eventually, Saddam Hussein was overthrown in November/December 2003 and executed (cf. *ibid.*:220).

4.3 U.S. Interests towards the Kurds – 2003-present

In the aftermath of the U.S. American invasion in Iraq the focus on the U.S.-Kurdish relationship became increasingly relevant to investigate. With the invasion in Iraq, the USA committed itself to stabilising and mediating in the Kurdish region because it had an interest: “[...] in seeing the Kurdistan Region continue to develop and prosper, while at the same time continuing to play a leading role in Iraq’s democratization” (Romano 2010:1345). Furthermore, the U.S.-Kurdish relationship was strengthened through the Turkish lack of cooperative policy. While the Kurds helped the USA by overthrowing Saddam Hussein, Turkey refused to do so. This resulted in a closer relation between the Kurds and the USA (cf. Charountaki 2011:220pp). When Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, it provided an opportunity for the Iraqi Kurds, which they took advantage of. With the reunification of PUK and KDP in 2005, officially signed in 2006, the Iraqi Kurds finally merged within the framework of the *Kurdistan Alliance*. That was a very important step towards autonomy. The elections in 2005 were a success for the *Kurdistan Alliance* – it got 26% of the overall Iraqi votes, which provided them with an excellent position in terms of negotiating the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. The outcome of the elections resulted in PUK leader, Jalal Talabani, becoming the new President of Iraq and KDP leader, Masoud Barzani, becoming the President of the KRG (cf. Romano 2010:1349pp). Furthermore, in 2005 Masoud Barzani was invited to the USA, which can be considered as a clear sign of the good U.S.-Kurdish relations. (cf. Charountaki 2011:222).

When considering the relations between USA and the Kurds, the aftermath of 2003 is viewed as the big turning point of their relationship. In a book by Mohammed Shareef, lecturer in International Relations, he elaborates: “[...] the change in US-Kurdish relations started after 2003, as America’s interest in Iraq broadened.” (Shareef 2014:164). However, Shareef mentions that the relationship was not easy from the beginning onwards. After the invasion, the USA had an interest in unifying Iraq, which meant that the Kurdish perspective became ‘just’ another factor to consider in the process of stabilising Iraq. And in 2004, when the USA proposed that the Kurds became a part of a federal Iraq, however with limited powers, it was with reservations. Later on in 2004 the White House expressed that they wanted the

Kurdish language not to be mentioned in the following constitution and there was also discussion about disbanding the Peshmerga³ (cf. *ibid.*). In the same year, these tensions led to a breaking point where Talabani and Barzani together wrote a letter to the White House explaining their discontent with their position created by the USA. This seemed to be a clever move since the Kurds were considered an important player yet again when the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution 2005 began (cf. *ibid.*: 165).

From this it can be concluded that the influence of the Kurds, especially in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, has grown also on a global scale. With their informal recognition the Kurds have become an important actor in the region, which makes them an important factor to consider in U.S. foreign policy especially because of their geopolitical position (cf. Charountaki 2011:223). This point is shared by Gunter who wrote in 2004 that - with the recognition of KRG - the Iraqi Kurds had a great deal of relevance in terms of the future of the Middle East and international politics. Even though, the future of post-Saddam Iraq remained still uncertain (cf. Gunter 2004:204).

4.3.1 The Oil Perspective

Within the Iraqi Constitution, article 140 is of special interest for the Iraqi Kurds: It addresses the issues of disputed territories, such as Kirkuk, which is a city that is rich on oil, and both the Iraq government and the Iraqi Kurds claim it to be theirs. Kirkuk is relevant both because of all the minorities that feel connected to the area but also because of the oil. During the Saddam Hussein's regime, many Kurds were ethnically cleansed from the city and replaced by Sunni Arabs, which has made the city today populated with different ethnic groups such as Assyrian, Turkmen, Kurdish and Arabic minorities (cf. The International Research Journal 2009). This issue was taken into consideration and addressed in article 140, which provides the opportunity for Kurds to reunite with their cities and, furthermore, in article 140: "[...] the Kurds negotiated somewhat ambiguous language regarding federal and local competencies in the petroleum sector, which could be interpreted to mean that oilfields discovered in the future in Kurdistan fall under the exclusive authority of the KRG" (Romano 2010:1350). With the 2005 Constitution, the Kurds reached a certain level of autonomy, the recognition of Peshmerga and a good position with regard to the oil

³ Peshmerga is the KRG defence force (cf. Gunter 2011:102).

fields. However, the city of Kirkuk was also the starting point for a new Kurdish opposition to arise. A part of the Iraqi Kurds did not agree with certain aspects of PUK and KDP. Therefore, in February 2009 a new party was formed by Nawshirwan Mustafa, which was named *Gorran*. *Gorran* is the Kurdish meaning for *change*. In July 2009, during the Kurdish provincial elections, *Gorran* already managed to receive 25 out of 111 seats (cf. *ibid.*:1351). One can argue that in the spirit of democracy this development can be viewed very positively, however, as mentioned earlier the USA had an interest in a stable Kurdistan region - especially with regard to the USA reducing its presence in Iraq. This could mean that “[t]he American strategy of getting the Kurds to compromise and hold off on their key outstanding demands may become less effective in the wake of withdrawal” (*ibid.*:1352).

With the KRG’s Petroleum Law from June 2007, the Iraqi Kurds further secured their access to the oil. Thereby, an economic bond between the USA and the Iraqi Kurds was established since, eventually, U.S. American oil companies signed agreements with the KRG. This underlines the Kurds becoming an important actor in the region, which could not be ignored by the U.S. government and investors looking economic opportunities (cf. Charountaki 2011:222p). This is of further interest with regard to the oil perspective from a Turkish-Kurdish relation’s point of view. In 2010, there was an official meeting between the KRG and Turkey where the Turkish Foreign Minister stressed the importance of the Turkish-Kurdish relations. Moreover, he expressed the wish for more economic integration with the KRG. This represented a new and surprising development considering Turkey’s harsh history with its own Kurdish minorities (cf. *ibid.*: 223).

