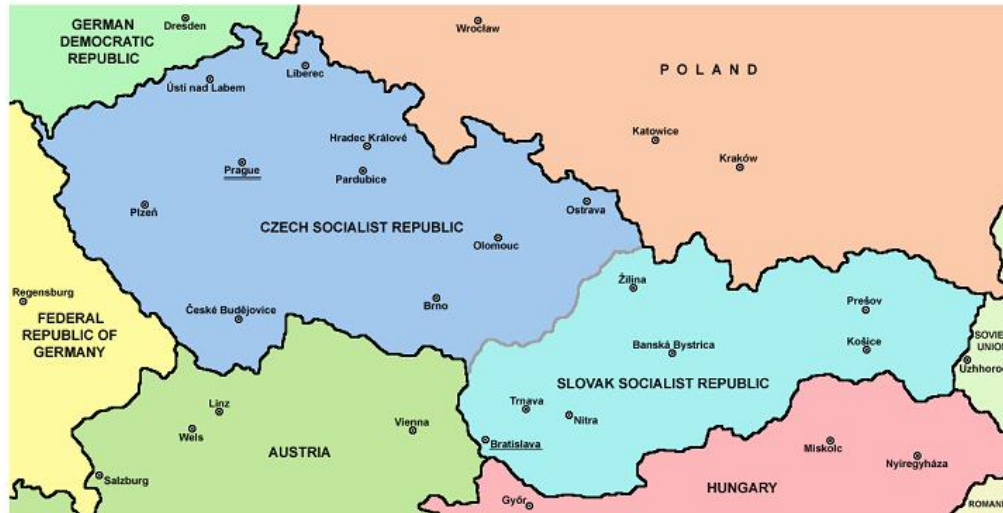


## Velvet Divorce: Why Czechoslovakia's unique case of separation could not be applied to Iraq



Washington Kurdish Institute

Matthew Margala, November 24, 2020

*Czechoslovakia and Iraq: Two ethnically diverse states with politically tumultuous histories. Czechoslovakia, unlike most other countries in similar situations, separated peacefully, through a mutual agreement between the Czech and Slovak heads of state. Iraqi Kurdistan has overwhelming support amongst its population for independence, but also significant opposition from the central government. Why was it possible for Czechoslovakia to peacefully separate in 1993, but not Iraq in the 21st century?*

Throughout history, states have fractured, united, and disintegrated due to a variety of reasons, be they ethnic, religious, ideological, or otherwise. Since the end of World War II, many of the conflicts that have transpired around the world have been related to border changes. The Korean and Vietnam [Wars](#) were fought to decide the ideological fate of two divided states. The break-up of Yugoslavia was a bloody, nationalist conflict between the different ethnicities and religious of the former Communist state, with some groups seeking independence, such as the [Bosniak Muslims](#), and others hoping to hold on to what they saw as part of their ancestral land, such as the Serbians seeking to retain the Muslim and Albanian-majority province of [Kosovo](#). Nearly every part of the world has suffered from these conflicts, from Africa, where South Sudan [became](#) the world's newest UN member state in 2011, after a long and bloody war of national liberation, to Asia, where the Muslim-majority people of Kashmir have long [sought independence](#) from the Hindu-dominated central government in New Delhi. The common variable amongst these different conflicts is that nearly every case when a country split along ethnic and/or religious lines, it was through intense, often prolonged civil wars in which one side's hand was forced. Even if the state's territorial integrity was maintained, stability was not.

This is no different in the case of Kurdish-majority northern Iraq. The region has been a hotbed of [Kurdish independence movements](#) for decades, largely driven by the two major political parties in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). These parties have autonomously administered Iraqi Kurdistan since [1992](#), and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was [legitimized](#) and enshrined in the Iraqi Constitution after the fall of Saddam Hussein's Arab nationalist and Sunni-dominated government in 2003. This was a massive advance in the cause of Kurdish independence, with Kurds having their own parliament, armed forces, and governmental ministries for the first time in history. Nevertheless, due to a combination of historic repression, a distinct cultural and political identity, and a weak, hostile central government that could not contain the rise of the Islamic State (Da'esh), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) decided in [October 2017](#) to hold an official [Independence Referendum](#). The referendum took place in all areas administered as officially part of the KRG, but also, in the [Kurdish-majority](#) parts of Iraq that the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters liberated from Da'esh. This led to international [condemnation](#), from both allies and opponents, and a military operation by the Iraqi Army and the [Iranian-](#)

