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International Recognition vs. Domestic Viability: Applying Coggins's Recognition - Coordination Model to the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish Referendum

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ABSTRACT
On 25 September 2017, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq held an independence referendum that delivered an overwhelming "Yes" vote yet produced neither recognition nor statehood. Why did a high-mobilization secession bid by an entity with long-standing de facto autonomy fail so quickly? This article tests Bridget Coggins's recognition–coordination model against domestic "viability" explanations centered on elite incentives, institutional cohesion, and political economy. It argues that the binding constraint on Kurdish state emergence was international admission: pivotal states and regional powers coordinated around Iraq's territorial integrity, preventing any recognition cascade. Domestic viability nonetheless conditioned both the referendum's strategy and its aftermath. Intra-elite rivalry, contested institutional legitimacy, party-segmented coercive authority, and rentier fiscal vulnerability reduced bargaining leverage and amplified external perceptions of risk, reinforcing coordinated non-recognition. Integrating admission and viability, the article shows how referendums can generate strong democratic signals yet fail when recognition thresholds are high and regional veto players can impose rapid costs. It contributes to comparative secession scholarship by specifying how domestic governance signals interact with external coordination to foreclose state emergence in regionally constrained settings.

KEYWORDS
Iraqi Kurdistan; independence referendum (2017); secession; international recognition; de facto statehood; political economy; state emergence.

INTRODUCTION

The 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum presents a central controversy in the study of secession: can a referendum that produces overwhelming domestic support generate statehood when international recognition is absent? This article argues that it cannot. Although the referendum demonstrated a strong Kurdish democratic mandate, it failed as a state-making project because pivotal international actors coordinated around Iraq's territorial integrity and prevented the emergence of a recognition cascade. Domestic viability also mattered, but not as an alternative explanation to recognition. Rather, internal political and economic vulnerabilities shaped the referendum's timing, credibility, and aftermath. The article, therefore, examines the referendum as a case in which domestic mobilization, regional opposition, and international admission politics intersected.

On 25 September 2017, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) held an independence referendum in which an overwhelming majority voted "Yes." The vote did not, however, produce Kurdish statehood. Instead, it was followed by a rapid political and territorial reversal that left the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) weaker vis-à-vis Baghdad than it had been during the referendum campaign. The literature converges on two basic findings of the episode: the referendum proceeded without meaningful international backing, and Baghdad responded by reasserting federal authority, including reversing Kurdish gains in disputed territories (Palani & Fazil, 2023; Salam, 2025). The puzzle, therefore, is not whether Iraqi Kurdish nationalism existed or whether the KRI had accumulated state-like institutions, but why a high-mobilization secession bid failed to deliver the outcome that ultimately matters for independence: internationally recognized statehood.

This article addresses that puzzle by applying Bridget Coggins's recognition–coordination model to the 2017 referendum rather than domestic viability accounts rooted in internal political incentives, institutional cohesion, and political economy (Coggins, 2011, 2014). Coggins's central claim is that statehood is constituted through external legitimacy: independence depends not only on internal capacity, but also on whether existing states are willing to treat a claim as legitimate and, crucially, whether they can coordinate around that judgment. A secessionist project may be administratively credible — capable of governing territory, sustaining institutions, and mobilizing public support — yet still fail if it cannot secure a decisive external signal that others follow. The model is especially useful for analyzing referendums because it distinguishes democratic authorization from international admission. A referendum may express a population's preference for independence, but it does not by itself create statehood unless external actors convert that claim into recognized sovereignty.

The Iraqi Kurdish referendum is therefore a demanding test for domestic-centered narratives. The KRI had long exhibited extensive de facto autonomy, maintained armed forces through the Peshmerga, developed governing institutions, and sustained international engagement. However, the referendum did not generate coordinated external legitimacy. The analytical question is therefore which mechanism proved decisive in 2017: domestic viability or

the international admission barrier? The argument here is that international admission was the binding constraint. Domestic viability did not disappear from the explanation. However, it operated mainly by shaping the credibility of the Kurdish bid, the timing of the referendum, and the KRG's ability to withstand the consequences of non-recognition.

The case matters beyond Kurdish politics because it highlights the continuing force of territorial integrity norms and the practical significance of regional veto dynamics in the Middle East. A Kurdish bid for statehood implicates not only Erbil and Baghdad but also neighboring states and the wider international system. The KRI's geography intensifies this interdependence. As a landlocked polity, it has trade corridors, pipelines, and routes to external markets that are vulnerable to disruption by neighbors and to leverage by Baghdad (Natali, 2010, pp. 140–163). Scholarship on the political economy of Kurdish nationalism has long underscored the contradiction between aspirations for independence and dependence on external routes, markets, and, at various times, federal transfers (Sumer & Joseph, 2018, pp. 574–588). In 2017, the referendum therefore functioned as both a domestic mobilization event and a regional order problem, testing the limits of de facto autonomy under conditions in which external actors could coordinate opposition and impose costs.

