

ExxonMobil, Kochs, Israel Pushing Washington to Partition Iraq and Syria

The currently stateless Kurds sit astride the Iraq-Syria border on land blessed/cursed with oil, other resources, and geopolitical significance. Is it any wonder that mega-corporations and their client states are looking to use the Kurds, stoke conflict, and exploit the situation?

By [Whitney Webb](#)

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (Analysis) — Years before the U.S. illegally invaded and then occupied Iraq, plans were circulating within the Pentagon to partition the country along “sectarian” lines, with the express purpose of allowing the U.S. and its regional allies to better control oil resource production and movement within the Middle East.

In Syria, the same narrative of partition has more recently been circulated as the “only” solution to the nation’s sectarian divisions, divisions which did not emerge until they were artificially created in 2011 when the current conflict began and later fomented by hostile foreign actors.

While the Bush and Obama administrations pushed for the partition of Iraq on several occasions, it was largely corporate actors during that time that took the most active steps towards creating an independent state within the Iraqi region controlled by the U.S.-allied Kurds, an area with sizeable energy reserves and other strategic resources.

The area of Syria controlled by the U.S.-backed Kurds conveniently connects directly with the Kurdish “statelet” in Iraq, making the possibility of a larger independent Kurdistan more feasible. This area also boasts the largest concentration of many of Syria’s most critical resources.

While past administrations avoided openly recognizing the partition of Iraq, the administration of President Donald Trump is striking a different tone, largely due to the influence within the administration of some of the biggest players who actively sidestepped Iraq’s government in favor of the Kurds years ago.

Chief among such players was ExxonMobil — whose CEO at the time, Rex Tillerson, is now Trump’s Secretary of State — along with other corporations whose financial and political support for the Trump administration is [well-documented](#).

The geopolitical and economic motives for a partitioned Iraq

The corporatist, neoconservative dream of partitioning Iraq has been around for well over a

decade, first materializing a year before the U.S.' ill-fated 2003 invasion of that nation. The plan, drafted by former Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, [contemplated the division](#) of Iraq into three autonomous, sectarian "statelets" for Iraqi Muslim Sunnis, Muslim Shi'as, and ethnic Kurds, who are also predominantly Muslim. This partition, it was believed, would allow the U.S. and its regional allies [to more easily dominate](#) Iraq and its important fossil fuel resources, along with conferring other "strategic advantages."

As U.S.-based private intelligence firm Stratfor [noted in 2002](#), the invasion and destruction of Iraq would pave the way for partition and thus greater U.S. control over Iraq and the entire Middle East:

"After eliminating Iraq as a sovereign state, there would be no fear that one day an anti-American government would come to power in Baghdad, as the capital would be in Amman [Jordan]. Current and potential U.S. geopolitical foes Iran [...] and Syria would be isolated from each other, with big chunks of land between them under control of the pro-U.S. forces.

Equally important, Washington would be able to justify its long-term and heavy military presence in the region as necessary for the defense of a young new state asking for U.S. protection – and to secure the stability of oil markets and supplies. That, in turn, would help the United States gain direct control of Iraqi oil and replace Saudi oil in case of conflict with Riyadh."

Creating the divisions needed to justify partition

The big problem for the partition plan, however, was the simple fact that these diverse groups [had coexisted](#) with minimal sectarian violence in Iraq for centuries. This meant, of course, that the sectarianism that was needed to justify partition had to be engineered. The U.S., in its invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, happily obliged, [sponsoring sectarian violence](#) through the military training – [including torture techniques](#) – it gave to Iraqi militias, police and military forces that divided along particular ethnoreligious lines.

[Many of these organizations](#) have been found to be repeat human rights offenders and have targeted particular ethnoreligious groups within Iraq. Despite their egregious track record, the U.S. [continues](#) to financially support these armed groups.

The U.S. has also worked to create and strengthen ethnoreligious divisions within the country [by promoting](#) Iraqi organizations founded on religion or ethnicity rather than along political lines.

Though some analysts believe that the biggest winners in the U.S.-created environment of Iraqi sectarianism were the Iraqi majority population of the Shi'a – which, after all, was given control of the post-invasion government – it was really the Kurds who gained the most as a result of the U.S.' machinations to divide and conquer Iraq.

The Kurds are the largest group of nomadic people in the world and have long existed without their own state. [As journalist Sarah Abed has noted](#),

"This fact has allowed Western powers to use the 'stateless' plight of the Kurdish people as a tool to divide, destabilize and conquer Iraq and Syria, where colonial oil and gas interests run deep."

Although the most powerful Kurdish political parties in these countries [do not see themselves](#) as pawns, [history shows](#) that Western colonial powers have used them that way in the past and continue to do so, often with their willing cooperation.