4.3.2 USA, Turkey and the Kurds

It is debatable whether or not the USA had an overall positive or negative attitude towards an independent Kurdistan over the course of history. On the one hand the USA needed the Kurds for unifying and stabilising Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion in 2003. On the other hand tensions were detected for example in 2007 when Turkey made the decision to enter North Iraq to fight against PKK, which was backed by the USA. One could argue that the USA could not or would not, at the time, publicly endorse an independent Kurdistan out of loyalty to their fellow NATO member Turkey. However, the USA also feared it could lead to conflicts within the

region. With regard to this, KRG-President Barzani refused to go to Baghdad to a scheduled meeting with Condoleezza Rice among others. The USA had really put itself in a delicate situation when trying to maintain friendly relations with both Turkey and the Kurds (cf. Shareef 2014:166p). However, as the former Kurdish delegate in Washington and today's deputy Prime Minister of the KRG, Qubad Talabani, has stated “[...] that this did not have to be a zero-sum game and that the US could have relations with the two entities at the same time” (*ibid.*:167) .

As mentioned earlier, Turkey and the Kurds have not had a good relationship from the beginning. Turkey has been viewing the Kurds as a threat to its territorial integrity and, thereby, having negative effects on its state sovereignty. With the Iraqi Kurds gaining more influence and recognition from the international community, Turkey fears that this could encourage the Turkish Kurds to rebel and claim their own rights, too. The strong tensions between the Kurds and Turkey, the USA became trapped in a delicate position, being an ally to Turkey but also having a great interest in the Iraqi Kurds to help them stabilising Iraq (cf. Charountaki 2011:228p). However, from 2010 onwards, the economic bonds between the KRG and Turkey haven been increasing. In 2012, the trade between Iraq and Turkey reached 12 billion USD, where 70% of this represented trade with the KRG. Shareef does, however, point out that the USA did not seem to be fond of this growing relationship since it has favoured a unified Iraq from the beginning. Therefore, a growing relationship between Turkey and KRG could cause some tension with the rest of Iraq (cf. Shareef 2014:168). Nonetheless, this has not jeopardised the U.S.-Kurdish relationship since Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Christopher Straub, has expressed that USA has a good relation towards Iraqi Kurdistan and supports whatever decisions the Iraqi people makes. (cf. *ibid.*:171).

4.3.3 Obama Administration and the Kurds

One could argue that during the Obama administration, the USA has maintained its positive position towards the Kurds. The relationship has further strengthened in 2009 with the proposal of a U.S. consulate in the Kurdish region. This proposal was adopted and the U.S. consulate was established in Erbil in 2011. Furthermore, from 2013 onwards, it was possible to receive U.S. American visas from the consulate in Erbil. On the business level, the relationship further expanded through the signed

agreements between the KRG and U.S. American oil companies, ExxonMobil and Chevron, in 2011/2012. The 2007 establishment of the ‘American University of Iraq, Sulaimani’ marked a cornerstone of the cultural relationship between the USA and the Kurds. The first graduates finished in 2010; most of them were Kurds (cf. *ibid.*:176). Nonetheless, Shareef stresses the point that U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds will always depend on U.S. national interests in the Kurds being a useful tool in order to stabilise the region. From this he argues that Washington is in a transition period towards Iraq and the Kurdistan region. The USA might finally realise that a unified Iraq might not be a reachable goal, and that more recognition and trust for the Kurdistan region may be the better strategic approach. On this background, the U.S.-Kurdish relationship in the period from 2005 until 2014 can be described as an institutionalised relationship. Also, it is worth mentioning that ever since Barzani has been in KRG office he has met with President Obama seven times (cf. *ibid.*:181p). In the aftermaths of one of these visits, Qubad Talabani wrote in his blog: “[...] I am finally seeing a special relationship between the United States and Kurdistan take root—one that goes beyond a tactical relationship and the exchange of niceties, to a more substantive and strategic relationship. It will be a relationship where mutual concerns get discussed and strategies for respective goals and aspirations will be outlined. [...] This relationship between a superpower and a region within a transitioning country should not be taken for granted” (Qubad’s Blog 2010). It is interesting to consider that not every region, or Head of State for that matter, gets to visit the U.S. American President in the Oval Office - this just underlines that the USA views its relationship towards the Kurds as important and worth maintaining.

In an 2013 article, Gunter writes about the aftermath of the *Arab Spring* of 2011, which was debated as to have triggered the *Kurdish Spring* as well. In July 2011, the Turkish DTK declared its democratic autonomy, which was not only premature but also irritated the Turkish authorities and provoked them to conduct a military operation into Northern Iraq in order to fight against the PKK. This can be considered as the outburst of the *Kurdish Spring* (cf. Gunter 2013:443). In Iraq, this led to tensions between Baghdad and the KRG in 2011/2012. The tensions got to a point where the rhetoric of the KRG came to a point of considering the separation from Iraq and getting their independence by vote. Nonetheless, representatives met in 2012 to discuss and decrease the tensions between Iraq and the KRG (cf. *ibid.*:446).

4.3.4 The Impact by IS

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring a new actor has made its entrance to the Kurdish region - the IS. Especially after the beheadings of the U.S. American journalists, the threat of the IS has put the Middle East region and the international community on alert. In a television interview between journalist Thomas L. Friedman and President Barack Obama, published by the New York Times in August 2014, they discussed the situation in the Middle East and the impacts by IS. In this interview, Obama's rhetoric signals how careful the USA has planned to approach the threat of the IS. He speaks about approaching the problem through intergovernmental diplomacy and economic sanctions - thereby, emphasising not only the importance of counteracting militarily and expressing the need for a broad coalition (cf. Obama on the World 2014:09:35). With regard to the U.S. air force intervening in the region, Friedman asks about whether or not the Kurdish opposition is an actor the USA should support even more. Obama's reasons for this intervention focus on U.S. national interests. Primarily, it is about protecting the U.S. American personnel and facilities in the region. Moreover, the USA is obliged to help if the country in question is asking for U.S. support. Further in the interview, Obama mentions that the Kurds have positioned themselves well and that: "[...] the Kurdish region is functional as we see it" (*ibid.*:18:15). Therefore, it is important to protect the Kurdish inhabited area. However, Obama stresses that it is not in U.S. interest to overtake the Iraqi or Kurdish air force but to keep its solely supporting role in the conflict. In relation to this point, Obama explains why the USA did not immediately send air force to counteract IS back in June 2014. He argues it was because that would have taken the pressure off of Baghdad and Erbil. The USA can not always come rescue and contain the conflict - the region has to solve regional conflicts on its own (cf. *ibid.*:19:01). Obama concludes by saying: "We do have a strategic interest in pushing back ISIL. We are not going to let them create some Califat through Syria and Iraq but we can only do that if we know that we got partners on the ground who are capable filling the void." (*ibid.*:20:11).