[backed Popular Mobilization](#) Forces (PMF) in which territory that had been liberated by the Peshmerga, including the major city of Kirkuk, was violently seized and occupied. Since then, the KRG is no closer to independence than it was prior to the referendum, despite the referendum achieving overwhelming (93.25%) [support](#).

Given the history of ethnic conflicts devolving into violence, and the fact that the struggle for independence for Iraq's Kurds in 2017 ended in violence, it's important to examine which national divisions have been most successful in terms of the transition process, in which both countries emerged as independent, stable, and peaceful states. Admittedly, these cases are few and far between, but they do exist, and perhaps the most prominent case to note is the so-called "[Velvet Divorce](#)". This is the name given to the 1993 division of Czechoslovakia, into the countries that are today known as the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic respectively. This term was created based on term used for the anti-Communist revolution of 1989, referred to as the "[Velvet Revolution](#)" because of how peaceful it was. The split of the country was similarly peaceful, which is especially noteworthy given the paths other former Communist states took when they were divided. The break-up of Yugoslavia into seven countries was a long and [brutally violent](#) process that took nearly a decade (although Montenegro peacefully separated from Serbia in 2006), and to this day there are tensions in Bosnia and between Serbia and Kosovo. Similarly, many former Soviet republics have found themselves [divided violently](#) along ethnic lines, such as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine. The fueling of these tensions by outside powers, such as Turkey's backing of Azerbaijan's [ongoing offensive](#) against Armenian forces in the disputed majority-Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh region, has only served to further exacerbate these tensions. As a result, it is essential to study the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia when examining how a peaceful, future independence settlement may be reached between the KRGt and the central government in Baghdad.

In order to identify how, and if, a peaceful independence settlement may be reached between the two states, It is important to study what factors pertaining to Czechoslovakia allowed it to carry out a split between its two major regions, both factors that existed as a de facto part of the country, as well as the approach taken by the leadership in the Czech and Slovak entities of the country. The factors that will be examined are the history between the major ethnic groups that are seperating, in this case the Czechs and Slovaks, and the Kurds and Arabs, the religious differences

found in both states, the popular support for both divisions amongst the populations and political parties, and the futures that the different ethnic groups and political parties involved see for their respective people/countries. By comparing and contrasting these factors between Czechoslovakia and the Republic of Iraq, it can be determined if the conditions for a peaceful split in Iraq can be achieved as it was in Czechoslovakia.

The Czech people have a long and varied history that can be traced as far back as the settlement of Slavs in the modern territory of the Czech Republic in the [6th century](#), but as a people with a united state and language, largely to the [Duchy of Bohemia](#) in the late 8th century as part of the Holy Roman Empire. The ethnic makeup of the region became more [Germanic](#) as a result of Austrian and Holy Roman influence over hundreds of years, until the region eventually became [incorporated](#) into the Austrian Empire. The Czechs, however, have never been a people that are easy to forcibly incorporate. In 1419, following the [death](#) of the Czech Christian reformer Jan Hus at the hands of the Catholic Church, his followers, known as Hussites, revolted in a series of conflicts that took place over 15 years. The Pope called for [Crusades](#) against the Hussite “heretics”, and eventually, the most radical elements within the movement were defeated, with moderate Hussites [striking a deal](#) with the Catholic forces that allowed them to co-exist alongside one another. They [revolted](#) against the Austrians during the Thirty Years’ War that ravaged Europe in the 17th century, although they lost, and the repression by the Habsburg’s only increased, with extensive [Germanization](#) efforts alongside economic and political hardship that saw the Czech population decline by about a third. This continued until the [Czech National Revival](#) of the 19th century, which saw a new wave of Czech culture and political activism in the wake of the nationalist revolutions of that time period across Europe. This culminated in the Czechoslovak Legions that [fought](#) alongside the Allied powers in the First World War against the Central Powers, leading to Czechoslovakia’s independence from Austria-Hungary at the end of the conflict.

