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Building brand Kurdistan: Helly Luv, the gender of nationhood, and the War on Terror

Nicholas S. Glastonbury [‡]

Abstract

In the early 2000s, the Kurdistan Regional Government hired a US-based firm to begin a public relations campaign called “The Other Iraq.” Since that time, it has worked with a number of PR and lobbying firms to build a cultural, political, and financial apparatus that I refer to as Brand Kurdistan. This apparatus aims to prove to Western audiences that the Kurds are a liberal exception in an illiberal Middle East, and to build prospects of KRG’s eventual national independence. This article explores the connections between Brand Kurdistan and the gendering of Kurdish nationalism, focusing particularly on Kurdish pop diva Helly Luv. In her music, Luv underscores the trope of the “badass” Kurdish woman in the service of Brand Kurdistan’s political and economic projects. Thus, Brand Kurdistan and Helly Luv mutually reproduce the binary world discourse of the war on terror, a discourse aligned with neoconservative American war making and exertions of US empire.

Keywords: Gender; nation branding; pop music; war on terror; Iraqi Kurdistan.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

Çêkirina Marka Kurdistanê: Helly Luv, cinsiyeta netewetiyê, û Şerê li Dijî Terorê

Serê salên 2000an, Hikûmeta Herêma ya Kurdistanê (HHK) şirketeke amerîkî girt da ku helmeteke danenasîna giştî bi navê “Iraqa Din” bi rê ve bibe. Ji hingê ve, hikûmetê ligel çendîn şirketên têkiliyên cewawerî û lobiyê kar kiriye ku mîkanîzmeke çandî, siyasî û darayî ava bike, ya ku ez wek “Marka Kurdistanê” bi nav dikim. Ev mîkanîzm armanc dike ku li cewawerên Rojavayî biçêspîne ku Kurd istisnayeke liberal in di Rojhilata Navîn a dût ji liberaliyê de, û wisa jî derfet û şansên serbixweyîya neteweyî ya HHKyê bilindtir bike. Ev meqale li têkiliyên di navbera Marka Kurdistanê û bi cinsiyetkirina netewegeriya kurdî dikole, û ji bo vê yekê li ser Helly Luv stranbêja kurd hûr dibe. Luv di muzîka xwe de balê dikêşe ser tîmaya jinên Kurdistanê yê “neguhdar/asî” di xizmeta projeyên siyasî û aborî yê Marka Kurdistanê de. Wisa jî, Marka Kurdistanê û Helly Luv bi awayekî mûteqabil dîskûra duserî ya şerê li dijî terorê vesaz dikin, dîskûrek ku hevterîb e ligel şerkeriya muhafîzekariya nû ya amerîkî û hewlên împeratoriya Dewletên Yekbûyî yê Amerîkayê.

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ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Dirûstkirinî Brand Kurdistan: Helly Luv, cênderî neteweyatî w Şerrî Dij Be Têror

Le seretay salanî 2000, Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan şerîkeyekî emrîkîy girt bo berêwêbirdinî hellmetêkî pêwendîye cemawerîyekan be nawî "Êraqî Dike". Lew katewe, hikûmet legell çendîn şerîkeyî pêwendîye cemawerîyekan û lobî karî kirdûwe bo dirûstkirinî amrazêkî kultûrî, siyasî û darayî, ke min nawî denê "Brand Kurdistan". Em amraze amanciyetî le cemawerekanî rojavayî biçespênê ke kurd nimûneyekî yektay komelgay lîberal in le Rojhellaî Nawerastî dîr le lîberalî, û bem şêweye beqay Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan bo bedesthênanî serbexoyîy neteweyî ziyatîr bikat. Em wutare sebarete pêwendîyekanî nêwan Brand Kurdistan û becênderkirinî netewegerrîy kurdî ye, be taybetîş çaw le Helly Luvî dîvay popî kurd dekat. Le mosîqayekey da Luv têmeay jînî kurdî "yaxî" le xizmet projekanî siyasî û aborîy Brand Kurdistan da dexate pêş. Bem şêweye, Brand Kurdistan û Helly Luv pêkewe ew dîskûrî çihanî duberekîy le ser şerrî dij be terror serlenwê dirûst dekan, dîskûrêk ke hawterîbe legell şerrkerîy muhafîzekarekanî nwêy emrîka û hewllekanî împeretoriy Dewlete Yekgirtûyekanî Emrîka.

Introduction

The music video for Helly Luv's 2015 pop anthem "Revolution" begins, innocuously enough, in "a village somewhere in Kurdistan". Children laugh and play as they make their way to school; men sit around tables chatting, drinking tea and playing backgammon; women buy vegetables at roadside stands. Suddenly, though, the ground begins to rumble, and a bomb explodes in a building nearby, plunging the village into chaos. Amid the smoke and scorched earth, as bodies fly and children weep, tanks ride into town, mounted by Islamic State military forces, firing into the fleeing crowds. The video shifts to a shot along the ground, and we see the feet of those fleeing the Islamic State. But walking in the opposite direction, towards the tanks, a pair of golden high heels appears in the frame, accompanied by the rising sound of a chamber choir: it is Helly Luv, her ankles adorned with gold bangles. In the next shot, we are behind her mysterious figure, dressed in a black jumpsuit, her head covered by a red and white *keffiyeh*, a scarf that indexes political resistance, walking towards the tanks. People in the crowd stop to look at her in awe and admiration. Finally, in the next frame, we see her face, mostly covered by the red *keffiyeh*, save her eyes, forehead, and some of her "Rihanna-red" hair (Al-Nasrawi, 2015); a golden chain runs across her forehead; two black *keffiyehs* are tied around her chest like a pair of cartridge belts. Her hands, covered in an elaborate henna pattern, are spangled with golden rings and bracelets made of gold bullets. Striding confidently up to the tank's turret, she lifts up a banner that reads, in English, "STOP THE VIOLENCE." She tosses it aside and pulls off the red *keffiyeh* as the screen goes black and the beat drops. Garbed in guerrilla couture, Helly Luv spends the rest of this seven-minute-long video leading the people of this village in a musical insurrection against ISIS, under the banner of Kurdish emancipation and revolution.