In recent decades the U.S. government and military have openly supported Kurdish separatist elements, though they have stopped short of recognizing “Kurdistan” as a state completely independent of the Baghdad-based government. This role fell instead to U.S. corporations, such as ExxonMobil, a major force in the fossil fuel industry. In 2011, ExxonMobil [unilaterally brokered an oil deal](#) with the Kurdistan region, bypassing Iraq’s central government in the process.

According to ExxonMobil, the move was partly motivated by problems it was having contracting with Iraq’s central government regarding oilfields in southern Iraq. However, the promise of oil reserves in Kurdistan said to be “one of the world’s most promising regions for the future [of] hydrocarbon discovery,” was also a clear motivator. As a result, ExxonMobil sided with the Kurdish separatists over the central government, giving clout to Kurdish goals of greater regional autonomy – and thus furthering their shared goal of a divided Iraq.

Other oil corporations – including Chevron and Gazprom, among others – followed Exxon’s lead..

By 2014, [more than 80](#) foreign energy corporations had struck deals with Kurdistan. [Oilman Ray Hunt](#), whose Hunt Oil Co. signed its own unilateral agreement with Kurdistan in 2007, has consistently heaped praises upon Kurdistan and has also made clear his vision for the future of Iraq: “In the end, you’ll end up with a soft partition of Iraq.”

Corporate connection to Trump’s change of heart on Iraq partition



A photograph released by Russian intelligence depicting thousands of trucks laden with oil crossing from Syria into Turkey. December, 2015.

Over the years since these deals were struck, the Kurdish separatist parties in Iraq have benefited immensely, though more recently they have been hit hard by the global drop in oil prices. In 2014, they were exporting 280,000 barrels of oil every day. And, [despite troubles](#) with foreign companies brought on by falling oil prices and the rise of Daesh (ISIS),

the Kurds – as of the end of 2016 – [were exporting](#) nearly 600,000 barrels a day.

Though Daesh was painted by the media as a scourge to the Kurds, they have in fact benefited from Daesh's invasion of large swaths of Iraq. Indeed, the Kurds – trained, armed and provided with airstrike support by the U.S. and Israel – have taken control of many former Daesh territories and have thereby expanded the size of their own territory.

The U.S. and its regional allies have said that the Kurds' ability to confront Daesh essentially entitles them to "have their way." As Sadad Ibrahim al-Husseini, former head of exploration and development for the Saudi state oil company Aramco [told The New York Times in 2014](#):

"At the end of the day, the Kurds will have their way, because they are the only credible Sunni group that can confront ISIS."

Not surprisingly, the Kurd's oil riches have brought them into direct conflict with Iraq's central government, which has since [cut off](#) national funding for the Kurdish region and threatened any country or company buying Kurdish oil with legal action for violating the nation's constitution by not sharing its oil sale revenue equally among all Iraqis.

However, countries like Turkey and Israel [continue to buy](#) significant amounts of oil, as well as natural gas, from the Kurds. Turkey's case is particularly interesting given Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's well-known hatred of the Kurds and opposition to Kurdish independence in Syria. However, when it comes to Iraqi Kurdistan at least, economic factors have won out, with Turkey's ruling party having stated that Kurds in Iraq [have the right](#) to self-determination.

Kurdish control of Iraq's oil-rich north is key to the partitioning plan. As Michael Makovsky, a former Pentagon official, [told The New York Times](#):

"I think Iraqi Kurdish independence is inevitable, at least eventually. They have natural allies in the United States because of the oil companies involved in drilling there. And the Turks and Europeans need their gas."

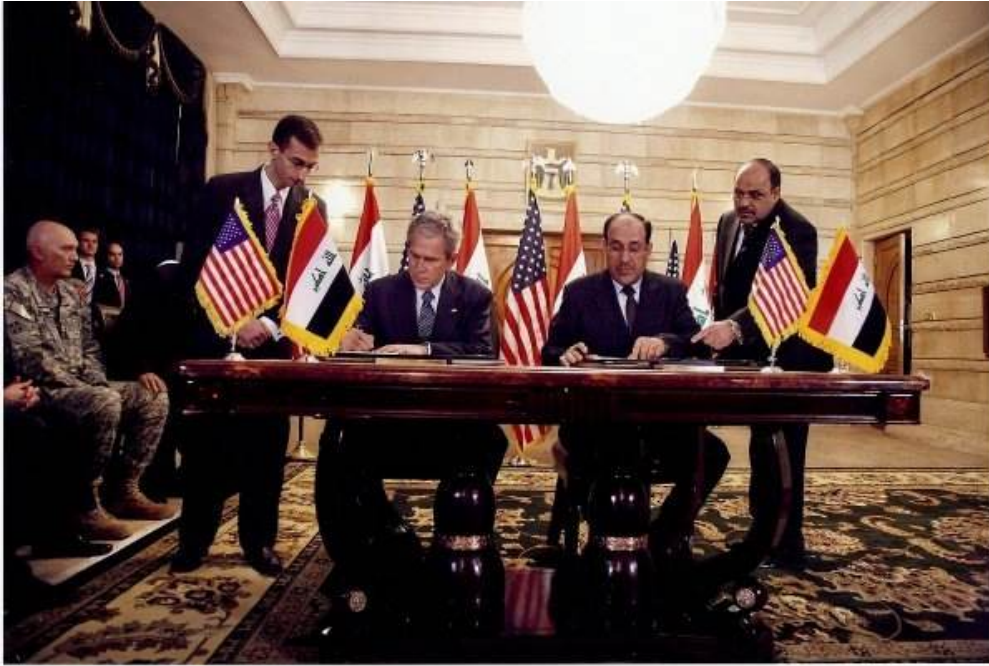
Though candidate Trump had not voiced support for a partition of Iraq, spurred by his administration's strong ties to the oil industry, Washington has become even more friendly to the Kurds – and to the idea of Kurdish secession – since Trump took office.