In an 2014 article by the former Undersecretary of Defense and Financial Officer for the U.S. Department of Defense, Dov S. Zakheim, he writes about how the USA should support the Kurds in their fight against the IS. According to Zakheim, it is in interest of the whole international community to stop the IS. However, neither the

USA nor the Kurds wants U.S. forces on the ground (cf. Zakheim 2014). In the mean time this attitude has changed: in an article, published by the Washington Post on November 23rd 2014, the Chief of Staff to President Barzani, Fuad Hussein, states that the Kurds need support on the ground - they feel alone in fighting the IS (cf. Diehl 2014). The Kurds do want and need U.S. assistance through political, financial and military support. In these terms, the article states that eight Kurdish brigades have already received 92 million USD worth of equipment and that the U.S. air force has helped the Peshmerga to fight against IS (cf. Zakheim 2014).

In September 2014, Obama spoke to the U.S. American nation on the four-point strategy the USA will conduct against the IS. In the framework of a broad coalition, with the USA in the leading role, the first point of the strategy aims to conduct systematical airstrikes against the IS (cf. Obama's Full Speech About ISIS 2014 5:00). Secondly, the USA will increase the support for the Iraqi and Kurdish forces on the ground with the help of military training, intelligence and equipment (cf. *ibid.*:5:47). Thirdly, the USA will draw on its capabilities to prevent further attacks from the IS (cf. *ibid.*:7:12) and finally, the USA will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the civilians who have suffered from the IS (cf. *ibid.*:7:43).

5 ANALYSIS

The following chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds as described in the history section. The project has started from the hypothesis that the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds has changed in the light of the appearance and expansion of the terrorist group IS. However, by having a deeper look into the history of U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds, it has become apparent that the assumption made can be contested. The USA has been and is still following its realist approach in term of its foreign policy. Over the course of history, there have been changes from offensive to defensive realism and vice versa. Nonetheless, the USA has not fundamentally changed its foreign policy approach but rather made adaptations to the situational changes. This hypothesis will be further analysed in the following.

In order to roughly follow the structure of the history part, the analysis is divided into three parts. In the first part, U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds during the Cold War period will be introduced. The second part is dedicated to the post-Cold War period before analysing the U.S. foreign policy in the light of the current events. However, at this point it is important to notice that the USA does not have one common foreign policy approach towards the Kurds since they are spread over four different countries. The relations to these states are probably more significant to the USA due to their status within the international system. “Nevertheless, given its interest in the Middle East stability as well as human rights, the United States has come to accept that it does owe the Kurds a certain amount of attention [...]” (Gunter 2011:93).

5.1 Cold War Period

Following Mearsheimer’s theory of offensive realism and great power politics, it can be assumed that the USA based its foreign policy during the Cold War on the goal of maximising its power. Within this power-maximising strategy, the USA was following two main geostrategic objectives. Firstly, the USA wanted to keep the oil-rich region safe and closely allied to them. The second major goal – containment of the Soviet Union - is linked to the first one. The USA tried to keep the Soviet Union out of the region in order to secure its own access to oil. Furthermore, oil supply from

the region and the guaranteed access would decrease European dependency on the Soviet Union in terms of energy supply. This goes in line with the U.S. long-term aim of keeping the Soviet Union out of Europe (cf. Mufti 2006:167).

The theory can only be proved through empirical evidence. According to Mearsheimer, “[...] the evidence must show that great powers look for opportunities to gain power and take advantage of them when they arise. It must also show that great powers do not practise self-denial when they have the wherewithal to shift the balance of power in their favour, and that the appetite for power does not decline once states have a lot of it” (Mearsheimer 2001:168). Offensive realist thinking by the great powers – in this case namely the USA – has not only influenced the Western hemisphere but the *Global South*, too. According to Odd Arne Westad, Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science, the Cold War and the bipolarity between the USA and the Soviet Union has influenced every region of the world and not just the two respective countries and Europe. This leads to the assumption that U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds has been largely influenced by Cold War thinking. “[...] US and Soviet interventionisms to a very large extent shaped both the international and the domestic framework within which political, social and cultural changes in Third World countries took place” (Westad 2005:3). Empirical cases supporting this assumption are given in the following.

As illustrated in the history section, with joining the NATO in 1952, Turkey became an important ally of the USA. This partnership was an major step for the USA towards the further containment of the Soviet Union and the spread of Communism. Especially, since Stalin was interested in Turkey, too. However, eventually, the USA – within the framework of the Truman doctrine (1947) – supported Turkey financially and, thereby, laid the foundation of the containment policy regarding the Soviet expansion (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:324). In order not to threaten the new partnership with Turkey, the decisions of the Turkish government towards the Kurds were largely backed by the USA. “This was to deny Kurdish demands for minority rights as they might escalate into further demands that would threaten Turkish territorial integrity” (cf. Gunter 2011:95). This example perfectly illustrates the offensive realist thinking of the USA during the Cold War period. The USA was following the aim of maximising its power and took advantage of the opportunity to “[...] shift the balance

of power in their favour [...]” (Mearsheimer 2001:168). This goes in line with the theory of offensive realism arguing that great powers are never satisfied with the current level of their power but always seek to maximise their strength (cf. *ibid.*:21pp).