In this article, I want to explore the media world inhabited by Helly Luv, both within Iraqi Kurdistan and transnationally. I am interested not only in

tracing the discourse of social and political liberation embedded in this music, but also in understanding Helly Luv, along with the trope of the “badass” Kurdish women fighting for Kurdish liberation, against the political and cultural landscape of gender and womanhood in Iraqi Kurdistan. What are the gendered discourses that underpin the idea of the Kurdish nation, and how do these discourses circulate globally? What kinds of work does pop music do in the service of these global circuits of representation? What political and cultural projects are Kurdish pop divas like Helly Luv involved in, and how do such projects come to bear upon larger notions of nationhood, nationalism, and futurity in Iraqi Kurdistan?

I begin this article by exploring the connections between gender, womanhood, and nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan. Scholars across the Middle East (and around the world) have critically analysed the gendered construction of nationalism, the normative concepts of gender and sexuality implicit in the nation, and the ways in which the nation is represented through and as woman (Delaney, 1995; Danielson, 1997; Najmabadi, 1997, 2005; Göçek, 2002; Baron, 2005; Çağlayan, 2007; Ahmadzadeh, 2008). This literature highlights not only the ways in which modern nation-states and nationalism are produced in gendered ways, but also the ways in which women’s political cultures become transformed through the growing hegemony of nationalism as a political idiom. Attending to these questions in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan is particularly instructive because, unlike many of the case studies in the aforementioned literature, which take place mostly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it represents a fecund site to consider how gender and nationalism intersect in the present world-historical moment animated by financialised capitalism and the global war on terror (King, 2008, 2013; Hague, Gill, and Begikhani, 2012; Hardi, 2013; Alinia, 2013; Buffon and Allison, 2016; Toivanen and Başer, 2016).

From here I move into my discussion of “nation branding” and the emergence of what I call Brand Kurdistan. As Melissa Aronczyk (2013) writes in her study of the phenomenon, nation branding “is seen as a way to help a nation articulate a more coherent and cohesive national identity, to animate the spirit of its citizens in the service of national priorities, and to maintain loyalty to the territory within its borders” (p. 3). At the same time, it represents a means of reifying national culture as a singular, monetisable, marketable commodity. As such, nation branding serves the crucial purposes of globalising the nation as a discrete entity while also vesting national populations with a fixed repertoire of Kurdish culture and heritage. While nation branding is predominantly pursued by nation-states, I argue that Iraqi Kurdistan has engaged in nation-branding because it is the emergent idiom of nationhood under contemporary capitalism. By communicating in this idiom, in other words, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is able to transnationally present Iraqi Kurdistan *as if* it is a nation-state. The repertoire of images, discourses, and representations that emerge out of KRG’s branding efforts, which include those produced and

circulated by lobbyists and public relations firms, are what I refer to hereafter as Brand Kurdistan. Brand Kurdistan is predicated upon the commodification not only of ethnicity and nationality, but also of civilisation itself. To buy into this version of Kurdishness is to reject the barbarism of the Islamic State and all that it stands for; to refuse is to capitulate not only to religious extremism but to the status quo. To refuse, in other words, is to let the terrorists win.

It is against this backdrop that I shift my focus to the musical stylings of Kurdish pop diva Helly Luv, attending to the ways in which she appears as an ideal-object, not only for the cathexis of the “western fascination with badass Kurdish women” (Dirik, 2014), but also for Brand Kurdistan as a whole.¹ I look not only to her music and her videos but also to her reception, particularly amongst Euro-American audiences. These pop songs tap into globalised discourses of liberal feminism, cosmopolitanism, and anti-terrorism that consequently redound upon the image of Iraqi Kurdistan as a potential nation-state. Rather than reflecting a revolutionary project of fundamentally reimagining social, political, and economic relations, (the task, after all, of revolution), Helly Luv’s “Revolution”, and the other songs I discuss in this article, exemplify the widespread tendency to represent the nation-state as the sole object of struggle and inevitable telos of political imagination for ethnic minorities.

I conclude by analysing the connections between Brand Kurdistan and Helly Luv, using these connections to trace not only the reasons for the failure of the September 2017 independence referendum but also the kinds of futures that this failure indexes. If, after all, Brand Kurdistan operates in the ways I describe, why would it fail to deliver? The answer has to do not only with the heightening contradictions among liberal democracy, nation-states, and global capitalism, but also the ways in which Kurdistan confounds some of the constitutive elements of the nation-state form. The failure of the independence referendum thus compels a critical re-evaluation of the political, cultural, and economic priorities that guide struggles for emancipation across Kurdistan.

Gendering Kurdish nationalism in Iraq

Scholars of nationalisms in the Middle East have written about how the nation is frequently represented and imagined upon and through women’s bodies as a means of consecrating its place within the daily lives of those who inhabit it (Delaney, 1995; Najmabadi, 1997; Danielson, 1997; Göçek, 2002; Baron, 2005). The nationalisation of the idea of homeland meant its discursive

¹ While I found several sources that claimed the KRG was investing in Helly Luv’s music, I was unable to find any primary documents that corroborated these sources. Consequently, in the lack of meaningful evidence, I do not mean to argue here that she is an official part of the KRG’s sanctioned nation branding campaign, nor that she is being backed financially, produced, or managed by officials within the KRG. Rather, I argue that the emergence of Brand Kurdistan over the past fifteen years has quite effectively set the terms through which Iraqi Kurdishness is articulated to global audiences. It has enacted a kind of hegemony over the field of cultural production in Iraqi Kurdistan such that producing music for an international (read: Western) audience would be unfathomable except within the repertoires of Brand Kurdistan.

transformation into both “mother” and “beloved”: that is, homeland not only as a body that bears the individual and his identity into being, but also “a body to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for”, to protect from the penetration of outside forces (Najmabadi, 1997: 445). Women and their bodies become metonyms for the nation, standing in for anxieties about the nation’s honour and purity while also being resignified according to archetypes of kinship and family (Baron, 2005: 40-42). As a consequence, women’s bodily practices and dispositions are not simply expressions of individual morality or propriety but also crucial indices of national honour and pride: regulating and disciplining women’s bodies and sexual lives as a means of articulating sovereignty (Delaney, 1995; King, 2008). Women’s honour is thus a manufactured discourse operating simultaneously across multiple scales: the individual body, the family unit, the community, and the nation.²

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the connections between gender, womanhood, and nation should be understood in historical context. State leaders tend to be described in everyday speech using the language of kinship, with Mustafa Barzani as the “father” of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani as *kak*, or “brother,” and Jalal Talabani as *mam*, or “uncle” (King, 2008: 333). Nationalist Kurdish novels written by men from the mid-twentieth century onwards tend to represent Kurdistan through the figure of “a suffering, sick and dying woman, often a mother”, who needs “the nation’s boys” to protect her (Alinia, 2013: 35; Ahmadzadeh, 2003, 2008). While these discourses about women as nation have changed since that time, as I describe below, it is worth noting that Iraqi Kurdish nationalism has been and remains profoundly conservative, even with the emergence of a robust women’s movement and the recent media spectacle surrounding Kurdish women taking up arms (Dirik, 2014; Toivanen and Başer, 2016). Iraqi Kurdish nationalism has by and large failed to incorporate an intersectional approach to gender, class, religion, and other categories of identity over the course of its history, effectively reining in the capacity of women’s full participation in political life (Alinia, 2013; Hardi, 2013; Ahmad, 2018).