Existing research offers strong explanations for why the referendum occurred when it did and why the Kurdish position proved fragile. Timing-centered accounts emphasize intra-Kurdish party competition, perceptions of increased leverage after the war against ISIS, and acute fiscal pressures linked to oil and budget disputes, together producing a perceived window of opportunity (Palani, 2019). Other work stresses elite incentives and domestic crisis, arguing that the referendum served partisan competition and, in some interpretations, regime survival by redirecting attention from economic hardship and institutional deadlock (Degli Esposti, 2021). These arguments are indispensable for explaining timing and elite choice. However, they often treat the international environment as a background condition rather than as the admission mechanism that determines whether de facto autonomy can become de jure statehood. This article builds on those domestic accounts but repositions them within a recognition-centered explanation.

The aftermath makes the international dimension analytically unavoidable. The referendum did not trigger the external endorsement needed to convert a domestic mandate into statehood. The United States prioritized Iraq's territorial integrity; neighboring powers, especially Iran and Turkey, opposed Kurdish independence; and Baghdad leveraged these alignments to impose isolation measures and roll back Kurdish control in disputed areas, including Kirkuk. The sequence of restrictions, territorial reversals, and the KRG's eventual freezing of the referendum outcome is consistent with the logic of recognition and coordination: secession succeeds not when mobilization culminates in a referendum, but when pivotal states shift, and a wider pattern of acceptance begins (Palani & Fazil, 2023; Salam, 2025).

Accordingly, the article advances a two-level argument with a clear hierarchy of causal weight. International admission operated as the decisive constraint on Kurdish statehood in

2017: no recognition cascade emerged among pivotal states. Domestic viability is incorporated as a conditioning explanation rather than a substitute. Fragmentation, institutional crisis, and economic dependence mattered because they shaped the referendum's timing and design, weakened Kurdish bargaining leverage, and increased the perceived risks and costs for external actors of recognizing a new Kurdish state. The contribution is to show that domestic dynamics help explain why the referendum occurred and why the Kurdish position proved vulnerable, while the transition from de facto autonomy to de jure statehood hinged on recognition and coordination.

The article proceeds in five steps. First, it establishes the central claim that the failure of the 2017 referendum is best explained through the absence of coordinated international recognition rather than through domestic weakness alone. Second, it develops the theoretical basis of this claim by engaging Coggins's recognition–coordination model and the literature on de facto statehood, secession, and domestic viability. Third, it examines the international response to the referendum, showing how major powers, regional actors, and international institutions converged around Iraq's territorial integrity and prevented a recognition cascade. Fourth, it analyzes the domestic conditions that shaped the referendum's timing, credibility, and aftermath, including intra-Kurdish rivalry, institutional fragility, coercive fragmentation, and fiscal vulnerability. Finally, it draws out the broader implications of the Kurdish case for debates on referendum-based secession, international admission, and the limits of de facto statehood under conditions of regional opposition.

Claim

The claim advanced in this article is that international admission constituted the binding constraint on Kurdish state emergence in 2017. The referendum generated a strong democratic signal, but it did not move the Kurdistan Region of Iraq across the recognition threshold required for sovereign statehood. No recognition cascade emerged because pivotal states and regional powers coordinated around Iraq's territorial integrity.

This claim does not treat domestic viability as irrelevant. Internal political and economic vulnerabilities shaped the referendum's timing, credibility, bargaining leverage, and aftermath. However, those vulnerabilities worked mainly as conditioning factors: they amplified external perceptions of risk and reduced the KRG's capacity to withstand counter-secession once recognition failed to materialize.

The claim rests on three propositions. First, a referendum cannot produce statehood without movement toward the recognition threshold. In the absence of a Great Power focal recognizer, other states will tend to uphold the parent state's authority, and coordinated non-recognition will preserve the status quo. Second, where Great Powers share concerns about system stability, they will coordinate to discourage unilateral secession and prevent a recognition cascade. This aligns with recent arguments about conservative territorial norms and the geopolitics of recognition in transitional orders (Newman & Visoka, 2023). Third, domestic viability deficits such as elite disunity, fiscal vulnerability, and contested territories do not, on

their own, cause failure. They operate by enabling effective counter-secession and by strengthening external incentives to withhold recognition because admission appears likely to increase instability (Coggins, 2011, pp. 452–453; Coggins, 2014, p. 54).

Reason

The reason for privileging recognition over domestic viability is that state emergence depends on admission into an already constituted international society. A secessionist polity may display administrative capacity, democratic mobilization, territorial control, and foreign engagement, but these attributes do not become sovereign statehood unless existing states treat the claim as legitimate and coordinate recognition around it.

This study treats the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) 2017 independence referendum as a hard case for theories of secession (O'Driscoll & Baser, 2019). The episode brought together features often associated with credible state projects, including territorial control, substantial coercive capacity through the Peshmerga, and long-running de facto self-rule. However, it ended in a rapid reversal once the bid met overwhelming external rejection and punitive countermeasures (Sumer & Joseph, 2018). Secession, therefore, involves two linked problems. One is an external "admission" problem, meaning recognition and the coordination of recognition decisions. The other is an internal "viability" problem, meaning the ability to sustain authoritative rule and collective action under pressure (Coggins, 2014). To capture that interaction, the paper centers Coggins's recognition–coordination account and draws on de facto state and secession research to operationalize domestic viability for process tracing. In the post-1945 order, state birth is treated here as an outcome of recognition politics as much as internal capacity (Kyris, 2022; Newman & Visoka, 2023).