Slovakia’s history as a nation is similar but different to the Czech’s. Like the Czechs, Slavs had [lived](#) in the territory of present-day Slovakia since the 6th century, and became a part of a Moravian Empire in the 9th century. However, unlike the German domination of most of the Czech lands following the collapse of Bohemia, Slovakia was subjugated mostly by [Hungarians](#), and Magyar influence would remain over the Slovaks until an independent Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I. To this day, there

is a significant Hungarian [minority](#) in Slovakia. The idea of a “Slovak nation” was largely a result of the Slavic national revivals that [took place](#) in Slavic parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the mid-19th century. Nevertheless, both Czechs and Slovaks [formed](#) the new Czechoslovak state following the collapse of Austria-Hungary. This existed as a relatively prosperous, liberal-democratic state throughout the inter-war years. The population [grew](#), the economy [grew](#), and the country’s military [became](#) relatively large as well. Nevertheless, the rise of Fascism also led to the decline of this first iteration of Czechoslovakia, with Germany [occupying](#) Czech lands as “The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”, and Slovakia becoming an independent but clerical-Fascist puppet [state](#) of the German Reich, with a far-right priest, Jozef Tiso, as the leader. The war eventually ended in 1945, with Czechoslovakia becoming a part of the Soviet-led [Eastern Bloc](#) and a one-party Communist state, until the revolutions of 1989, when the Cold War ended. Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia would last until 1993, when it [split](#) into two states along ethnic lines.

There are a number of differences between the Slovak and Czech people that could lead to a desire to split their country. Besides the moderate linguistic difference between the languages, Slovaks are notably [more religious](#) than Czechs, with 63% of Slovaks being Catholics, and Czechs being nearly the opposite, as 72% are religiously unaffiliated. This is a major factor that played into their history. Slovakia’s fascist Second World War-era government had a [priest](#) at its head, and heavily emphasized the clerical nature of its regime. The Czech population was [friendlier](#) towards the militantly atheist communists, with the Communist Party winning first place in the 1946 elections, and even has one of the few [Communist parties](#) in former Eastern Bloc states that remains somewhat popular. It came [fifth](#) in the last parliamentary elections, winning fifteen seats. During the Communist era itself, the regime attempted to [industrialize](#) the Slovak parts of the country, bringing Slovakia’s GDP to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Czech’s level by 1992. This focus on industrializing Slovakia [created animosity](#) amongst Czechs, and Slovaks had never appreciated what was perceived as [bureaucrats](#) in Prague deciding the fate of their lands.

The history of the Kurds and Arabs of Iraq is perhaps more complicated than that of the Slovaks and Czechs, especially given the violence that has prevailed between both sides since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Kurds are, for the most part, thought to have arrived in the area approximately [4,000](#) years ago. By the [1500s](#), they were mostly under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. However, the idea of Iraqi Kurds only came

into being with the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) of 1916 that was developed by the Allied Powers to eventually partition the Ottoman Empire. Kurds were promised their own state in the 1920 [Treaty of Sevres](#), but the Turkish War of Independence [forced](#) the victorious powers to create a new treaty, that of the [Treaty of Lausanne](#), in 1923, which determined the borders of the modern Republic of Turkey, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The Kurdish movement in Iraq began to form in the mid-20th century, with the founding of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in [1946](#). It campaigned for Kurdish autonomy and in [1961](#), it initiated an insurgency against the Republic of Iraq's government. Kurds in Iraq would reach their first [agreement](#) with the Iraqi government in 1970, which saw Saddam Hussein, leader of the Ba'ath ruling party, and Mustafa Barzani, leader of the KDP, agree on major points regarding [Kurdish autonomy](#), including Kurdish being made an official language, Kurdish-majority areas would self-govern, Kurds would receive senior posts within the government, etc. Nevertheless, the agreement was never implemented, and Saddam Hussein's regime would continue Arabization policies, and in 1974, conflict between the Kurdish opposition and Iraqi government would [resume](#). Furthermore, Iran, long a rival of Iraq, would [cut](#) its support to the KDP in 1975. The same year, the PUK party was founded by Jalal Talabani, and Kurdish intra competition [culminated](#) and it ended in a civil war in the mid 1990s. Between 1986 and 1989, the Iraqi government carried out the [Anfal Campaign](#), a genocide against the Kurds of Iraq, with the goal of exterminating all Kurdish opposition. This culminated in the [Halabja massacre](#), in which thousands of Kurds were killed on March 16th, 1988 using mustard gas.