Given the unevenness of European colonial domination in the Middle East, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq took different trajectories than in Turkey, Iran, and Syria, and should be understood as distinct from these other three contexts

² It is precisely this multi-scalar quality of honour that underpins the scholarship on “honour killings”, a topic that is hypervisible in the literature on gender and sexuality in the Middle East and especially in Kurdistan. In her writings about honour crimes in Turkey, Dicle Koğacıoğlu (2004) has written compellingly about the institutional, legal, and theoretical discourses surrounding honour crimes, arguing that such discourses all too often end up reifying the concepts of tradition and honour. She shows how these reifications naturalise the concept of tradition, thereby placing it outside the scope of politics and foreclosing the possibility of political critique of the structures and institutions through which women’s “honour” is reproduced. Following Koğacıoğlu, I try to push against the naturalisation of concepts of honour and tradition as they relate to women’s place within the nation, even when these concepts enter into the scholarship on Iraqi Kurdistan. My intention is not to minimise or dismiss the urgency of challenging and combating entrenched patterns of violence against women. Rather, I am trying to argue against the culturalist accounts of honour killings prevalent in popular and scholarly accounts of honour killings. For more on this, see Abu-Lughod (2002), Koğacıoğlu (2004), and Buffon & Allison (2016).

(Alinia, 2013: 17). As a modern political unit, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR)³ has existed since the era of the British mandate of Iraq, when the sheikhs of the Kurdish Barzan tribe began agitating for greater political recognition. In 1946, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, often referred to as the “father” of Iraqi Kurdistan, founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*, KDP), in concert with the establishment of the Mahabad Republic (in present-day Iran), a short-lived independent Kurdish state supported by the Soviet Union. After some time in exile in the Soviet Union, Mulla Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraqi Kurdistan where, after his death, his sons remained at the helm of the KDP.

In 1992, following Saddam Hussein’s Anfal campaign as well as the first Gulf War, the Kurdistan Regional Government was founded, vesting limited autonomy to the Iraqi Kurdistan region and its political actors. According to Choman Hardi (2013: 46), only in the wake of the Gulf War does it become possible to speak of a concerted women’s movement in Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet during this time, women’s activism was very circumscribed with political parties serving as gatekeepers to crucial resources; indeed, virtually every party in Iraqi Kurdistan supported a subsidiary women’s organisation (Hardi, 2013: 49). Women’s activism in the late 1990s and early 2000s produced legislative gains for women and facilitated women’s increased visibility in public life; crucially, these transformations aligned with “the KRG’s attempt to create a democratic self-image” (Hardi, 2013: 51). While I will return to this point in my discussion of nation branding, I want to emphasise how the image of Kurdish women (albeit resignified) continued to serve as a crucial site for the KRG to project an image of itself, this time as a progressive, modern, liberal political entity.

The US invasion of Iraq, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s government and the enduring war on terror have only led to a retrenchment of this image. Indeed, for the past five years or so, as the Kurdish struggles against ISIS have gained media attention, the figure of the woman guerrilla fighter has become synonymous in western discourse with the Kurdish freedom movement. While there may be Kurdish women fighting within the ranks of the Peshmerga in Iraq, no efforts have been made to establish structures for gender parity and women’s leadership akin to the structures in Rojava and Bakur. Yet the hyper-representation of Rojava’s women guerrillas in Euro-American news media has led to a “western fascination with badass Kurdish women” who defy Orientalist and neo-Orientalist presumptions that women in the Middle East are “always already” oppressed by their cultures (Dirik, 2014). As the battles against the Islamic State have raged in Rojava as well as in Iraqi Kurdistan, images of Kurdish women dressed in military fatigues and brandishing weapons have circulated in the news like wildfire. French and British newspapers attended to the “exceptionality” of women’s participation in armed conflict, describing Kurdish women fighters as “Joans of Arc” whose bravery “emasculates” the

³ Following the new Iraqi constitution, the region is officially referred to as the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR), but is more commonly known as KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

Islamic State (Toivanen and Başer, 2016: 306-308). Even fashion magazines *Marie Claire* and *Elle* featured profiles and images of these women, focusing on the supposed contradiction between their femininity and their “incalculable” courage (Griffin, 2014; Toranian, 2014); while clothing retailer H&M started marketing khaki jumpsuits purportedly modelled on those worn by Kurdish guerrilla fighters (Ismail, 2014). Although the images of these women tap into the repertoires of representation deployed by Kurdish nationalists in Iraq and elsewhere over the past century, they are simultaneously projections of Euro-American fantasy, serving political and ideological purposes in Europe and North America that legitimise the war on terror.

Branding the nation, branding civilisation

The period that begins with the the US invasion of Iraq is a crucial period for nationalisms and nation-states globally because of the emergent practice of branding ethnicity, nation, and civilisation. Since that time as well, Kurdish women have become doubly signified through nationalist as well as Euro-American anti-terror discourses. In Iraqi Kurdistan, as I describe below, practices of nation-branding culminated early on in a public relations campaign called “The Other Iraq”. Since then, the KRG has continued its lobbying efforts in the United States through a handful of other neo-conservative lobbying and public relations firms. From building the tourist economy and fighting terrorism to inviting foreign investors, finance capital, and neoliberal entrepreneurialism, Brand Kurdistan has been a way of proving to Western audiences that the Kurds are a liberal exception in an illiberal Middle East, and therefore, of building prospects for KRG’s eventual national independence as a ready and willing ally of (and purveyor of oil to) American empire.