However, when the State Department was asked by journalist Nafeez Ahmed whether it still stood by the traditional position of supporting a unified Iraq, a department spokesperson [answered](#):

"With respect to the unity of Iraq, you're right; that is something we make a point of saying. But ultimately, these are all internal political discussions that Iraq needs to have with all ethnic groups resident in the country."

[As Ahmed notes](#), this is the first time that the State Department has officially announced the U.S.' willingness to consider the partition of Iraq.

Why the sudden change of heart?



Ali Khedery, pictured far left, watches as U.S. President George W. Bush, signs an agreement with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. (Photo: Public Domain)

ExxonMobil once again emerges as a key player — not surprisingly, given that current Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was Exxon’s CEO when the unilateral contract with the Kurds was forged. Tillerson, however, is not the only former ExxonMobil employee with ties to the Trump administration. Ali Khedery — a former Pentagon official who served in the U.S. coalition authority in Iraq, and a former ExxonMobil executive — [has repeatedly promoted](#) the division of Iraq.

Khedery is also the founder of Dragoman Ventures, a firm connected to [the Committee to Destroy ISIS](#), which has been instrumental in bringing about the Trump administration’s change of opinion regarding Iraq’s partition. The Committee’s executive director, Sam Patten, also [shares deep connections](#) to members of Trump’s campaign and transition teams, as well as to certain Iraqi oligarchs suspected of having ties to U.S. intelligence and insurgent elements in Iraq.

Nor is oil the only resource that has swayed the Trump administration and its corporate allies to view partition favorably. Iraq’s Anbar province was recently found to contain nearly a tenth of the world’s total deposits of phosphates, a key ingredient in the production of nitrogen fertilizer. Now — with control of more than 70 percent of the world’s phosphate supply, and with markets [reaching a point](#) where demand is beginning to outstrip supply — the world’s largest producer of nitrogen fertilizer is eager for access to Anbar province.

That company, Koch Fertilizer Inc., is owned by the infamous Koch Brothers. Fully [one-third](#) of Trump’s entire transition team had ties to Koch Industries.

The role of Israeli ties in pushing the partition plan



Ethnic Kurdish Israelis protest outside the Turkish embassy in Tel Aviv, Israel, July 8, 2010.

The Trump administration's [close ties to Israel](#) may also be a factor in Trump's willingness to consider Iraq's partition. Though the U.S. is clearly driving partition in both Iraq and Syria, it is not alone. Israel stands to gain greatly from a partition of Iraq and has worked, like the U.S., to engineer sectarianism there and strengthen the Kurds. The Kurds [have received](#) weapons, training, and more from Israel — well before the rise of Daesh, with ties dating back to the 1960s.

Israel has also directly supported the Kurds' economy. In 2015, despite warnings from Baghdad, Israel was [importing as much as 77 percent](#) of its oil supply from Iraqi Kurdistan, funneling much-needed money to the cash-stripped Kurdish regional government.

Israel has long recognized the potential role of the Kurds in dividing countries it and its allies seek to weaken. It is hardly a coincidence that Israel's [Greater Israel project](#) aligns almost perfectly with "Kurdistan." In the [Oded Yinon plan](#), or the plan for a "Greater Israel," the use of the Kurds is considered imperative as a means for dividing neighboring countries in order to aid in Israeli plans for greater domination and territorial expansion.

