

The U.S.-Kurdish Relationship in Iraq After Syria

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Brief Analysis

On November 23, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Iraq for an unannounced trip that included a visit to meet with the President of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) Nechirvan Barzani. In the published White House remarks of the meeting, one sentence asserted a sense of confidence in the Kurdish-American relationship. After thanking the Kurdish president, **Vice President Mike Pence highlighted** (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-president-barzani-iraqi-kurdistan-region-bilateral-meeting/>) "the enduring bond that exists between the Kurdish people and the people of the United States of America."

However, it remains to be seen whether these statements can heal the psychological aspect of the relationship between Iraqi Kurds and the U.S. government, recently significantly damaged by the latest U.S. announcement—since amended—of a withdrawal from Syria. The strong positive feelings Kurds have towards the American model of democracy is an underappreciated but deeply important aspect of U.S. soft power in the Kurdish-American relationship. All too often, analysis of this relationship is limited to military and security jargon like ‘proxy,’ and ‘local partner.’ The majority of Kurds do not recognize these distinctions; they see fighting against terrorism, for instance, as a shared value.

Thus, for Iraqi Kurds as well as other Kurdish people, the earlier White House statement announcing a withdrawal from Syria in the direct aftermath of U.S. President Donald J. Trump’s call to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 6 was simultaneously shocking and all too familiar. In particular, the withdrawal decision left a traumatic impact on ordinary Kurds on the street, rekindling a sense of recent frustrations with United States policy while leaving many unanswered questions.

On the one hand, the instability of the government in Baghdad, culminating in Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mehdi’s resignation, emphasizes the importance of maintaining good relations between the United States and the KRG during this transitional period for Iraq. However, the United States may have to work harder to re-cultivate the popular good will towards America once given freely among Iraqi Kurds.

In an informal survey of Facebook responses as to how the withdrawal was affecting Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the vast majority of respondents expressed disappointment and fear. This kind of reaction from ordinary Kurds has been a rather neglected consequence of October’s withdrawal attempts. Moreover, among policymakers, the communal and

psychological Kurdish relationship with the United States and its role in future policy has been neither noticed nor debated.

In both Iraq and Syria, Kurds consider themselves American allies. This attitude is not without risks and costs in the Middle East region, where it is often popular to be hostile to the United States. For many Kurdish intellectuals in particular, the United States is seen as different from other traditional global powers by having a strong focus on the notion of 'the people' in its culture, institution, and constitution. Kurds see the U.S. emphasis on democracy and a right to self-determination as particularly relevant to their own longstanding efforts to form a recognized independent country. Kurdish leaders in particular have been fascinated by this Wilsonian aspect of U.S. foreign policy, seeing Woodrow Wilson's vision as an American tradition shaping American foreign policy up through the present.

In short, Kurdish intellectuals share Walt Whitman's vision of America outlined in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*: "The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people." This democratic aspect is what bonds many outside the United States to the country.

It is these fundamentals that have bound Kurds to the United States—but the most recent moves by America put the Kurds in a weak and embarrassing situation in the region. The withdrawal has correspondingly been corrosive to the Kurdish perception of the United States. In addition to its geopolitical effects, it is important to recognize the impact that this moment is having and will continue to have on the Kurdish imagination and understanding of United States.

For Iraqi Kurds in particular, this move also solidified a frustration with U.S. policy first seen in the U.S. approach to the Kurdish Region in Iraq in the wake of the independence referendum in 2017, almost two years exactly before the U.S. decision to withdraw from Syria. During the Iraqi army attack and eventual capture of Kirkuk—pushing these and other disputed areas of Iraq out of Kurdish control—the United States took a neutral position, which many Iraqis on both sides interpreted as a green light for Baghdad's military action. Many have interpreted the latest U.S. decision as another form of a 'green light,' this time for Turkey.

The current circumstances have also highlighted issues of trust and vulnerability among the Kurds. The more Kurds see the United States adopt a position of neutrality on key regional issues, the more this will be interpreted as a tacit acceptance of the regional powers—namely Turkey and Iran—willing to fill the power vacuum and implement a hegemonic agenda within the region. By not acting and allowing these powers to implement their agendas, the United States is indirectly pushing local elites into the arms of said regional powers. This is the case even among allies such as the Kurds. Moreover, these shifting attitudes will have an impact on the KRG's dealing with the United States in a number of ways. It makes the former hesitant, less confident, and wary of potential sudden changes that might affect the balance of power in the region.

However, the popular American response to the withdrawal was in many ways a silver lining to the situation. After the withdrawal itself and the atrocities that followed, the American people demonstrated a different attitude toward the Kurds through Congress and other avenues. This is an important development in the Kurdish-American relationship. If the withdrawal results in making the Kurdish struggle known to the American people, Iraqi Kurds may be able to tap into the American civil tradition of the Wilsonian doctrine to bolster popular support.

All this being said, while the Syrian withdrawal may have harmed the Kurdish-American relationship, it is by no means the end. The ongoing global and regional shifts and crises are likely to bring the United States and the Kurds closer together as their interests continue to align. Twenty-first century conflicts make local partners necessary, and local partners and proxies appears set to shape the coming decades. The long history between these two partners in

particular will keep the two working together. Yet the element of trust—an elusive yet vital feature of successful partnerships—is at stake, and the United States must work to rebuild it if it hopes to retain a fruitful alliance with the Iraqi Kurds in the long run. ❖

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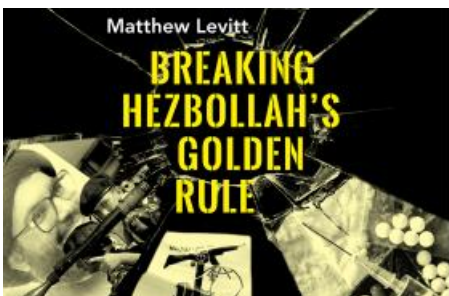
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