In *Ethnicity, Inc.*, Jean and John Comaroff (2009) examine how cultural identity in the present manifests simultaneously as an object of rational choice and as the immanent essence of human being. The emergence of the ethnic-as-commodity, they suggest, is not merely an unfolding transformation of “the ontology of ethnic consciousness”; perhaps more importantly, this emergence reveals the intensification of market forces and the consequent shifts in the form and meaning of capital (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 20). Ethnicity is branded not only as an outward expression of cultural heritage for the sake of enticing tourist dollars, but also as a means of flattening out the realms of difference and contestation that gave way to “heritage” in the first place. Branding, for them, is a process of “creating an affective attachment to a named product, to both its *object*-form and to the *idea* of an association with it” (2009: 18). Branding is thus not merely a means of incentivising consumers to buy into reified cultural heritage; it is also a way of vesting producers of cultural heritage in the singular idea of the ethnic-as-commodity.

Because of the increasing entanglements between neoliberal statecraft and ethno-nationalism, the concept of *Ethnicity, Inc.* gives way to what the Comaroffs (2009: 118) call “Nationality, Inc.,” a mode of political belonging

that has “[insinuated] itself into the heart of the liberal nation-state”. In fact, they argue that this phenomenon is not anomalous, but is rather the logical culmination of centuries of corporate mercantilism enabled by European liberalism and expansionism, exemplified by the overdetermined place that the British, French, and Dutch East India Companies occupied in each country’s consolidations of empire. But where liberal orthodoxy saw the nation-state as a natural articulation of population to polity and vice versa, nation and state are now rearticulated through capital, such that the hyphen in nation-state acts as a cipher for the forms of wealth, assets, and capital exchange that currently determine the relationship between population and polity (2009: 127). Nationality, Inc. thus injects the corporate back into the nation-state, making corporatism the sole idiom for governance, order, citizenship, and social organisation.

In her book *Branding the Nation*, Melissa Aronczyk (2013) expands upon the Comaroffs’ concept of Nationality, Inc. According to Aronczyk, the concept of nation branding is similar but not quite identical to the process of branding and marketing any other product. While nation branding does involve significant marketing and commodification of largely intangible goods like cultural heritage, it also plays a role in reproducing the nation-state “as container of distinct identities and loyalties, and as project for sovereignty and self-determination” (2013: 9). This is because making nation-brands recognisable and giving them social life is, for branding and marketing professionals (as well as for their clients, the governments of nation-states), about defining and consolidating largely ambiguous concepts like community, authenticity, and distinction. Nation-branding is a collaboration between political leaders, lobbyists, public relations managers, and marketing directors in order to produce a reified imaginary about the geopolitical, cultural, and affective contours of the nation, contours that speak at once to investors, tourists, and even the citizens of the nation in question. Similarly, nation branding forecloses the possibility that populations could belong to anything except nation-states, themselves made legible through these reified imaginaries.

While nation branding is a globalised and globalising process, the vast majority of brand consultancies and marketing agencies behind these processes are located in the United States and Britain. As a consequence, these brands are inexorably haunted by orientalist and imperial structures of knowledge and domination, structures that inevitably constrain the realm of the possible. As Aronczyk writes, “the logics that underpin the practice [of nation branding] maintain and reinforce historical inequalities and reify paternalist and neocolonial assumptions” (2013: 13). Keeping in mind the aforementioned histories of European corporate mercantilism, then, branded nations are the consummation of the ongoing reification of the nation-state and the increasing liquidity, financialisation, and abstraction of capital.

In the Middle East, nation branding has imbricated tried and true Oriental(ist) tropes with images and discourses of urban, cosmopolitan

modernity: tellingly, for example, the campaign to brand Egypt proposed to show a flying carpet over the pyramids before having it appear above a cityscape (İğsız, 2014: 696). In the case of Turkey in the mid-to-late 2000s, the branding process articulated the country as a bridge for an “alliance of civilisations” in which Turkey would use its “knowledge...regarding the differences between East and West,” along with its “traditional” relationships with other Middle Eastern countries, to act as a model Muslim democracy for its embattled neighbours. The plan that emerged out of this transnational effort at nation branding was to “enhance the EU’s sphere of influence” across the Middle East and to spread Western, humanist, cosmopolitan democracy by proxy (İğsız, 2014: 697). In the purportedly civilisational crisis that has emerged in the Middle East since September 11, then, branding the nation is not merely a modality of “ethnicity, inc.” or “nationality, inc.” but also what Aslı İğsız identifies as “civilisation, inc.” (2014: 696).

To be sure, the concept of nation branding has been predominantly theorised from the paradigm of already-existing nation-states. Yet as I hope to show below, the Kurdistan Regional Government has seized upon the practice of nation branding to shore up not only its political legitimacy but also its place within the global capitalist market. Marketing Iraqi Kurdistan to Western countries as a destination for investments that have significant financial as well as moral returns is also a way of marketing the promise and the possibility of Iraqi Kurdistan as a fellow nation-state in the world. Given the place of Kurdistan in the discourses of the war on terror, its representation as the last bastion of civilisation against the savagery of Islamic fundamentalism, this civilisational component of branding the nation plays an especially key role in Brand Kurdistan. The backdrop of the war on terror has endowed efforts to brand the nation with a particularly moralising political urgency.

The public relations of Brand Kurdistan

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been represented in the United States and internationally by at least half a dozen multinational public relations, marketing, and lobbying firms since 2004. Here I will focus on three of the more significant firms: Barbour Griffith & Rogers, Russo Marsh & Rogers, and Dentons LLP. Since mid-2004, these firms have been working in collaboration with seasoned politicians from Iraqi Kurdistan, such as Nechirvan Barzani, Qubad Talabani, Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, and Karim Sinjari, in order to develop advertising campaigns, liaise with politicians, establish business connections between the United States and Iraqi Kurdistan, and contribute monies to American politicians and political groups across the ideological spectrum at the federal, state, and local levels. In spite of the failure of the independence referendum in September 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government is poised to spend millions of dollars on US lobbyists in 2018.

The KRG hired Barbour Griffith and Rogers, which also works under the name BGR Government Affairs LLC, in June 2004 at a yearly cost of at least

\$354,000. According to investigative reporting published in the American magazine *Mother Jones*, the infamous American lobbyist Jack Abramoff had initially been approached to represent the Iraqi Kurds before they ended up working with BGR (Rozen, 2007). BGR was founded by two senior aides to former President George H. W. Bush and, in November of 2004, George W. Bush's chief Iraq advisor also joined the firm. According to lobbying disclosure records mandated by the United States Department of Justice, BGR was hired with the mission to "develop a better understanding among U.S. officials of foreign and domestic issues in occupied Iraq [and to] meet with U.S. officials engaged on issues involving the reconstruction and post-reconstruction Government of Iraq".