The same was true for the Iraqi Kurds during the regime of Abdel Karim Qassim. The USA had a great interest in destabilising his pro-Communist regime and needed the Iraqi Kurds, which were largely not in favour of Qassim, in order to challenge his power. However, an U.S. memorandum on Iraq from 1962 states: “The United States considers the Kurdish problem in Iraq an internal matter which should be resolved internally. Our Government does not support Kurdish activities against the Government of Iraq in any way [...]” (U.S. Department of State 1962). However, according to some historians, such as Douglas Little, it is not proved yet that the USA was not directly entangled in the destabilising of the Qassim regime (cf. Little 2010:68). Either way, the USA was satisfied with the outcome – a coup d’état against Qassim in 1963. The overthrow of the pro-Moscow regime marked an important step towards the further containment of Soviet Union expansion and, therefore, served the U.S. aim of power-maximisation. Consequently, the Kurds were not further supported by the USA, although they were expecting it in exchange for their efforts regarding the overthrow of Qassim. In the aftermath of the coup d’état, the Kurds were even violently persecuted by order of the new Ba’athist regime (cf. *ibid.*:69pp).

The situation of the Iraqi Kurds during the 1970s is another example for the realist U.S. foreign policy approach towards the Kurds. When Saddam Hussein slightly moved towards a better relationship with the Soviet Union and vice versa, the USA felt threatened and thought about using the internal interests of the Iraqi Kurds in order to keep Saddam Hussein in check. However, after the U.S. ally Iran made an agreement with the Iraqi leader, the USA quickly lost the interest in a possible empowerment of the Iraqi Kurds. At that time, the Iraqi Kurds did not fit any longer into the geopolitical strategy of the USA and were abandoned from the agenda (cf. *ibid.*:74pp).

However, Mearsheimer argues that the realist approach in U.S. foreign policy has never been that apparent due to the liberal rhetoric of the government. Indeed, no

contemporary state leader from a democratic country would admit realist thinking regarding its foreign policy. Nonetheless, according to Mearsheimer, the U.S. government has an “[...] especially intense antipathy toward balance-of-power thinking” (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:23). He exemplifies his view on U.S. rhetoric with Woodrow Wilson who brought up a liberal perspective on the world by outlining his famous *Fourteen Points*. As stated in the history section, however, the Kurds did not profit from Wilson’s ideas eventually. This illustrates the gap between the U.S. liberal rhetoric and its realist actions. “American foreign policy has usually been guided by realist logic, although the public pronouncements of its leaders might lead one to think otherwise” (*ibid.*: 26).

The end of the Cold War leads us to the next chapter where the post-Cold War foreign policy of the USA towards the Kurds will be discussed more in detail. With regard to the post-Cold War world order it is important to keep in mind that the Cold War period has been an important step towards “[...] the creation of today’s world, about how the mightiest powers of the late twentieth century – the United States and the Soviet Union – repeatedly intervened in processes of change in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and through these interventions fuelled many of the states, movements, and ideologies that increasingly dominate international affairs” (Westad 2005:1). As analysed above, this assumption is applicable to the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds which has been influenced a lot by Cold War thinking and has had an important impact on the future of the Kurds and their struggles. In their bipolarity and competitiveness, the USA and the Soviet Union have affected the local events in the Middle Eastern region and influenced the faith of the Kurds for several times. Indeed, the Kurds have been betrayed by the USA during the Cold War period due to adaptations in the strategic orientation of U.S. foreign policy, which most carefully paid attentions to the containment of the Soviet Union. Eventually, that leads to the conclusion that different geopolitical aims and strategies of the great powers could have changed the fortune of the Kurdish population in their respective country during the Cold War period.

5.2 Post-Cold War Period

The purpose of this part of the analysis is to investigate the stated hypothesis concerning the presumable shifts in U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds in the post-Cold War period.

According to the theory by Mearsheimer, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War did not change the behavior of states – they still feared for their own survival and will at the expense of others seek to maximise their own power to remain secure. (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:361). Therefore, Mearsheimer would argue that states still act within the framework of realism, more precisely within the anarchical system despite the fact that the system is exposed to change. Although Mearsheimer is a strong believer in the international anarchy system existence, he does recognise that there do exist some signs that endorse a change (cf. *ibid.*).

With a new world order after the end of the Cold War, the bipolar structure ended and left the USA as the last standing great power, causing the distribution of power to change drastically. This change had been influential in terms of how the USA conducted its foreign policy. It can be argued that in the beginning of this period - before the *Kurdish uprising* - the USA maintained a rather passive relation towards the Kurds in its foreign policy strategy. As already mentioned in the history section, in 1991, the Kurdish delegation was met with a cold shoulder as it was not received on an official level by U.S. officials. This stemmed from its current focus on preserving its own level of power, focusing on its internal security (cf. Waltz 1993:49).

U.S. officials' passive behaviour was out of loyalty to their NATO ally Turkey, which has led repressive policy towards its Kurdish minority and did not acknowledge their culture and rights. The USA was aware that Turkey is a very important trusted ally that sees itself as an final guarantor of the country's secular democracy in the region. In addition, as mentioned in the history section, the USA saw in the leftist Turkish radicals an ideological enemy that threatened Turkey's stability. This behavior can be analysed from the assumption of defensive realism that great powers' domestic policy is directly interlinked with its external environment and its foreign policy (cf. Taliaferro 2001:142). U.S. national interests are shown in how it values its ally

Turkey, which promotes democracy and, therefore, correlates with U.S. national ideology. The rather defensive policy of the USA was further shown during the time of the *Kurdish uprising* as it refused to support the opposition forces in Iraq. In particular, this resentment was illustrated when the U.S. officials discussed that Saddam Hussein's regime should not be overthrown but only the dictator himself. President Bush junior expressed only rhetorical support to the Iraqi people as a whole - therefore, not specifically mentioning the Kurds - as that would be insensitive to its ally Turkey and the stability of the region as such. This event can be interpreted with regard to another defensive realism assumption, which states that it is important to consider the notion of the security dilemma, where the uncertainty of the anarchical system triggers states to ensure their own security (cf. *ibid.*:136). It can be argued that since the USA did not want to interfere in the region at that time, it still followed its defensive strategy in order to keep the balance of power in a way, which would serve its maintenance of security. "Defensive realism predicts greater variation in internationally driven expansion and suggests that states ought to generally pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security" (*ibid.*:129).