A first step is clarifying what counts as success or failure in secessionist politics. Legal and institutional accounts commonly begin from the Montevideo Convention criteria, namely a permanent population, a defined territory, an effective government, and the capacity to enter relations with other states (Crawford, 2006, p. 112). However, Montevideo-style attributes do not secure admission. Recognition practice is decentralized, conservative toward territorial change, and shaped by geopolitical contestation. Recognition can also vary in degree over time, and decisions are often conditioned by stability, precedent, and non-intervention concerns (Hasar, 2025; Kyris, 2022; Newman & Visoka, 2023). This distinction is central to the Kurdish case because the 2017 referendum produced a strong expression of popular will but failed to secure the external recognition required for statehood.

The de facto state literature captures the gap between capacity and admission by focusing on polities that exhibit extensive empirical state capacities yet remain blocked from broad recognition (Palani et al., 2021a). Pegg's core insight is that such entities may hold territory and administer governance while lacking the external status that converts control into membership (Pegg, 2019). Caspersen shows that prolonged non-recognition reshapes internal trajectories, often privileging security imperatives and regime consolidation (Caspersen, 2012). For Iraqi Kurdistan, scholarship similarly treats the KRG as a de facto entity that pursues

legitimization strategies through external engagement and resource politics, without breaking the recognition barrier (Alkış & Sever, 2025; Mirhanoglu, 2023). Prior to 2017, the KRI's strategy frequently resembled an "engagement without recognition" posture (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). It deepened external ties and consolidated capacity while treating formal recognition as distant. During 2003–2017, including the campaign against the Islamic State, extensive external interaction still did not translate into recognition support (Palani et al., 2021a), and foreign policy signaling and image-building helped sustain the de facto entity while leaving the recognition constraint intact (Sadoon, 2023).

Coggins's recognition–coordination model provides the article's primary theoretical framework for the referendum. The referendum is not treated here as a self-executing act of state creation, but as a political signal whose success depended on whether external actors recognized it as a sovereign act. Coggins rejects the assumption that "facts on the ground" are sufficient to produce new states, arguing instead that entities emerge as states when they secure external legitimacy through recognition decisions made by existing members of the system, especially Great Powers (Coggins, 2011). Recognition behaves like a threshold process. A critical mass of recognition must be reached before the rights and obligations of statehood take hold in practice (Coggins, 2014). Great Power recognition is disproportionately influential because it functions as a focal point. It signals that recognition is strategically safe, which encourages follow-on recognitions. By contrast, where Great Powers do not converge, recognition tends to stall, preserving the status quo (Coggins, 2011, pp. 452–453). Great Powers also coordinate because overlapping sovereignty claims are destabilizing, and coordination protects system stability and reproduces a state-centric order (Coggins, 2011, pp. 452–453).

Coggins adds two refinements that are particularly relevant to the Kurdish case. Security interests, domestic political concerns, and the stability of the system shape recognition preferences. Domestic characteristics matter largely through outsiders' beliefs about them. Internal factors become politically relevant because system members treat them as signals about the consequences of admission, rather than because they constitute statehood on their own (Coggins, 2014, pp. 8–9). This provides the bridge to domestic viability (Coggins, 2014, p. 224). In Iraq's fragmented governance environment, settlement and institutional dynamics shape how outsiders interpret the risks of recognizing a new state project (Arif, 2025; Leezenberg, 2024; O'Driscoll & Costantini, 2024; Salam, 2025). For this reason, the article does not oppose recognition and viability as mutually exclusive explanations. Instead, it treats recognition as the decisive admission mechanism and domestic viability as a factor that shapes how recognition claims are interpreted.

Recognition-centered explanations can appear to crowd out domestic politics, but the framework here treats viability as the internal side of the same strategic contest. Viability links to admission in three ways. It serves as a signal in recognition politics, it shapes exposure to counter-secession, and it conditions sustained diplomacy. Even where a secessionist polity has coercive capacity, institutional cohesion and economic resilience shape its ability to withstand

coordinated countermeasures by the parent state and neighboring powers (Coggins, 2014, p. 77). After the vote, punitive measures and the retaking of disputed territories converted an aspirational state project into a struggle to preserve prior arrangements, an outcome emphasized in referendum-focused analyses (Alkış & Sever, 2025; Sadoon, 2023). Unrecognized polities may survive through engagement under stigma, but buffers built through informal ties may be non-transferable when recognition is sought (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). Public discourse and stigma around autonomous regions and de facto entities further shape what can be politically converted into recognition (O'Brochta, 2024). The key question, then, is whether KRI engagement in 2014–2017 was deep and politically convertible enough to generate recognitional support once the referendum forced a choice (Sumer & Joseph, 2018).

The literature therefore supports a recognition-centered but domestically attentive reading of the Kurdish case. Recognition remains the decisive admission mechanism, while domestic viability affects how outsiders evaluate the risks of admission and how effectively the claimant can sustain a sovereignty project under pressure.

Evidence

The evidence is organized around the two mechanisms identified above: first, the blocked international admission pathway; second, the domestic-viability constraints that reduced Kurdish resilience after the vote. This evidence shows that the referendum functioned as a powerful expression of Kurdish self-determination but did not become a mechanism of state creation.

International admission: recognition, coordination, and the blocked cascade

The September 2017 independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq can be read as a direct test of Coggins's account of international admission in state formation. In this view, the decisive question is not whether a secessionist polity can display the internal attributes usually associated with statehood, but whether it can cross an externally regulated threshold for admission to the recognized state system (Coggins, 2014). Recognition is therefore not a neutral legal confirmation; it is a gatekeeping practice shaped by power and coordination.