On 23 June 2004, less than a month into the working relationship between KRG and BGR, three U.S. military helicopters arrived in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, carrying fifteen tons' worth of \$100 bills, totalling \$1.4 billion (Paddock and Miller, 2005). This extraordinary cash hand-off was made by Paul Bremer, the outgoing leader of the U.S.-run Coalition Provisional Authority. The money had ostensibly been paid to Saddam Hussein through the U.N.'s controversial oil-for-food program but had been withheld from the Kurdistan region for several years. Though it remains unclear what exactly compelled Bremer to make such a spectacular transfer of cash,⁴ the task of finding a bank willing to accept fifteen tons of cash fell to BGR. The KRG renewed their contract with BGR at nearly double the price: \$700,000 annually as of 2007, the last publicly disclosed contract between the two parties. BGR remains on retainer for the KRG and continues to actively correspond with members of the US Congress on "U.S.-Kurdistan relations": in the six-month period between June and December 2015, for example, BGR made over 2,300 telephone conversations and email exchanges with members of Congress on the topic.

In 2005, the year that the Barzani-led KDP and the Talabani-led PUK merged administrations, the Kurdistan Regional Government hired another US-based public relations and lobbying firm, Russo Marsh and Rogers (RM&R) to "promote its interests" (Berkowitz, 2005). RM&R is a California-based firm long affiliated with Republican Party politicians and electoral campaigns. In addition to sponsoring a "Move America Forward" tour intended to shore up support for the Iraq War, RM&R also led a smear campaign against Barbara Lee, the only member of Congress who voted against the authorisation of the use of force after 9/11 (Berkowitz, 2005).

⁴ In her investigation into the event, journalist Laura Rozen encountered an Israeli-American businessman and former counterterrorism commando named Shlomi Michaels who claimed to have pulled the strings that led to the cash transfer. Her reporting further suggests that Michaels and other well-connected Israeli intelligence operatives played a role in facilitating the Kurds' relationships with lobbyists like BGR. For more, see Rozen, L. (April 11th, 2007). *Kurdistan's Covert Back-Channels*. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved at www.motherjones.com/politics/2007/04/kurdistan-covert-back-channels/ (last accessed 28 October 2017).

While RM&R, a pro-Iraq War, pro-US imperial firm, might seem like a puzzling choice to represent the KRG, it is instructive to look at the rhetoric of the PR campaign that they led to understand the potential appeal of Brand Kurdistan to neoconservative projects of American war-making. RM&R pioneered “The Other Iraq” campaign, which aired radio and television commercials in the United States and the United Kingdom (the two largest contributors of troops to the coalition forces in Iraq). One television commercial from 2006, titled “Thank you,” begins with a shot of a graveyard. The narrator says, “Saddam’s goal was to bury every living Kurd... He failed.” The rest of the commercial features smiling “Kurd Citizens” (as named in the script) all looking into the camera and saying variations of “Thank you,” “Thank you America/Great Britain,” “Thank you for democracy”. The narrator intervenes, “The Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan just want to say ‘thank you’... for helping us win our freedom”. It ends with a Kurdish child waving an American flag while a “Kurdish Hero Girl” (also as named in the script), offers one last declaration of thanks (Kurdistan: The Other Iraq [A], 2006). This ad spot casts the United States and Great Britain, not as capitalist empires fighting wars for oil, but as benevolent protectors of the downtrodden, as purveyors of democracy, human rights, and freedom. The discourse of the campaign, in other words, maps perfectly onto the discourses used by the likes of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney in justifying the war: that it was a war against evil, a war to protect “American values” abroad. Just as the US war in Afghanistan was couched in the language of liberating women from the tyranny of a perverse Islamic patriarchy (Abu-Lughod, 2002), the invasion of Iraq is cast here as a fundamentally good and just war to liberate the Kurds from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.

Another 2006 spot by RM&R, titled “Open for business,” imbricates discourses of entrepreneurship, innovation, and investment with nebulous discourses of hope and democracy:

VOICEOVER NARRATOR:

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq investors aren’t just building an airport...

AIRPORT MANAGER:

We are building a democracy.

V/O NARRATOR:

They’re not just installing hospital labs...

LAB TECHNICIAN:

We are building hope.

V/O NARRATOR:

They’re not just planting a forest...

REFORESTATION WORKER:

We are planting a future.

V/O NARRATOR:

Come see what's happening in the "other" Iraq...Iraqi Kurdistan. See the promise.

KURDISH HERO GIRL:

Share the dream. (Kurdistan: The Other Iraq [B], 2006)

Infrastructures of modernity like airports and hospitals serve in this spot as indices of democracy and hope, suggesting that there is something ineffably progressive and entrepreneurial about Kurdistan and about the Kurds themselves. Ostensibly intended to invite foreign investment in capacity building, infrastructure, medicine, technology, and other infrastructures, this advertisement insinuates that such investments are inevitably investments in democracy in the Middle East, investments in hope in times of war. The dream of the "other Iraq," its promise, is thus about being "open for business," about "planting a future" built on foreign investment.

It is telling that both advertisements described here feature a "Kurdish hero girl," because as I suggested above, women and their bodies are often mobilised as metonyms of the Kurdish nation. By positing Kurdistan as a space where women and girls are not only liberated and secular but are also doctors, workers, and "heroes," this PR campaign engages in the kind of institutionalised liberal feminism that animates Euro-American political discourse. Investment, then, is not only framed as entrenching democracy, but also as a way of empowering women against the violent masculinities and oppression of women rampant in the region (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Joe Wierzbicki, the RM&R account executive in charge of the "Other Iraq" campaign, argued that the KRG is a worthwhile partner of the United States because, "of all the different groups in Iraq that have a vision for the future, the vision of the Kurds is closest to ours. It's important to recognise that the Kurds are not hostile to the West" (Berkowitz, 2005). The key to this PR campaign, then, is proving the exceptionality of the Kurds in a region of barbarism, religious extremism, and anti-Americanism.

In addition to BGR and RM&R, the KRG has also worked with a firm called Dentons US, LLP since 2015. KRG has between three and five Dentons lobbyists on monthly retainer for yearly salaries of \$240,000 apiece. In addition to providing "advice to the foreign principal [KRG] in relation to the US Government's policies on Iraq and the Middle East", Dentons and its lobbyists have been making bipartisan campaign contributions to individual politicians, political parties, and political action committees (PACs). In the latter half of the 2015 fiscal year, for example, Dentons made campaign contributions on behalf

of the KRG totalling over \$106,000 at the national level and just under \$22,000 at the state and local level. Since that time and especially during the months leading up to the 2016 election, those numbers have only swelled, such that the state/local campaign contributions on behalf of the KRG were nearly \$200,000. Dentons also drafted letters that KRG sent to US Senators Dianne Feinstein and Ben Cardin in March 2016, calling on them to help subsidise the peshmerga monthly budget of \$364.5 million, to the amount of over \$197 million, due to the urgency of their fight against ISIS.