In addition, Israel considers the Kurds an important part of its long-standing goal to destabilize Iran. For instance, WikiLeaks [revealed in 2010](#) that Israel's intelligence agency Mossad had expressed interest in using the Kurds and other ethnic minorities to topple the Iranian government by manufacturing the country's division. Given that the partition of Iraq would isolate Iran from Syria, Israel – like the U.S. – views partition as serving multiple goals, ultimately enabling Israel to dominate the entire Middle East.

Syria partition plan follows the Iraqi partition playbook

Iraq is by no means the only Middle Eastern country that Western powers are seeking to partition. The partition of Syria has been repeatedly sold to the public as [the "only" solution](#) to Syria's ongoing "sectarian" conflict, now well into its seventh year. However, this sectarianism was engineered and stoked by foreign powers to bring about the current conflict in Syria. [WikiLeaks revealed](#) that the CIA was involved in instigating anti-Assad and

“sectarian” demonstrations as early as March 2011. [Declassified CIA documents](#) show the plan to engineer sectarianism in order to weaken the Syrian state dates back to at least the 1980s.

The partition idea was also [repeatedly touted](#) by the Obama administration, which stated that it “may be too late” to keep Syria whole.

In 2011, when the conflict was in its infancy, the U.S. and its allies – namely Israel, Qatar, Turkey, France, the U.K. and Saudi Arabia – began supplying [tons upon tons](#) of weapons to insurgent and sectarian elements within Syria, heavily arming the so-called “moderate” Wahhabi opposition like the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds. As the conflict raged on – and the “moderate” opposition was exposed time and again as sharing close ties with internationally recognized terror organizations like al-Qaeda – Washington’s support [began to shift](#) increasingly [towards the Kurds](#).

As in Iraq, the spread of Daesh in the area [became a pretext](#) for the U.S. not only to arm the Kurds but also to allow them to take control of areas, such as Raqqa, once held by Daesh. Media and government sources repeatedly told the public that the Kurds must be armed, as they were the only group that had proven “effective” in countering Daesh. This past March, the Kurds declared the formation of a [Kurdish federation](#) under democratic self-rule. This declared federation has yet to obtain international recognition, but – given what has transpired in Iraq and in U.S.-Syrian relations – such an achievement doesn’t seem far off.

The Kurds and their U.S. allies currently have gained effective control of Syria’s north, which comprises about a quarter of the entire country but boasts over 90 percent of Syrian oil and gas potential. [According to Yeni Şafak](#), the U.S. along with the Saudis, Egypt, and Kurdish officials have held meetings where decisions were made to extract, process and market the oil, with the Kurds being given a handsome share of the profits. As of 2015, they were said to be earning [in excess of \\$10 million](#) every month.

Syria’s Kurdistan exports its oil to Iraq’s Kurdistan, with which it conveniently shares a border. It is then refined and sold to Turkey. Though no corporations are explicitly involved, the deal between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds [was brokered by](#) unnamed “oil experts” and “oil investors.” The Kurds in Syria and Iraq did not even sign the agreement in person. They were subsequently “informed” and instructed to supervise the operation.

A source in Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) [told NOW News](#) that

“with regard to southern Kurdistan, it was a company and not the KRG that signed the deal, and it is [the company] that directly hands over the sums in cash every month.”

Given that over 80 foreign companies are involved in the KRG’s oil trade, most of them based in the U.S., we can safely assume that many of the same players have also been involved in developing the oil trade of Syria’s Kurdistan.

Non-oil assets of Syrian Kurdistan also tempt corporations and governments



Kurdish Fighters take positions at the top of Mount Annan overlooking the Tishrin dam, after they captured it from ISIS militants, south of Kobani, Syria December 27, 2015. (Photo: Rodi Said)

In addition to oil, the “Kurdistan” of Syria also includes much of Syria’s freshwater, including its three largest reservoirs, as well as much of its electricity (hydropower via Tabqa) and its agricultural resources. The growth of Syria’s Kurdistan also has major implications for one of Syria’s other key assets: its location. In 2013, [The New York Times noted](#) that “Syria’s prime location and muscle make it the strategic center of the Middle East.”

Syria’s strategic location makes it [crucial to the regional flow](#) of hydrocarbons. Having the northern section of Syria — and potentially the eastern as well, if the U.S. gets its way — under the control of a U.S. ally could have a profound effect on [future and existing pipelines](#). Notably, it would complicate the land route between Syria and Iran, Syria’s staunchest regional ally and long-time foe of the U.S. and Israel — a scenario [highlighted by U.S.-based intelligence firm Stratfor](#) back in 2002.

[The words](#) of late journalist and historian Patrick Seale – “Whoever would lead the Middle East must control Syria” – ring true for the U.S. government now more than ever. With internal reports warning of [the U.S.’ waning position](#) as the “world’s only superpower,” the division of Iraq and Syria is essential to Washington’s designs to maintain its influence, as well as the influence of the corporate powers it protects.

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