Coggins argues that would-be states do not emerge through declarations, plebiscites, or administrative capacity alone. They must pass a recognition threshold in which external powers, especially major powers, confer legitimacy by extending recognition (Coggins, 2014). Early recognition matters because it reduces uncertainty, establishes momentum, and makes subsequent recognition less costly for subsequent recognizers. If no "prime mover" is prepared to recognize a new state, follow-on recognition becomes unlikely, and statehood stalls regardless of domestic support. This logic applied directly to the Kurdish case. The referendum produced an overwhelming "Yes" vote, yet it encountered a coordinated front of opposition and non-recognition from key external actors. The result was a blocked cascade: no early recognizer appeared, and the international system closed ranks around Iraq's territorial integrity. Recent work shows why: performance and engagement may strengthen claims, yet

they still fail to trigger recognition when admission is framed as a risk to regional order and great-power interests do not align (Alkış & Sever, 2025).

A brief chronology clarifies why this coordination outcome became likely. After 2003, Iraq's federal design left key "final status" issues unresolved, especially the disputed territories covered by Article 140, whose constitutionally mandated deadline expired at the end of 2007 without implementation (Akreyi, 2025). Iraq's post-2003 order remained institutionally incoherent, which repeatedly pushed external actors toward stability-first responses whenever territorial disputes threatened escalation (Dodge, 2024; O'Driscoll & Costantini, 2024). In the KRI, state-building advanced through party-anchored institutions, but patronage and elite bargaining weakened the credibility of centralized decision-making under pressure (Ahmed, 2012; Arif, 2025; Bali, 2018; Sosnowski, 2022). Fiscal tensions sharpened in 2014 when Baghdad cut the KRG's revenue share, and Erbil began exporting oil independently (Akreyi, 2025). During the war against the Islamic State, the KRI strengthened its coercive capacity and deepened security cooperation with external partners. However, this wartime role remained compatible with Iraq's territorial integrity and did not translate into support for sovereign admission in 2017 (Sadoon, 2023).

Coggins's earlier work explains why the external response was decisive. Great powers and other influential states often coordinate to preserve the status quo, and by acting together, they can block the emergence of new states by withholding early recognition cues that might otherwise trigger a cascade (Coggins, 2011). In the Kurdish case, this coordination appeared in a common script before and after the vote: repeated emphasis on Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity, paired with warnings that unilateral secession would be destabilizing during a fragile post-ISIS transition. They signaled the dominant international position and increased the reputational and strategic costs for any state tempted to defect through recognition. Comparative scholarship supports this mechanism: independence referendums can also provoke counter-coordination when key actors read them as destabilizing rather than negotiated (Stockwell, 2025).

The United States, arguably the only actor with sufficient weight to serve as a focal recognizer, closed off the admission channel early. On 20 September 2017, days before the vote, the U.S. State Department declared that it "strongly opposes" the Kurdistan Regional Government's referendum and urged dialogue with Baghdad instead of unilateral action (U.S. Department of State, 2017). After the vote, the position hardened. On 29 September, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that "the United States does not recognize the…unilateral referendum… The vote and the results lack legitimacy", while reaffirming support for "a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq" (Kurdistan24, 2017). Under Coggins's logic, this removed the clearest recognition cue that might have signaled to other states that recognition was strategically safe. Related scholarship supports this point: in unstable international orders, legal criteria are filtered through major-power calculations about risk and regional order (Newman & Visoka, 2023; Tesser, 2026).

The United Nations, especially the Security Council, reinforced this signal in institutional form. On referendum day, Secretary-General António Guterres warned of the "potentially destabilizing effects" of the vote and urged dialogue within Iraq's constitutional framework (United Nations Security Council, 2017a). Earlier, on 21 September, the Security Council had unanimously reaffirmed Iraq's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity, and similarly described the referendum as "potentially destabilizing" and called for disputes to be resolved constitutionally (United Nations Security Council, 2017b). This mattered because it indicated that the system's core security forum would not treat Kurdish independence as a legitimate route to statehood.

The European Union adopted a closely aligned position, further locking in the coordination equilibrium. On 19 September 2017, the EU reaffirmed its "steadfast support for the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq" (European External Action Service, 2017a). After the vote, it again backed a "united, sovereign and federal Iraq" while stressing both the referendum's unilateral character and the inclusion of disputed territories (European External Action Service, 2017b). Kyris's "dynamic sovereignty" helps explain this reaction: recognition is an evolving political practice, so the contraction of support fits coordinated sovereignty management (Kyris, 2022).

Taken together, the U.S., UN, and EU signals produced what Coggins describes as a coordinated equilibrium in which the safest choice for most states is to follow the dominant position rather than experiment with early recognition (Coggins, 2011; Coggins, 2014). The key empirical signature of that equilibrium was not only the absence of recognitions, but the absence of even tentative splitters. No major actor hedged through quasi-recognition or diplomatic upgrades. Instead, influential states repeatedly treated the referendum as outside the acceptable path to statehood and insisted on constitutional dialogue within Iraq. In threshold terms, the Kurdish bid did not approach the critical mass required for statehood rights and obligations to take hold in practice (Coggins, 2014). This makes Coggins's model analytically strong: it predicts blocked admission through the absence of a focal recognizer, shared discouragement language, and permissive space for parent-state countermeasures. One limitation deserves note. Coggins explains the external gate effectively, but the model is less precise in weighing how domestic fragmentation, contested governance, and strategic timing shape the bid's credibility before recognition cues are even tested. In the Kurdish case, external coordination is central, yet it worked partly because the referendum took place in an already fragile institutional and regional environment.