These lobbying efforts have had enormous payoffs. The month after Denton sent these letters to Feinstein and Cardin on the KRG's behalf, the US Department of Defense announced a reapportionment of military aid monies to Iraq, allocating \$415 million for ammunition, food, medical aid, and salaries for the peshmerga. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 earmarked \$715 million for the peshmerga, while in 2017 it offered them \$630 million. In 2018, this amount was more than doubled to just shy of \$1.27 billion.

The ideological agendas of these neoconservative lobbying and PR firms have been built into the construction and circulation of Brand Kurdistan, and they animate its political, cultural, and economic priorities. Because Iraqi Kurdistan is being packaged and sold in Europe and North America within the discourse of the ongoing war on terror, its uncertain political future has become inexorably hitched to the fate of US empire in the region. Brand Kurdistan is thus a paradigmatic example of "civilisation, inc.": a discretely marketable asset of liberal modernity amid the troubles that are understood as pathological in the Middle East.

"Songs as strong as weapons": Kurdish nation-building and the politics of pop music

The political and economic work of branding Kurdistan represents a useful backdrop against which to situate Helly Luv, an Iraqi Kurdish musician who grew up in the diaspora but has made her career as a pop musician through her return to Iraqi Kurdistan. Helly Luv was born in Iran in 1988 to parents fleeing Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign. According to Luv, her mother was a member of the peshmerga. After growing up in Finland, Helly Luv moved to the United States to pursue a career in music. Since signing to an independent label in 2011, she has released three songs: "Risk It All", "Revolution", and "Finally", all of which are avowedly political projects that thematise Kurdish liberation.

Before proceeding, I would like to emphasise the extraordinary amount of music that has been produced in Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora in response to the war since the inception of ISIS. Music has long been a critical feature of Kurdish resistance transnationally, and even within the field of Kurdish musical production, arguments over aesthetics and genre are at once arguments over political priorities and commitments (Aksoy, 2013; Hammo,

2017). Some Kurdish musicians in diaspora have called for a return to Kurdish music's traditional roots, lambasting the turn to popular music by musicians like Helly Luv and Dashni Morad, another Kurdish diasporic diva who sings political pop primarily in English (Sulaivany, 2017). In March of 2016, a group of Kurdish women in Germany initiated a solidarity campaign called *female:pressure* to crowdsource electronic music from which any profits made would be donated to women's organisations in Rojava (female:pressure, 2016). By focusing solely on Helly Luv, I do not intend to flatten the complex and contested terrain of contemporary Kurdish music production. Rather, I am interested in highlighting the ways in which Luv's music is a culmination of both Kurdish nationalist discourse about women and the practice of nation branding in Iraqi Kurdistan. In other words, her music and her persona are paradigmatic manifestations of the repertoires of Brand Kurdistan: she is an iconic, strong, secular woman who performs and embodies the liberal, secular, democratic orthodoxies that undergird normative life within the nation-state.

Helly Luv and her music are very much the product not only of the transnational flows of pop music as a genre, but also of her diasporic background. In an interview with NBC News, for example, she declares that "I don't think I could have [made this kind of music] if I'd grown up in Kurdistan" (Moussavi, 2014). As Jane Sugarman (2010) has written in the case of Kosovo, music and cultural production in diaspora shape the political and cultural worlds within the so-called homeland, especially in contexts of war. For example, singers from Albania who recorded songs of solidarity with Kosovans afflicted by the Yugoslav war were often seen by music industry professionals in Kosovo as "capitalising on the suffering of [Kosovans]" (Sugarman, 2010: 32). Perhaps more importantly, however, music made by Albanians had the effect of imposing a mythic understanding of the war, shaping the war's place in the historical consciousness of Albanians and naturalising the war "as a necessity and an inevitability" (2010: 38). As such, diasporic music must be understood as "a site of negotiation, and at times contestation... [that forges] a sense of national purpose by eliding or mystifying social difference" (2010: 18). Music made by diasporic musicians impinges powerfully upon political terrains in the homeland, renegotiating and rearticulating priorities, horizons, and futures. Through its repertoires of image and discourse, Helly Luv's music "[plays] on the emotions" embedded in the concept of the homeland itself (2010: 37). Like the "Kurdish Hero Girl" who figured into the campaign to brand the Iraqi Kurdistan Region as "the other Iraq," Helly Luv and her music map onto the logics of imperial feminism that have underpinned and justified exercises of US interventionism in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Helly Luv's song "Risk It All" came out with an accompanying video in 2013. While the lyrics speak to a vague sense of political disquiet, the video features an array of striking imagery that speaks to the overdetermined tropes through which Euro-American media have represented Kurdish women in the context of war (Toivanen and Başer, 2016). Throughout the video, as with

“Revolution”, she is adorned in gold bangles, rings, and bracelets, and her hands are covered in henna. The video begins with Luv lighting a Molotov cocktail and throwing it down an alley, where it explodes into flames along the ground and up the walls. The scene highlights the contradictions between her appearance as a wealthy, fashionable, beautiful, feminine woman and her commitments to an emancipatory political project, the Molotov cocktail a stark counterpoint to her jewels and makeup. The rest of the video articulates these contradictions sartorially, capitalising on Orientalist fantasies about women’s bodies beneath the veil and toggling between traditional Kurdish attire and risqué “modern” dress.

As the song breaks into its first chorus, Helly Luv appears on a rooftop, singing the chorus and wearing a dress made of hundreds of very small mirrors. The dress and its many mirrors, refracting and glinting in the sunset, are emblematic of what Kurdistan becomes in the narrative of her song and of Brand Kurdistan writ large, a projection of Western liberal fantasy, a reflection of what Western audiences might indeed expect out of Brand Kurdistan: the liberated, Orientalised woman; the urban sprawl, with its scattered skyscrapers and buildings, reflected in her dress; an entire landscape refracting off her body; the inchoate, urbane nation-state that is coming to pass spreading behind her, as she sings “I don’t wanna wait no more.”