5.2.1 The Kurdish Uprising and the Shift towards Offensive Realism

This paper argues that the Kurdish uprising had signalled a shift in U.S. foreign policy towards a more offensive behaviour. At this time, the major cities of Iraq were in the hands of the rebels and the U.S. officials had decided to act. They did so with the use of military power and - together with the Iraqi army - they attacked the rebels as well as the Kurds. It can be argued that the USA had restored to offensive military actions in order to maintain the balance of power in its favour, therefore, still trying to support the Iraqi regime. According to Mearsheimer, it comes down the states calculated aggression, as the USA being a great power will reconsider carefully about the balance of power and how it will affect the reaction of other states (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:58).

The aggression by the Iraqi forces in coalition with the USA had major human consequences as Iraq had experienced massive exodus, especially with regard to the Kurdish camps bordering with Iran and Turkey. This situation had resulted in the UNSC to pass the resolution, which resulted in the launch of *Operation Provide Comfort I*. With *Operation Provide Comfort I*, where the USA played a leading role,

heralded a stark shift in how the USA conducted its foreign policy in Iraq and towards the Kurds in particular. The USA started to promote humanitarian aid as it can be seen from the fact that *Operation Provide Comfort I* was based on a humanitarian approach. It can also be seen from President Bush junior rhetoric on the Kurds being killed and that the USA can not tolerate it because of humanitarian concerns. Here Mearsheimer assumption on the intentions of states can be used. States' intentions are never 100% certain and are prone to change quickly. Therefore, a state can be hostile to one actor and the other day to another (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:55). This shift can be linked to another assumption of Mearsheimer that regards state survival, which is the primary goal of the state. "States seek to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their political order" (*ibid.*). But survival also relates to pursuing non-security goals, such as U.S. spread of democracy in the Cold War period or in this example in order to promote human rights (cf. *ibid.*:55pp). Mearsheimer further argues that states seeking non-security goals have no effect on the balance of power. And human rights interventionist in most cases confirms to this description: "[...] they tend to be small scale operations that cost little and do not detract from a great powers prospects for survival. For better for worse, states are rarely willing to expend blood and treasure to protect foreign populations from gross abuses, including genocide" (*ibid.*:63).

In the phase of *Operation Provide Comfort II*, which started right after *Operation Provide Comfort I* ended, the USA restored to a more offensive tactic as the second operation had a rather limited humanitarian concept. This time it was aimed at combating Saddam Hussein's forces. In line with the theory explained, the USA had dramatically shifted its intentions as it now moved against the Iraqi forces. This again shows the unpredictability of states' decisions. Thereby, states can never be 100% sure if other states will restore to offensive actions and continue to use their military capability (cf. *ibid.*:55). Moreover, in terms of non-security goals, the states sometimes contradict with the balance of power logic where these mostly act within the rules of realism (*ibid.*:63). The example of attempting to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime goes along with Mearsheimer, where he states an example of U.S. contradictive behaviour. The USA, although dedicated to the promotion of democracy, still supported to overthrow the Iraqi regime. Furthermore, the USA also supported a number of authoritarian regimes during the Cold War period (cf. *ibid.*).

Theoretically, Mearsheimer argues that other states are potential threats since there does not exist any authority. Therefore, the states have to rescue themselves in order to survive. "In international politics, God help those who help themselves" (*ibid.*:56). He further states that alliances can be created, however, many times they only have temporary character. "Today's alliance partner might be tomorrow's enemy, and today's enemy might be tomorrow's alliance partner" (*ibid.*). This illustrates how the behaviour of the USA has not completely shifted but rather just adjusted to changes in the international system. However, it can be argued that the USA, by being part of the crackdown on the rebels, was not fully aware of the tragic consequences this would cause. As Mearsheimer states, great powers can - from time to time - miscalculate their own decisions. This is never avoidable because states always make their assumptions and decisions based on incomplete information about current situations (cf. *ibid.*:58). The adjustment of the U.S. behaviour to the circumstances also correlates with Mearsheimer's assumption of rationality that "Great powers are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it" (*ibid.*:55).

In terms of U.S.-Kurdish relations, at this point, the U.S. administration had still somewhat passive incentives towards the Kurds. This can be illustrated by the example when the Kurdish parties PUK and KDP wanted to negotiate the extension of autonomy for Kurdistan. The USA had rejected to help, stating that the Kurds should make their own arrangements with Saddam Hussein. Despite the fact that the Kurds still decided to hold elections and the USA had welcomed it, the U.S. spokesperson stated that USA supports stability but not separatism. The USA had used more offensive rhetoric against PUK and KDP when in 1994 these parties restored to clashes, which had signaled possible instability that could arise in the region. The USA warned the Kurds that they would be left to Saddam Hussein if the fights were continued.

The previous resentment of the USA can be linked to the sensitivity of its valuable NATO ally Turkey. Theoretically, it can be said that the USA was again acting rationally, being aware of the external situation and trying to keep the regional balance of power in favour of its ally Turkey. The USA has "[...] weigh[ted] the costs and risks of offense against the likely benefits" (*ibid.*:58). According to

Mearsheimer's assumption of rationality and strategy, this can illustrate how the USA calculates. It pays attention to how its behaviour would, for example showing more narrow or biased sympathy to the Kurds, affect the behaviour of its ally and how that would in return affect their own strategic thinking in pursuing their own security. Furthermore, the notion of security is, according to Mearsheimer's assumption on survival, connected to the states question of territorial integrity and its sovereignty of its domestic political order. Thereby, closely connected to its national interests (*ibid.*:55). In addition to this, it is important to state that the clashes were put aside and the USA. was the mediator in the settlement of the issue through the *Washington Agreement*.