That environment further raised the cost of admission. The inclusion of Kirkuk and other disputed territories sharply increased the stakes. Kirkuk has long been treated as a likely trigger for external intervention and regional contestation, making any move toward independence more threatening to Baghdad and its neighbors (Natali, 2008). The ballot itself reinforced this perception by explicitly including "the Kurdistani areas outside the administration of the Region" and by presenting the question in multiple languages, heightening the salience of territorial

revision and border precedent (Park et al., 2017). The KRI's quasi-state position compounded the risk. As Natali argues, the KRI possessed substantial internal sovereignty but lacked external sovereignty, while remaining landlocked and structurally vulnerable to neighbor veto power (Natali, 2015). Recognition in such conditions would likely trigger pressure through borders, trade, and strategic gateways. Securitization scholarship explains why this veto threats travel so effectively: Kurdish issues are repeatedly framed through security narratives that justify coordinated restraint in the name of regional stability (Mafakheri, 2025). Oil revenue enabled state-like functions, yet it also tied recognition to resource control and conflict in contested hydrocarbon territory (Mirhanoglu, 2023; Sharifi & Majidi, 2025). Once admission was foreclosed, coordinated non-recognition quickly translated into material consequences. Baghdad faced fewer constraints on counter-secession, federal forces reasserted control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas, and the KRG's bargaining position deteriorated until it froze the referendum result (United Nations Security Council, 2017b). The referendum, therefore, failed not simply because recognition did not arrive, but because a broad non-recognition regime consolidated around it. In that sense, the 2017 Kurdish referendum strongly supports Coggins's recognition-coordination model. A referendum may generate a democratic mandate, but where great powers align around territorial integrity, where disputed and resource-rich territories are at stake, and where neighbor-veto threats are credible, the vote becomes a focal point for anti-recognition coordination rather than a path to statehood. The Kurdish case thus shows why admission politics, more than domestic viability alone, explains the gap between a high-mobilization referendum and rapid post-referendum reversal.

Domestic viability: cohesion, institutions, and political economy under pressure

A recognition-coordination account of the 2017 referendum's failure still leaves a decisive question: could the KRI have sustained statehood in practice even under a less hostile external environment? In this paper, domestic viability denotes the internal capacity to (a) maintain a cohesive political settlement across elite blocs and coercive institutions, (b) operate legitimate and effective governance institutions capable of aggregating preferences and enforcing decisions, and (c) reproduce the fiscal and distributive foundations of order under acute stress. Domestic viability does not substitute for international admission; rather, it conditions whether a secessionist polity can endure the consequences of non-recognition long enough to shift bargaining dynamics with the parent state or attract future sponsorship (Salam, 2025).

A referendum can generate an impressive signal of unity without producing durable cohesion once the costs of confrontation materialize. What matters for viability is the resilience of the political settlement: the elite bargains that structure party competition, distribute rents, and organize coercive power. In the KRI, referendum mobilization sat atop a settlement strained by rivalry and contested authority, thereby limiting the capacity for sustained collective action once Baghdad and its neighbors imposed counter-measures (Palani & Fazil, 2023).

The key vulnerability was that the independence vote served multiple political purposes simultaneously. When referendum politics is partly driven by domestic competition (legitimacy

repair, partisan advantage, and coalition repositioning), unity tends to be event-based rather than institutionalized (O'Driscoll & Baser, 2019). This matters because the post-referendum phase demands coordination across parties, ministries, and security forces as the parent state reasserts authority. Where unity is performative, elite blocs can rationally hedge when counter-measures impose uneven burdens across party territories and patronage networks, thereby shortening the horizon of collective action (Degli Esposti, 2021).

A micro–macro lens clarifies why these rivalries were not incidental but structurally destabilizing. In consociational settings, macro-level bargains can appear stable while micro-level intra-communal competition erodes cohesion over time; intra-elite rivalry can therefore weaken the communal bloc's bargaining posture and strategic consistency in national politics (Palani, 2025). Comparative research on North Macedonia similarly shows that consociational power-sharing may accommodate group demands while persistent ethno-national polarization continues to challenge social and institutional cohesion (Bigagli, 2021). This applies directly to Kurdish politics, where periods of strong inter-party coordination produced a more coherent Kurdish position in Baghdad, while heightened rivalry weakened collective leverage and coordination capacity (Palani, 2025). In a secession attempt launched without secure prospects for admission, micro-level fragmentation directly constrains viability.

Timing compounded this cohesion problem. Wartime mobilization against the Islamic State temporarily elevated the Kurdish military's status and international visibility, fostering perceptions of leverage. At the same time, internal party dynamics and resource calculations shaped the referendum as a bargaining instrument rather than a sequenced transition plan (Mustafa, 2021). The viability implication is that the referendum emerged when the settlement was already under pressure, increasing the likelihood that the costs of confrontation would translate into internal political fracture rather than sustained strategic discipline.