Kurdish autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan was first [established](#) following the no-fly zones that had been created by Western powers following the events in Halabja, in 1992. Following the aforementioned Iraqi Civil War, the PKK, Kurdish militants fighting the Turkish government, made their base in the [Qandil Mountains](#). In 2003, The United States led a small coalition of countries into Iraq to [overthrow](#) Saddam Hussein. This led to Shia representation in the central government, and the 2005 [legitimization](#) of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Since then, as Iranian influence in the country has [increased](#), tensions have likewise increased between Baghdad and Erbil. In 2017, Iraqi Kurdistan held an [independence referendum](#), in which over 93% of respondents voted for independence. The Iraqi government [deemed](#) it illegal and [invaded](#) disputed regions held by Kurdish forces, such as Kirkuk, capturing around [40%](#) of territory held by the Kurds. Much of the fighting was done by pro-Iranian [Shia militias](#). Since then, the central government in Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurdish government have

attempted to come to agreement on some issues, such as [administration](#) of the Yazidi homeland of Sinjar, which was one of these regions that the Iraqi military took control of in 2017. Nevertheless, tensions remain.

Kurds and Arabs have many differences, not just in Iraq, but in general. Unlike Czechs and Slovaks, which are both [Western Slavs](#) ethnically and linguistically, Kurds are an [Indo-Iranian](#) ethnic group with a culture and language far closer to that of the Persians than the Arabs. Furthermore, Iraq is one of the few [majority](#) Shia states in the Middle East, and Kurds are mostly [Sunni](#) Muslims in Iraq. While Kurds tend to be more [secular](#) than their Arab counterparts, the [sectarian](#) nature of many modern Middle Eastern conflicts has led to these religious differences becoming more prominent. Da'esh is a strictly [Sunni](#) group that saw the Shia of Iraq as heretics, while Iran backs many Shia extremist groups that operate under the [PMF](#) umbrella. These groups not only have [disdain](#) for Sunni Muslims, but they also have treated ethnic minorities in Iraq [poorly](#), just as the Iranian regime treats its own [minorities](#) with extreme disdain. Since Saddam Hussein's mostly secular but Sunni majority Ba'athist government was overthrown, Iraq's central government has been [dominated](#) by the Shia majority, which has boosted the influence of Iran and the aforementioned Iran-backed Shia militants. Overall, The difference between the Kurds and Arabs of Iraq are far greater than that of Czechs and Slovaks, and because of outside powers, such as Iran, further fomenting sectarian tensions, these differences are exacerbated and create friction between Iraq's communities that has frequently led to violence.

The next important factor to assess is the desire amongst populations and major political parties for division of the respective states. This is where a major difference between the two cases can be found. Typically, when states divide, or attempt to, it is because one or more of the respective populations has large-scale desire for independence. This was not the case in Czechoslovakia leading up to 1993, neither in the Czech or Slovak entities. [37%](#) of Slovaks and [36%](#) of Czechs supported dividing the country in 1993, which shows that there was decisive support for keeping the country together. The factors mentioned prior, including the religious differences, as well as economic and political factors in the history of Czechoslovakia's existence as a state, largely explain the support for division amongst those 37 and 36 percent of citizens. And yet, the country was split successfully. This is because the issue was not put to a referendum, as is usually done, and as was done in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017. It was largely decided by the two prime ministers of the respective Slovak and Czech entities of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Klaus in the Czech area, and

Vladimir Meciar in the Slovak, due to their own political and economic goals.