5.2.2 The 21st Century

Prior to the era of the Bush junior administration, the Kurds were considered as close friends. This was furthermore strengthened when USA perceived the Kurds as valuable asset in the fight against Saddam Hussein. In the period prior to the invasion of Iraq, the USA had intentions of manipulating facts in order to achieve its goal as a great power and removing Saddam Hussein. The USA had disrespected the decision of the UNSC and the evidence that the WMD were non-existent. The USA even restored to use its inspectors to spy. In terms of theory, Mearsheimer argues that states, which interact in an anarchical system, always act in a self-interests manner. The reason why states are acting on the basis of self-interest is very simple: "[...] it pays to be selfish in a self-help world" (*ibid.*:56). As mentioned above, about the USA disrespecting the UNSC, this goes in line with Mearsheimer's statement that: "States are willing to lie, cheat, and use brute force if it helps them gain advantage over their rivals" (*ibid.*:57).

In the time of the upcoming Iraq invasion, the current administration of the USA needed to assess the situation before using offensive actions against Saddam Hussein. U.S. intentions were now to support the Kurds, as well as Turkey. The Bush junior era, after 9/11, had signalled a shift from the politics of deterrence to a more offensive concept. The 9/11 doctrine justified attacks on terrorists whose location was unknown and who posed a threat to the national security of the USA and its allies. Analytically, it can be stated that the USA had used strategic calculation and rationale of how to justify offensive attack on terrorists who posed a threat to the international

community. At the same time, it aimed to justify invasions against a state that has no direct linkage to the 9/ 11 attacks (cf. Wheeler 2003:187). In terms of theory, when a state determines that another state is posing a threat to its survival it will restore to use offensive capabilities. Furthermore, as intentions are difficult to detect, the state will make the worse case scenario assumptions (Mearsheimer 2001:62).

The U.S.-Kurdish relations moved towards more cooperation and the USA promoted the Kurds as an ideological example of democracy in Iraq. However, the USA had again been aware of the Turkish sensitivities. This can be seen in an example where the USA had, prior to the invasion, informed that the Kurds would benefit if supporting U.S. goals as long as the Kurds keep silent about national aspirations. However, the relations between the USA and Turkey became hostile as Turkey refused to cooperate with the military invasion of Iraq. Eventually, the USA was dependent on the Kurds.

As to conclude on this analysis, Mearsheimer states that: “The particular international order that obtains at any time is mainly a by-product of the self interested behavior of the system’s great powers. The configuration of the system, in other words, is the unintended consequence of great-power security competition, not the result of states acting together to organize peace” (*ibid.*:64p). This goes in line with the behaviour of the USA when prioritising its own interest above all.

5.3 Contemporary Period

In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion in Iraq, the USA had a great interest in the Iraqi Kurds since they needed the Kurds to help overthrow Saddam Hussein. Furthermore, the USA needed the Kurds to help stabilise and unify Iraq in the withdrawal of the invasion (Romano 2010:1345).

The whole approach of the USA invading Iraq can be understood from an offensive point of view. As stated throughout the project, the USA has - in our perspective - always shown realistic tendencies in their foreign policy. Whether or not it is done in an offensive or defensive manner, it is always with U.S. interest and U.S. survival as top priority. With the Iraqi Kurds helping the USA to overthrow Saddam Hussein and assisting in the stabilisation of Iraq, the Kurds had positioned themselves as a reliable

and suitable potential ally to the USA. As mentioned in the history section, the Kurdistan region has a relevant geopolitical position. Through the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, the Iraqi Kurds have a good access to the oil fields in the region. All of this emphasises the Kurds as a relevant strategic partner or ally to consider from the U.S. perspective. One could argue that the USA has recognised this when the two American oil companies, ExxonMobil and Chevron, signed agreements with the KRG in 2011/2012. This goes in line with the offensive approach, hence the fact that the USA acts on its own interest to secure oil for its own state security by creating a relation with the KRG. Also, Vice President Joe Biden expressed in November 2014 that he welcomed the oil export agreement between Iraq and the KRG. Even though this is an agreement between Iraq and the KRG the fact that USA publicly applauds this can be seen as a step towards a future governmental oil agreement between the USA and the KRG (cf. Pamuk, Afanasieva 2014).

According to the offensive theory by Mearsheimer, this economic relation between the USA and the KRG can be viewed as the USA employing other ways to shift the balance of power than using direct military power: “Because one state’s gain in power is another state’s loss [...]” (Mearsheimer 2001:34), which represents offensive behaviour. The U.S. oil investment in the Kurdistan region underlines the U.S. interest in strengthening a partnership towards the Kurds motivated by economic reasons. Thereby, the Iraqi Kurds’ role changed from being just a factor the USA had to deal with - when conducting foreign policy interest in Iraq - to being an important business partner.

Nevertheless, as Gunter has stated in his 2011 article: “While the United States sees the KRG as a friend and de facto ally, however, it does not consider the KRG as an important ally as Turkey. Therefore, the message is clear. The KRG must get along with Turkey or else, in a showdown between the two, the KRG will not be able to count on U.S. support” (Gunter 2011:94). Again, this underlines an offensive behaviour by the USA, since it acts strategically according to its external environment, in this case represented by the Kurdish region and Turkey. Mearsheimer’s statement goes in line with the points made above: “[...] states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions” (Mearsheimer 2001:31). To clarify this point: the USA had an immediate interest in

maximising its power by creating good relations in the Kurdish region. However, in order to secure its long-term interest in Turkey being a reliable partner, the USA had to act strategically and clearly identify its priorities. The USA made a zero-sum approach, sending a clear message that the Kurds have ‘to play nice’ with Turkey otherwise the USA will back Turkey. Just as Mearsheimer states: “[...] great powers tend to have a zero-sum mentality [...]” (*ibid.*:34). This underlines the U.S. status as a great power. Only the great power status provides special rights such as the zero-sum mentality (cf. Bull 1977:194pp). One could argue that the actions of Kurdish-U.S.-Turkish interactions are very much influenced by these ideas. As stated in the history section, Turkey has had a very tense relation towards its own Kurdish minority in fear of the minority separating the Turkish state and, thereby, weakening its sovereignty. The USA, being a NATO ally of Turkey, has backed Turkey through most of history - for example in 2007 when Turkey went into Northern Iraq. However, since the economic interest in the Kurdistan region has increased from an U.S. perspective, it has placed the USA in a rather delicate position.