Viable statehood requires institutions that bind actors through rules rather than through factional enforcement. Even where administrative capacity exists, institutional legitimacy is essential in crises because it underpins compliance, resource mobilization, and credible commitments. The referendum occurred after a prolonged institutional conflict over executive authority and parliamentary oversight, which weakened the credibility of decision-making structures precisely when the independence project required unified, rule-bound governance (Hama, 2020).

The institutional weakness was not merely procedural. When representative institutions are suspended or hollowed out, sovereignty claims become easier to contest domestically (as elite projects) and harder to defend externally (as claims grounded in superior governance). This linkage is explicit in the referendum's recognition-strategy literature, which notes that the KRI's parliament was effectively deactivated until shortly before the vote, undermining democratization-based legitimation narratives deployed to support independence (Palani et al., 2021b). In other words, the KRI attempted to project statehood credentials while core oversight institutions were impaired.

A governance-centered conception of sovereignty helps clarify why this damaged viability. If sovereignty is treated not simply as a legal label but as governmentality (credible, legitimate governance relationships), then institutional fragility is a direct constraint on viability rather than an ancillary flaw (Salam, 2025). The relevance for 2017 is straightforward: without broadly legitimate institutions, the KRI's leadership would have struggled to sustain compliance and coordinate sacrifice under pressure even if the external environment had been less hostile.

This institutional pattern aligns with structural accounts of regime dynamics. Non-democratic rule persists where elites have incentives to monopolize revenue sources and the economy, while external actors often prioritize stability and security over pressure for democratization (Hama & Mamshai, 2025). These dynamics matter because legitimacy deficits become embedded in political survival strategies. When a sovereignty project is launched from within a system in which elites perceive democratic consolidation as threatening, state capacity can coexist with political illegitimacy – reducing both domestic consensus and the credibility of statehood claims.

Even cohesive institutions falter if the fiscal base collapses. The interaction of rentier dependence, fiscal conflict with Baghdad, and external constraints on trade and export routes undermined the KRI's domestic viability. These dynamics were rooted in the political economy of post-1991 autonomy, where aid and reconstruction strengthened Kurdish leverage while simultaneously generating complex interdependencies and negotiation requirements with Baghdad (Natali, 2007). The importance of this baseline is that autonomy expanded alongside dependence relationships that could be leveraged during crises.

The mid-2010s fiscal rupture converted these structural vulnerabilities into acute political stress. Budget disputes and contested oil governance reduced predictable revenue flows, while oil price collapse and war burdens compressed rents and weakened the distributive basis of legitimacy (Rafaat, 2018). Under such conditions, nationalist mobilization could provide a short-term rally, yet it could not substitute for fiscal resilience. When public finances deteriorate, viability problems multiply: salary arrears and austerity intensify protest cycles, while coercive responses further erode legitimacy and widen elite–society gaps (Degli Esposti, 2021).

Oil functions as a double-edged instrument: it can finance state-like functions and attract external engagement, but it can also reinforce rentier governance, weaken accountability, and shift political attention toward external leverage strategies at the expense of institution-building (Mirhanoglu, 2023). This "oil or state" tension is especially relevant to domestic viability: oil may help project statehood externally while simultaneously deepening internal pathologies (patronage, opacity, and party capture) that reduce resilience under pressure (Mirhanoglu, 2023).

External energy finance illustrates the same logic. Large-scale deals and pre-financing arrangements may alleviate immediate fiscal pressures, but they can also entrench dependencies and debt exposure, narrowing policy autonomy when confrontation costs rise

(Kaválek & Sommer, 2019). For viability, the relevant mechanism is not "foreign investment" per se, but how fiscal distress incentivizes elites to rely on externally anchored rents as substitutes for building rule-bound revenue systems and credible fiscal institutions.

The referendum thereby exposed a structural paradox: the KRI's economic livelihood depends heavily on stable relations with neighbors and Baghdad, yet those same actors oppose secession and can impose punitive measures. Under such conditions, retaliation is not merely symbolic; it is economically effective and translates quickly into domestic political costs that weaken cohesion and institutional compliance (Sumer & Joseph, 2018).

A viable sovereign project requires credible internal enforcement in the event of confrontation with the parent state. However, state-building in the KRI has remained "fluid" and sensitive to external alignments, with the balance of power between Erbil and Baghdad shifting in tandem with international support (Palani & Fazil, 2023). When external backing weakens, domestic viability depends even more heavily on internal cohesion and unified coercive capacity. Fragmentation of coercive institutions becomes a systemic constraint: leadership cannot reliably guarantee unified compliance, internal actors can hedge, and the costs of confrontation are distributed unevenly – thereby feeding rivalry rather than consolidating national cohesion (Degli Esposti, 2021).

Domestic viability includes the capacity to manage relations with Baghdad as an internal political project. Engagement strategies are politicized choices shaped by intra-Kurdish rivalry, with parties alternately framing Baghdad as an existential threat or bargaining partner depending on domestic competition (Palani et al., 2021a). After the referendum, prospects for pragmatic engagement improved as independence ceased to be an official priority. However, a unified engagement strategy remained constrained by internal divisions and partisan portrayals of the federal government. This matters because a failed bid for admission typically forces rapid accommodation to stabilize revenues and administrative authority; when accommodation undermines nationalist legitimacy, it can destabilize the coalition needed to implement it.