Prime Minister Klaus wanted to [pursue](#) further free-market reforms and privatization on a massive scale in the Czech republic, and centralizing power in the Czech capital by becoming an independent nation-state would make this easier to pursue without potential for Slovak disagreement. During the 1990s, these reforms were taking Europe by storm, and ended up leading to large-scale [corruption](#) and wealth [inequality](#) all over the former Eastern Bloc. In Slovakia, Prime Minister Meciar, known now for being corrupt and authoritarian (including the [kidnapping](#) of Michal Kovac Jr, the then Slovak president's son, in 1995, allegedly by the Slovak Intelligence Service, although an amnesty [law](#) enacted by Meciar put a halt to the investigation of the case) wanted to centralize power in Slovakia and better utilize his access to the state's property to do so. During his tenure, the country's path to the European Union and NATO was slowed considerably, although this [changed](#) following his election loss in 1998. In Iraq, it was, and continues to be a much different situation. Iraqi Kurdistan held an independence referendum in [2017](#), and the population of the region overwhelmingly voted for independence, at a rate of 93%. However, despite there being no numbers regarding support for a Kurdish split in the rest of Iraq, based on the overwhelming [military response](#) by the Iraqi military and allied militias, it is clear that there is not likely strong support for potentially splitting the country. If Iraqi Kurdistan did secede, and with the territories it held prior to the referendum in 2017, Iraq would lose significant economic assets, including Kirkuk's valuable [oil fields](#). This is a common and unsurprising trend across all four parts of Kurdistan. The governments of these states tend to be nationalist and authoritarian, relying on populist militarism to garner support from their majority populations. In Iraq, every government has consistently deemed any attempt at secession as being [unconstitutional](#), and the response to the referendum in 2017 did not just lead to the military operation, but also Baghdad's [seizure](#) of Sulaymaniyah and Erbil International Airports, and demands by Baghdad of Iran and Turkey to [close](#) their borders to the KRG.

The comparisons here are in very stark contrast. Czechoslovakia was split due to an agreement between the heads of both Slovak and Czech governments within the federal Czechoslovak state. There was virtually no attempt to prevent the split, from outside or inside forces. Nevertheless, public support for Iraqi Kurdish independence amongst its own population would give the government there more of a mandate for such a move than in the case of Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, the fact that there are Kurds in



[four countries](#) and not just Iraq means that an independent Kurdish state would possibly [embolden](#) other Kurdish populations. At the very least, this is what the other states believe, and as such, they are just as militantly opposed to independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. Czechoslovakia's neighbors have virtually no Slovak or Czech populations, and as such, this is not an issue. Furthermore, internal [divisions](#) within Iraqi Kurdistan, mainly the KDP and PUK parties, creates more turmoil and makes it difficult for Kurds to create a united front for their independence. As mentioned before, there was agreement between the two major parties involved in Czechoslovakia. This was not the case between the KDP and PUK, and [division](#) amongst different Kurdish political factions has consistently led to weakness within the quest for Kurdish freedom throughout history.

To continue, the histories between Czechs and Slovaks and Iraq's Kurds and Arabs are much different. Czechs and Slovaks, while having differences and at times not perfect relations, are both Western Slavic ethnic groups, meaning there is significant cultural and linguistic similarity, although religious difference is one major area that sticks out. Nevertheless, there has been virtually no violence between the two historically. The closest example that can be brought up is in World War II, when Slovakia was a puppet [ally](#) of Germany. However, this regime was not particularly popular, and in 1944, there was a [National Uprising](#) by Slovaks that nearly overthrew the fascist regime, and the German military had to [intervene](#) to crush it. Iraq's Kurds and Arabs have historic enmity that they are still coming to terms with, and continuing to experience. For decades, Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated government committed horrific crimes against the Kurdish minority of Iraq. Since his overthrow, the Shia majority has largely taken control in Baghdad, and it was mostly Shia militias that violently ousted Kurds from disputed areas following the referendum of 2017, including in Kirkuk. This history of violence creates a hostile environment that makes coming to agreements on issues as significant as potential secession all the more difficult.