In a 2009 meeting between KRG President Barzani and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Gates stated on behalf of the U.S. interests that the USA would commit to KRG with the following three points: “(1) To use our influence to ensure that the outstanding disputes between the KRG and the Iraqi Government, including the Kirkuk dispute and other disputed areas and the sharing of oil revenues, are resolved based on the Iraqi Constitution and Article 140. (2) To continue with our military efforts with the Peshmerga as well as with the Iraqi Army and security forces within the framework of our joint security architecture. (3) To offer our support and assistance for a census to be conducted in Iraq next year [...] A few days later, the Obama administration gave the Iraqi Kurds what they maintained was an ‘historic’ commitment when it promised to broker disputes between them and the Baghdad government, and to give support to the Kurds in resolving the vexing issue of oil-rich Kirkuk” (Gunter 2011:102). From this it can be argued that the USA again shows offensive realist tendencies in their way of conducting foreign policy. Hence, according to Mearsheimer, great powers will attempt to control regions that are rich on raw materials and which are not considered to be a great power in order to “[...] try to ensure that none falls under the control of a rival great power” (Mearsheimer 2001:144). To sum up, with the status as a great power, the USA has the necessary

tools and the expectancy to largely influence world politics. This is shown in U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurdistan region, hence, their increasing interest within this region.

One can argue from this that there has been a change in U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurdish region throughout time. However, the USA have maintained their realist approach towards the Kurds and rather adapted to the changing situation than having shifted their foreign policy approach. Thereby, the USA has moved away from a rather passive approach towards the *Kurdish question* to a very committed one. Not to say that this commitment is without any need for excellent diplomatic skills, hence Turkey being a fellow NATO ally as having a rather tense approach towards the *Kurdish question*. However, Gunter points out that it can be argued that there is no greater grand strategy towards the Kurds due to the fact that they are split into four countries, and “[f]urthermore, the states in which the Kurds live are each more important to American foreign policy than the Kurds themselves” (Gunter 2011:104). On the contrary, it can be argued that *some* foreign policy incentives can be detected. As mentioned, in 2011 the American consulate was established in the city of Erbil, which is the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, and the KRG president has attended several meetings in the Oval Office with president Obama.

5.3.1 The Current IS Crisis

In the light of the current IS crisis in the Middle East, one can argue that the approach of U.S. foreign policy towards the region has become more clear - or at least more on display. As stated earlier, being a great power demands certain expectations from the USA when a threat such as the IS rises and creates fear within the international community. The IS already made its entrance in June 2014, however, the USA did first react to the threat with the former mentioned four-point strategy in September 2014 (cf. Obama on the World 2014:19:01).

To begin with, the USA had a rather passive approach towards the IS threat. Obama stated that it is not in the interest of the USA to overtake the Kurdish or Iraqi air force. Thereby, the USA wanted to stress the importance of the region trying to solve the problem on its own. The uncertainty of how to deal with the IS and to what extent it would influence the international community triggered a very defensive U.S. foreign

policy approach in the beginning. At first, the USA emphasised that - if their involvement was needed - it would not just be about counteracting the IS militarily, it would mostly be with diplomatic incentives such as diplomacy and economic cutbacks (*ibid.*:09:35). At that point, it can be argued that the USA viewed an extensive demonstration of power as counterproductive and did not want to overrule their allies in the region, which were fighting the threat on their own. Therefore, this alternative approach, which the USA followed in the beginning, can be considered to be rather defensive (cf. Taliaferro 2001:129).

However, the situation changed and became more intense as the IS grew stronger. The IS became more intimidating when beheading U.S.-American journalists and brutally attacking the region, including civilians. So in his speech to the nation on the 10th of September 2014, Obama presented the four-point strategy against the IS with the starting line: “As Commander in Chief my highest priority is the security of the American people” (Obama’s Full Speech About ISIS 2014:00:16). This clearly represents an underlying realist approach. Obama has further expressed - in the former mentioned interview with Friedman - that the USA does have an interest in removing the IS and the threat they pose (cf. Obama on the World 2014:20:11). As presented in the history section the four-point strategy entails airstrikes against the IS, an increase in the support of Kurdish and Iraqi forces on the ground, the prevention of further attacks and the continuation of humanitarian assistance. These aims shall be reached within the framework of a broad coalition under the leadership of the USA (*ibid.*). Consequently, one could argue that the USA acts on its own interest by removing the IS as a security threat. Thereby, the USA demonstrates a rather offensive realist behaviour (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:30). Furthermore, the USA shows its military capabilities when bombing territory occupied by the IS. However, since they are backed by a broad coalition, the USA does so in accordance with the strategic interests of its environment (cf. Obama’s Full Speech About ISIS 2014:5:00) (cf. Mearsheimer 2001:31). These are all features that imply an offensive realist approach as described by Mearsheimer. This is also of great importance regarding relation with the Kurds. Before the USA got involved, the Kurds felt as if they were fighting against the IS on behalf of the whole international community (cf. Diehl 2014). Now, by supporting the Kurdish fighters with military equipment and airstrikes, the USA shows that it takes an interest in the U.S.-Kurdish interactions.

However, this interest is mainly driven by U.S. internal motives such a secure access to oil.

Some of the last stated points from the analysis will also be the starting point of the upcoming section of afterthoughts where this project seeks to investigate what the future entails for the Kurdish people.

6 AFTERTHOUGHTS

In order to give an outlook what the current developments might entail with regard to the future of the Kurds, we have discussed the issue within the framework of our group. The discussion has been based on the project findings – especially on the history and the analysis section. Therefore, the main purpose of the following chapter is to illustrate the thoughts that we have gathered throughout this process and show our debate on the future position of the Kurds.