A consistent viability diagnosis emerges once these mechanisms are integrated. The referendum was initiated amid internal political competition, contested institutional authority, and a rentier political economy under stress, while governance incentives encouraged illiberal consolidation and reliance on revenue monopolies. These conditions did not cause the international admission barrier identified in the previous section. However, they constrained the KRI's ability to withstand the consequences of non-recognition: they reduced collective discipline, weakened the legitimacy of a costly strategy, amplified vulnerability to fiscal coercion, and made sustained bargaining under pressure difficult.

DISCUSSION

This article set out to explain why the Iraqi Kurdish bid for independence in 2017 produced a clear plebiscitary mandate yet failed to translate into the emergence of a state. The analysis has treated this outcome as a two-level problem: international admission (recognition and

coordination) and domestic viability (cohesion, institutions, and political economy). The empirical record is consistent with the paper's central claim: the referendum's defeat cannot be reduced either to external vetoes alone or to internal weaknesses alone. Rather, the referendum exposed how blocked admission and strained viability interact (each amplifying the other) under the strategic conditions that Bridget Coggins's framework anticipates for unsuccessful secessionist outcomes. The discussion, therefore, evaluates the referendum through two connected dimensions. The first is international recognition: whether the referendum moved the KRI closer to admission into the international state system. The second is the domestic dimension: whether the referendum was supported by the internal political cohesion, institutional legitimacy, fiscal resilience, and collective values needed to sustain a sovereignty claim under pressure. Evaluating the referendum across both dimensions shows that its failure was neither purely diplomatic nor purely domestic. It was produced by the interaction between an externally closed recognition pathway and internally fragile conditions of political authority.

The admission-side findings indicated a coordination equilibrium among key external actors that prevented any recognition cascade. In Coggins's terms, secessionist outcomes turn not simply on local preferences or battlefield results, but on whether powerful states admit a claimant into the international system; recognition decisions are strategic, path-dependent, and responsive to signals from other influential actors. In 2017, the KRG confronted a recognition environment in which major powers and neighboring states shared strong incentives to prioritize Iraq's territorial integrity, to discourage precedent-setting secessionism, and to contain regional escalation. The referendum, therefore, confronted a high recognition threshold, and no actor was willing to bear the first-mover costs that could have initiated an admission cascade.

What the paper adds beyond a familiar "external opposition" narrative is that domestic viability constraints made the admission barrier easier to sustain. This matters because, within Coggins's approach, recognition decisions are not purely legalistic; they are strategic choices embedded in expectations about the consequences of admission. The KRI's internal situation offered external actors a ready repertoire of risk arguments – political polarization, contested authority, rentier fragility, and security-sector segmentation – that lowered the reputational and strategic costs of coordinated non-recognition. Even where external actors valued the KRI as a security partner, they could interpret the referendum as a destabilizing initiative undertaken under adverse governance conditions, thereby reinforcing a preference for "engagement without recognition". The domestic-viability findings help specify the internal mechanisms that constrained endurance under non-recognition. First, cohesion depended on a political settlement that was not fully institutionalized and was under strain from intra-elite rivalry; referendum unity was real but short-horizon, and it did not guarantee sustained coordination once the confrontation phase began. Secondly, institutional legitimacy was weakened by the mid-2010s constitutional and parliamentary crisis, eroding the credibility of

binding decisions precisely when a sovereignty project requires rule-bound authority. Thirdly, the political economy was structurally vulnerable: oil dependence, fiscal conflict with Baghdad, and reliance on external trade and export routes created a setting in which retaliation was economically effective and quickly translated into domestic political costs. The referendum thus became a viability stress test that the KRG was not well positioned to pass, particularly because the admission pathway was closed.

The interaction between international recognition and domestic viability is the article's main analytical contribution. Under conditions of blocked admission, viability becomes more salient not because recognition is unnecessary, but because the secessionist movement must survive long enough to shift external incentives or to renegotiate a more favorable settlement with the parent state. In the KRI case, the consequences of non-recognition – territorial setbacks, economic coercion, and political fallout – intensified existing vulnerabilities and shortened the horizon for sustained mobilization. This explains why the referendum's symbolic mandate did not produce a durable sovereignty campaign: a "yes" vote could not substitute for the external admission needed to convert de facto autonomy into sovereign statehood, and internal constraints reduced the KRG's capacity to absorb the costs of that missing admission.

The paper also speaks to a wider debate in secession and de facto state scholarship about whether a polity can "build its way" into recognition through performance and state-like governance. While the KRI demonstrates impressive elements of de facto statehood, the referendum episode suggests limits to performance-based pathways when the external environment is coordinated against admission. At the same time, the analysis supports governance-centered arguments that sovereignty claims are more credible when underpinned by demonstrable institutional legitimacy and accountable governance. This is not a claim that democratization mechanically produces recognition; rather, it is that the quality of governance shapes both internal endurance and external risk assessments. Comparative evidence from Afghanistan likewise highlights the relationship between political legitimacy, ethnic power structures, and preferences for centralized or decentralized governance in deeply divided societies (Ahmadi & Hikmat, 2023). In this sense, the KRI case aligns with a "reversed sovereignty" intuition: recognition is not merely a reward for administrative capacity; it is also an external judgment about political sustainability and the expected costs of admission.