The bridge, a repeated refrain of “Put your guns up in the air,” features Helly Luv standing in a khaki jumpsuit surrounded by women holding M-16s and wearing *keffiyehs*. Thereafter, she appears sitting in a golden throne in the desert, flanked by two female lions. She is covered in jewellery, including a bejewelled ornamental *bindi* on her forehead. The rampant self-Orientalising iconography of the video, subtended by a mélange of exotic pop beats, are at odds with the particularity of the political project Luv intended in the video.

Describing “Risk It All” in an interview, Helly Luv said: “I wanted to create a song that would represent and celebrate the freedom of the Kurds because, as you know, we Kurds have a long, horrible, bloody history. ‘Risk It All’ is a celebration of that, risking everything for a dream, and the dream for Kurds is obviously independence” (Al-Nasrawi, 2015). Elsewhere, she argues that “we all as Kurds have one dream, and that is independence” (Crowcroft, 2014). The song heralds the possibility of a unified nation-state for Kurdistan, a possibility represented as a tremendous yet urgent risk, indeed, a life or death decision.

This same heightened sense of risk is at play in her song “Revolution.” As I mention in the beginning of this article, “Revolution” stages an encounter between ISIS and a Kurdish village. As soon as ISIS starts shelling the village, Helly Luv appears with a banner that reads “STOP THE VIOLENCE” and brandishes it in front of the tank. The rest of the video is a montage that shifts between the villagers staging an insurrection against the invading forces and

peshmerga making advances on a battlefield, shooting at enemies with AK-47s, missiles, and tanks.⁵

About halfway through the song, the music slows to a stop; the only sound is the sound of many people marching in unison. The shot turns to a large platoon of soldiers dressed in blue, ceremonial attire, wearing white gloves, blue hats, and black aviator sunglasses, carrying M-16s over their left shoulder. Helly Luv sings “We’re marching” a few times over the sound of them stepping in unison. She appears at the front of the platoon, wearing a blue jacket with red accents and gold trim; red pants; a red, blue, and gold hat with the flag of Kurdistan on the front; gold cords and aiguillettes; red-yellow aviator glasses; a gold M-16 (that, in other scenes, is replaced with a gold sabre). This is what Helly Luv’s “Revolution” really heralds: rather than a transformation of social relations and the very terms through which a state apparatus monopolises violence, “Revolution” offers a modernised, Westernised, well-disciplined military apparatus marching on an airstrip and led by a woman. The video borrows the iconography of guerrilla insurgent movements in which women feature prominently, from the People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) and the Women’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ) in Rojava to the People’s Defence Forces (*Hêzên Parastina Gel*, HPG) and Union of Free Women (*Yekîtiya Jinên Arazad*, YJA) in Turkey. This iconography is deployed here in the service of an intransigently patriarchal and ethnonationalist military force, the peshmerga. The slogan of “STOP THE VIOLENCE” emblazoned on Helly Luv’s banner at the beginning of the music video is transfigured here into a spectacular re-monopolisation of violence by a state-supported, regimented, Westernised military.

Immediately after this sequence, Helly Luv appears atop a tank in her guerrilla outfit, surrounded by a crowd of villagers, all of whom brandish the flags of different countries, from Turkey and Iraq to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia; from Israel and Palestine to Qatar and Kurdistan. Whether such flags call to mind imperial or neocolonial powers that have been responsible for fomenting instability, sectarianism, fundamentalism, and mass violence in the greater Kurdistan region is inconsequential: the flags signify the promise of peaceable cooperation among nation-states, and they index the principles of a nation-state order enshrined by the United Nations. The conglomeration of flags in the space of Kurdistan’s battlefield amounts to a performance of the potential that international solidarity with the Kurds might have for the successes of the war against ISIS and the larger war on terror. Coupled with the villagers’ banners of “peace”, “freedom” and “no more

⁵ The specificity of this scene, of Kurdish peshmerga defending a village, has its own representational politics. At the height of the ISIS siege on the predominantly Yezidi region of Sinjar in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in August 2014, the Yezidis were abandoned by the peshmerga forces who were supposed to be responsible for defending them, resulting in the starvation, sexual enslavement, and massacre of thousands of Yezidis. This event highlights the tensions within the discourse of Peshmerga-as-liberator, demonstrating the need for more sobering accounts of the ethnonationalist and religious pitfalls in the Brand Kurdistan project. For more, see Buffon and Allison (2016).

genocide” earlier in the video, the flags (in the hands of the Kurdish villagers) perform a renewed commitment to liberal humanism and the nation-state system that exists to protect the sanctity of the liberal humanist order.

Helly Luv has been received by audiences in complicated ways. Kurdish media outlets like Rudaw have had mixed reactions to Helly Luv's music, with one interviewer commenting on her “bad clothes” and questioning her decision to sing in English instead of Kurdish. However, she has been taken up uncritically in Western media across the political spectrum, precisely because her music taps into and mobilises discourses about the war on terror. “Meet the Kurdish pop star fighting ISIS with songs”, exclaims an NBC news headline, while NPR proclaims her a “Kurdish warrior-diva [who] sings against ISIS, despite threats”. Vice similarly describes her as “a Kurdish Shakira with the political temperament of M.I.A. [... a] pop culture ambassador for Kurdistan and the peshmerga fighters”. Radio Free Europe (2014) heralds Helly Luv as a “siren for Kurdish independence”. In addition to her reception in the aforementioned liberal Western media, she has also been interviewed multiple times on right-wing channels like Fox News as well as the pro-Israeli channel i24News: the same channels that promote US empire in the Middle East, that advocate settler colonialism and dispossession, find in the figure of Helly Luv an admirable political project. These journalists and commentators describe her as “fighting with her voice... [issuing a] call to action against Islamic state” in support of a “secular message of Kurdish independence”. One Fox News contributor described the video as a “culture war” against ISIS, lauding Luv for producing music “as strong as their weapons”. Proceeding from a belief in the inherent auspiciousness of music, these commentators impose a narrative frame upon and around the scene of Kurdish politics, a narrative frame rooted in the same rhetoric that animate Brand Kurdistan.

Although Helly Luv's music traffics in the iconography and the urgency of revolution, “Risk It All” and “Revolution” proceed from a liberal belief in the normative value of music as a tool for communicating across difference, for building multicultural humanist democracy, and for advancing the “dream” of the Kurds. These songs tap into the ethos of revolution in the service of Iraqi Kurdistan's legitimacy on a world stage, and in so doing, they impose an ethico-political horizon that collapses the differences in political priority between competing ideologies of Kurdish liberation. Like Brand Kurdistan, “Revolution” builds upon the array of Kurdish futures unfolding in the region, drawing upon their zeal and their jouissance, packaging them into a discrete and marketable asset, in order to ultimately foreclose those futures.