On the one hand it can be argued that - in light of the current events of the IS crisis - the Kurds are left with a genuine hope for autonomy. The USA and the international community have been depending on the Kurds leading the fight on the grounds against the IS and, thereby, containing the threat for the whole international system. Since the rise of the IS, the Kurds - namely the Peshmerga - have been expressing their concerns about how long they will be able to balance the IS expansion in the region. They feel left alone on the grounds. Nonetheless, the Kurds have been fighting against the IS in order to protect their own territory. However, simultaneously, their resistance also serves the interests of the international community. This is also relevant in terms of maintaining the international as well as the regional power balance. It can be argued that this brings the Kurds in a position where they are able to put some pressure on the international community regarding their long-term goal for autonomy. Furthermore, autonomy, at least from an Iraqi Kurdish perspective, seems to have become an achievable objective. This is illustrated by Henri J. Barkey, Professor of International Relations at the Lehigh University, who has stated in his 2009 academic article that: “A paramount U.S. objective is to preserve Iraq’s territorial integrity within the confines of a federal and democratic state. Iraqi territorial integrity is dependent on Iraq’s ability to integrate its Kurdish population into a successful federal framework” (Barkey 2009:11). Thereby, he claims that the USA supports a federal Iraq with an autonomous Kurdish region under the rule of Kurdish Regional Government. The U.S. encouragement can be considered as a step towards a further Kurdish empowerment. The position of the USA can be partly explained by the history of the Iraqi Kurds, which have positioned themselves quite well over the past decades. Firstly, they have proven their ability to effectively govern themselves. The KRG has been in power since 1992. Secondly, the Iraqi Kurds have a

good access to the important raw material within the region, which is oil. These aspects underline the assumption that the Iraqi Kurds have the capability to become an even more important (business)-partner for the USA and fuels the Kurdish hope for more autonomy.

However, on the other hand, history has shown that the USA has relied on the Kurds several times before already but not backed up their request for autonomy in the aftermath. Once the problem had been solved, the Kurds somehow lost their value and, thereby, their strong position in negotiating future autonomy. Furthermore, Graham E. Fuller, an U.S.-American Political Analyst, points out that in general the international community is not in support of the break up of existing states since, eventually, that can lead to turmoil, violence and the instability of the international system (cf. Fuller 1993:109). Additionally, Fuller stresses the weakness of the Kurds by representing a homogenous group. Compared to other ethnic groups, the Kurdish ethnic unity is still poorly developed. The national Kurdish minorities mainly focus on their internal pursuit for autonomy and are not united on the question of autonomy and sovereignty (cf. *ibid.*). Therefore, a joint Kurdistan would be hard to realise even with support in the back. Furthermore, not all four states inhabited by a Kurdish minority have been as successful in integrating its Kurdish minority as Iraq did with acknowledging KRG and co-writing the 2005 Iraqi Constitution together with Kurdish representatives. For example, as illustrated throughout the project, Turkey has been struggling with its Kurdish minority. Turkey fears a possible recognition of an autonomous Turkish-Kurdish government since it would put a threat on its territorial integrity. Additionally, Turkey has been reluctant in cooperating with the coalition of the willing in its fight against the IS and still labels the PKK as a terrorist group. All this makes it hard to believe that a state like Turkey would ever consider recognising Kurdistan as an equal state.

In general, the whole notion of regional power balance is a quite interesting aspect. What would happen if Kurdistan became a sovereign state? Would this completely shift the power balance of the Middle Eastern region? Would a sovereign Kurdistan become a regional hegemon and a more important ally of the USA and the Western hemisphere? From the perspective of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey, a sovereign Kurdistan would most probably be a shift to their disadvantage. Therefore, from a

realist perspective, where states will act on the behalf of their own survival, a total separation of the Kurds will not be supported by the four respective countries.

7 CONCLUSION

Throughout the project, the foreign policy of the USA towards the Kurds in the Middle East has been discussed. Thereby, the project aimed to answer the question what underlying interests caused the shifts that the U.S. foreign policy has undergone over the period from the Cold War era to the present. In order to illustrate the shifts and analyse the U.S. foreign policy behaviour, we had to examine the history of the links between the USA and the Kurdish population. The historical outline has shown different periods of U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds and how it has changed according to different events in the Middle Eastern region or the international power struggle in general. It can be assumed that the nature of the U.S. foreign policy did not change over the course of history, but rather that situational shifts in the Middle East triggered an adjustment of U.S. foreign policy. The USA adapted its foreign policy instruments towards the Kurds according to its state's internal interest regarding the Middle Eastern region. Thereby, the great power actively tried to shape the regional developments and outcomes in its favour. Eventually, that led us to the conclusion that these shifts do not represent a reorientation of the direction the U.S. foreign policy is going, but rather an adjustment to the changing circumstances. In view of the threat the IS poses, this assumption can be related to the current U.S. foreign policy measures and its ties with the Kurdish population, too.

Therefore, we argue that the current approach towards the Kurds does not reflect a reorientation of U.S. foreign policy in the region. The adjustments in its foreign policy approach can be explained by the situational change in the region and the threat of the IS. At the moment, the USA and the international community largely depend on the Peshmerga and the Kurds in general since they do fight the IS on the ground and put up massive resistance. Thereby, the Kurds have established themselves as a stabilising factor within a region that is breaking apart. That makes them one of the most reliable regional partners at the present. As elaborated in the discussion section, it seems like that brings the Kurds in a favourable strategic position in view of possible autonomy. However, the USA and the international community have betrayed the Kurds for several times already. From that we can conclude that the Kurdish path towards autonomy has always been a struggle over the course of history. Therefore, it is not foreseeable in any terms if the Kurdish

resistance against the IS could actually result in an approach towards more autonomy and international support.

Taking everything in account, we claim that the USA has maintained its realist approach; either by protecting its own security and state survival (defensive realism) or by trying to increase its level of power in order to shift the international balance of power in its favour (offensive realism). Both branches are rooted in the assumption of an anarchical structure of the international system. These realist approaches have been reflecting the U.S. interests over the course of history. It can be argued that the USA has been acting according to the attainment of its internal state objectives. This had and still has an enormous impact on the Middle Eastern region and on the Kurdish faith. Throughout the project, we have elaborated adjustments in the U.S. foreign policy towards the Kurds. However, the underlying main interest of the USA has always remained its own state survival.

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