The referendum also illustrates the difference between domestic democratic legitimacy and internationally recognized sovereignty. Domestically, the vote expressed Kurdish aspirations for self-determination, collective identity, and political dignity. These values gave the referendum symbolic and mobilizing power. Recent research from Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok further highlights the importance attached to civic engagement, social awareness, and the capacity to navigate diversity within the contemporary educational context of Iraqi Kurdistan (Qolamani et al., 2025). Internationally, however, those values did not override the strategic calculations of states committed to Iraq's territorial integrity and regional stability. This distinction is central to the case: the referendum succeeded as an expression of domestic

political values, but failed as a mechanism of state creation. The gap between these two outcomes explains why the vote produced a powerful mandate without producing recognized independence. Several implications follow for interpreting the 2017 referendum specifically. First, treating the referendum as a single miscalculation overlooks the logic of timing and internal incentives. Party competition, legitimacy repair, and perceptions of wartime opportunity shaped the referendum as a strategic move even though independence was not readily attainable. Secondly, focusing exclusively on international opposition risks missing how domestic strains (fiscal crisis, governance disputes, and security fragmentation) limited the KRG's ability to impose costs on Baghdad or to sustain a prolonged bargaining strategy. Thirdly, a narrow "recognition failure" framing underestimates the extent to which post-referendum outcomes pushed Kurdish politics towards re-engagement with Baghdad, in line with patterns observed in de facto entities, where survival often depends on pragmatic accommodation once recognition is foreclosed.

The study has limits that also point to future research. The article has focused on a single critical episode and has treated the referendum as a test case for recognition–coordination logic. A broader comparative design (contrasting the KRI with other recent failed bids (for example, Catalonia) or with cases of partial admission) could further specify which domestic-viability signals most strongly affect recognition coordination. A second extension would disaggregate "external actors" more systematically, tracing how recognition positions were produced across bureaucratic agencies and how they responded to domestic signals from the KRI. A third extension would deepen the micro-level analysis of the political settlement by examining how party-controlled security and fiscal networks shaped strategic decision-making under pressure – especially in disputed territories where local administrative legitimacy and coercive capacity intersect.

CONCLUSION

The 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum offers a significant case for understanding the limits of referendum-based secession under conditions of adverse international admission. The vote generated a strong expression of Kurdish national aspiration and demonstrated the political salience of self-determination within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. However, it did not produce the decisive external recognition required to transform de facto autonomy into internationally accepted statehood. The referendum therefore illustrates the distinction between domestic democratic authorization and international admission: a popular mandate may strengthen a claim to independence, but it does not by itself create sovereign statehood.

This article has argued that the decisive constraint on Kurdish state emergence in 2017 was the absence of coordinated international recognition. Pivotal external actors, including major powers, regional states, and international institutions, converged around the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity. This convergence prevented the emergence of a recognition cascade and denied the KRG the external legitimacy necessary for admission into the international

system. In this respect, the Kurdish case supports Coggins's recognition–coordination model: statehood depends not only on internal capacity or popular will, but also on whether existing states are willing to coordinate around the legitimacy of a new sovereign claim.

At the same time, domestic viability shaped the referendum's trajectory and aftermath. The KRI possessed important features of de facto statehood, including governing institutions, territorial administration, coercive capacity, and extensive external engagement. Yet these assets were constrained by intra-Kurdish rivalry, contested institutional legitimacy, party-segmented coercive authority, fiscal vulnerability, and dependence on external trade and export routes. These internal weaknesses did not independently determine the failure of the referendum, but they reduced the KRG's bargaining leverage and made the costs of non-recognition more severe. Once Baghdad and neighboring states imposed political, territorial, and economic pressure, the KRG's capacity to sustain a prolonged sovereignty campaign was sharply limited.

The interaction between international admission and domestic viability is therefore central to the referendum's failure. Coordinated non-recognition closed the external pathway to statehood, while domestic vulnerabilities weakened the KRI's ability to withstand the consequences of that closure. The referendum became not a transition to independence, but a stress test of the KRI's political cohesion, institutional resilience, and economic endurance. Its aftermath showed that a sovereignty claim unsupported by external recognition and insufficiently grounded in internal resilience can expose a de facto polity to rapid reversal.

The broader implication is that referenda are powerful but risky instruments in secessionist politics. They can clarify collective preferences, mobilize nationalist legitimacy, and strengthen bargaining claims. However, when held under conditions of strong regional opposition and high recognition thresholds, they may also harden external resistance and invite countermeasures from the parent state and neighboring powers. For secessionist movements, democratic authorization must therefore be matched by a credible strategy for international admission and by domestic institutions capable of sustaining political, fiscal, and coercive pressure.

The Iraqi Kurdish referendum of 2017 demonstrates this lesson with particular clarity. It produced a compelling democratic signal, but the international gate to statehood remained closed, and domestic viability constraints prevented the KRI from sustaining the prolonged contest that might have altered the outcome. The case shows that self-determination and collective identity, while politically meaningful, require institutional strength, economic resilience, cohesive authority, and favorable diplomatic conditions to be converted into recognized statehood. Without these conditions, a referendum may leave a secessionist polity not closer to sovereignty, but weaker, more dependent, and more internally divided after confrontation.

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