While Helly Luv and her music transmit an affect of revolution, at every moment they index some of the most intransigent fixtures of the hegemonic global order: from capitalist consumer cultures and liberal discourses of feminism and tolerance to “the rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity” (Malkki, 1992). What these songs offer, and indeed, what Brand Kurdistan offers, is a Manichaean choice between what the Kurds

represent and what the Islamic State represents, between freedom and terror, between good and evil. This choice is the same choice posed in the binary world discourse of the war on terror and the clash of civilisations, a discourse aligned with neoconservative American war-making and exertions of US empire. Predicated on this binary world discourse, Brand Kurdistan was supposed to guarantee the prospective formation of an Iraqi Kurdish nation-state and the retrenchment of US foreign policy in the Middle East. Brand Kurdistan was thus poised “to change everything in order that nothing change” (Wallerstein, 1995: 218). Then the referendum happened.

“Finally”: Brand Kurdistan after the referendum

This article has attempted to unpack the kinds of horizons that come to bear upon the discourses and narratives of Kurdish liberation in Brand Kurdistan and in the music of Helly Luv. Up until very recently, these horizons seemed to suggest that the KRG, under the aegis of Masoud Barzani, was poised to enter into the international community with gusto, a secular, progressive, entrepreneurial, resource-rich nation-state in an embattled region, a polity that renewed and extended the auspices of neoliberalism. To achieve these goals, the KRG waged a massive lobbying effort in Washington D.C. and abroad over the past thirteen years. In this campaign to brand and package the Kurdish nation, the KRG’s political and economic futurity “depended on turning finance capital into cultural capital and vice versa” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 8). To this end, the KRG worked to convince investors and politicians alike that, whether in terms of military aid, finance, infrastructure, or technology, they could buy into the right side of history by supporting Iraqi Kurdistan and the cause of Kurdish independence.

In the lead-up to the independence referendum on 25 September 2017, Helly Luv released a song called “Finally”, meant to herald the long-awaited prospect of Kurdish independence “after all the generations of war and blood.” She performed the song for a packed stadium at a pro-independence rally in Erbil. The song, with its repeated refrain “finally we here [sic],” suggests, in keeping with the promise of the nation-state, that Kurdistan has arrived at the mythic end of history, a history saturated with “generations of war and blood” that could only be resolved with the formation of a Kurdish state. And indeed, in the first few days after the referendum, which was approved with over 90% of the vote, this seemed to have come true. Kurds living in other parts of Kurdistan as well as in the diaspora were elated, not least of all for the possibility that it might augur greater autonomy in these other parts of Kurdistan.

However, the success of the referendum plunged the central Iraqi government into crisis, in large part because it depends upon the oil reserves and fertile farmland in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iraqi government responded by coordinating military exercises with Iran along the border between Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region to emphasise “the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq and the illegitimacy of the independence referendum in northern Iraq” and to

discourage the KRG from following through with secession and independence (Al-Jazeera, 2017). The central Iraqi government also banned international flights into Iraqi Kurdistan's airports. In October 2017, Iraqi military forces entered Kirkuk to reclaim control over the region, and after five days of skirmishes with the peshmerga, the conflict came to an end with Iraq once again in control. In the aftermath of this battle, KRG President Masoud Barzani resigned. From November 2017 until March 2018, the KRG was under embargo, until finally, in the lead up to the 2018 Newroz (Kurdish New Year) festival, the central Iraqi government formally brought the KRG back into the fold, lifting the flight ban and introducing new economic agreements with the KRG (Coker, 2018).

Given that the political, economic, and discursive machinery of Brand Kurdistan has been working for the past fifteen years to make an Iraqi Kurdish nation-state eminently more possible, as I have argued in this article, how could the referendum have failed so spectacularly? How could these efforts at consolidating the Kurdish nation have resulted in “a dimmer, more internally divided, regionally and internationally isolated political entity”?⁶

The failure of Brand Kurdistan to deliver on its internal promise reveals an array of contradictions at the heart of American empire. As an attempt to bridge the priorities of Iraqi Kurdish political figures with those of North American and Western European political figures, Brand Kurdistan coalesced in the joint ideological project of national self-determination, a liberal discourse that has subtended the work of American imperialism since the end of World War I. This American commitment to self-determination is tempered by its involvement in NATO, as a consequence of which the United States is an ally of countries like Turkey, which threatened military action if the KRG had followed through with the referendum.

Furthermore, the project of American empire is also one that prioritises resource extraction and capital accumulation in a global free market in which the United States reigns sovereign. The embargoes that the central Iraqi government imposed in the wake of the referendum, along with its long-standing insistence on control over the sale of oil from Iraqi Kurdish oil fields (and its concomitant refusal to let the KRG enter into contracts with oil companies), turned into obstacles to these latter priorities, which ultimately threatened the liquidity of oil flows to the United States. Each of these faces of American empire is at odds with the others, belying its fickle, craven exercises in hegemony across the Middle East. No matter how the cards may have fallen after the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, the concatenated workings of empire would have ensured that the United States would emerge as the winner.

While Brand Kurdistan may have been subject to the vicissitudes of American empire, it is a project that fails on its own terms as well. The commodification of identity is a process that depends upon the “recognition of

⁶ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this formulation and for drawing my attention to this particular quandary.

irreducible difference” within the political space of the nation, upon the fixing of a discrete and unified identity that cuts across domains of culture, ideology, and class (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009: 123). Iraqi Kurdistan, however, is marked instead by an irreducible diversity, populated as it is by multiple dialects of the Kurdish language and multiple religious denominations, to say nothing of the manifold histories of struggle over political and economic ideologies. There is no singular Kurdistan, no singular Kurdishness, that can be made easily legible to people living within Iraqi Kurdistan region or to people around the globe. Indeed, this is why the promise of the nation-state is so vexing and mercurial in the Kurdish context: at every moment, the complex and varied social and political worlds alive in Kurdistan today are always pressing against and exceeding the narrative frame that the nation-state offers. Consequently, the failure of the KRG to achieve “independence”—in spite of its fifteen-year branding campaign, in spite of Helly Luv’s ethos of revolution—should be regarded as an invitation to reappraise the false promise and the cruel optimism of the nation-state, as an injunction to imagine and usher in different, more just political and economic futures.

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