Finally, the futures of each respective entity is an issue that has to be discussed as well. Czech and Slovaks have largely moved in the same direction as far as policy goes since splitting up. Both have joined the [European Union](#), including the [Schengen Zone](#) (meaning they have open borders), and both are full-fledged members of the [NATO Alliance](#). This shows that both countries have moved closer to Western powers, and as such, despite splitting as a state, both independent states have actually

integrated since then to a significant extent, both economically through the EU and militarily through NATO.

Iraq's Kurds and Iraq's Arab populations likely would not seek the same futures, at least not to the extent that Slovakia and the Czech Republic would. Iraqi Kurdistan is far friendlier towards [Israel](#), which was the only state that came out in open [support](#) for Iraqi Kurdish independence, and is a state that Iraq does not recognize and is openly [hostile](#) towards due to the Palestinian Issue. Iraq has very [close ties](#) with Iran across the board, although there has been [backlash](#) towards Iran's influence in the country from the population and some political parties in recent years. While various Kurdish parties have had relations [with Iran](#) over the years, it's unlikely the relationship between an independent Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran would be anywhere near as friendly as that of Iraq and Iran. Due to fears and pressures from far more powerful states, such as Turkey and Iran, it is unlikely that Iraq would pursue close economic and military relations with an independent Kurdish state, at least in the short-term, as long as the Kurdish Question as a whole remains unresolved.

Nonetheless, it is also important to theorize how Iraqi Kurdistan could succeed if it were ever to gain independence. Due to the aforementioned roadblocks that Iraqi Kurds face, potential solutions must be considered, despite the difficulties that are posed. The [disputed territories](#), including Sinjar, Kirkuk, and parts of the Diyala Governorate that the KRG and Baghdad both claim and fought over in 2017 could be jointly administered by the two states through agreements that international observers, in particular from the West, could guarantee. In October of 2020 one such [agreement](#) regarding the security situation in Sinjar was made already. Likewise, western countries have historically been the primary supporters of Kurdish aspirations, and continue to do so to this day, although with limitations in order to avoid [alienating Turkey](#). However, given the current [trajectory](#) of relations between Turkey and the West, especially with regards to Syria's Kurdish administration, future Western military guarantees for an Iraqi Kurdish state may not be as unrealistic as they have long appeared. Ba'athist Syria and Iran's theocracy are both staunch enemies of the United States, and Iraq's central government has remained an [unreliable partner](#). Therefore, if Turkey were to continue down its current path of intervention and confrontation with its supposed NATO "allies", it could potentially become a pariah as well, and leave little reason for the West to not support one of its most reliable allies in their quest for independence.

In conclusion, Czechoslovakia's split was an extremely unique case that cannot be applied to nearly any other example of independence movements, mostly due to the fact that it was not the result of popular support on either side for independence. There was far more decisive support for keeping the country unified, and it was largely the result of political ambition on the part of the leaders of the Czech and Slovak federal entities within the country that led to the split. Furthermore, it was so peaceful because Czech and Slovaks have extremely amicable relations, having almost never come to violence in any sense of the word. They are extremely similar linguistically, culturally, and so on, although they have their differences as well, such as Slovakia's more religious nature than the Czech Republic's. Iraq's Kurds are a much different case. They have popular support for independence, but the central government in Baghdad, as well as outside powers with Kurdish populations, vehemently oppose any such moves, to a point where they will be willing to use force of arms to prevent any such move. Negotiations are difficult as well, because of the history of violence between Iraq's Arabs and Kurds. As such, Czechoslovakia cannot be used as a model for a future Iraqi Kurdish secession. Nevertheless, there is some reason to be optimistic. Iraqi Kurds have made massive strides in the past twenty years alone, and gaining an autonomous region with their own military, parliament, and institutions that is legitimized in Iraq's constitution was a massive victory, and unthinkable during the darkest periods of the Anfal Campaign, just seventeen years prior. And if a comprehensive agreement(s) could be made between Baghdad and an independent Kurdistan regarding disputed territories in the Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala provinces, combined with western diplomatic support in the form of security guarantees to ward off the hostile surrounding powers, an independent Kurdistan formed out of the KRG could be viable as a newly independent, democratic, and secular state in the Middle East.