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Iraqi Kurdish Optimism on Biden Is a Product of Past Experiences

by [Sardar Aziz](#)

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Brief Analysis

Optimism on Biden in Iraqi Kurdistan is driven by historical ties. But contemporary political views on U.S. policy in the region may shape the Biden presidency in new, less comfortable ways.

The excitement from many Kurds at the prospect of a Biden presidency reveals much about public opinion in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) towards the United States and its highest office, especially given the longstanding history between the two entities. Iraqi Kurds see Biden as a known quantity, remembering him from his days both as Vice President and as the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 2001-2003 and 2007-2009.

Biden's History with Iraqi Kurdistan

The broader relationship between the United States and Iraqi Kurds is decades old, founded within the larger narrative of the Cold War. The United States saw Iraq's Kurdish population as a potential counterbalance to the 1958 coup that deposed the Hashemite kingship in Iraq and brought Abdel Kareem Qassim to power, whom the United States saw as pro-Soviet.

When the U.S. National Security Council met to discuss the coup in January 1959, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles **observed** that the United States was "not sufficiently sophisticated" to meddle in the complex mix of internal Iraqi politics. And while the coup did indeed create space for the pro-Soviet communists to play a larger role in the

country's politics, it would be the Ba'ath party that ultimately consolidated power, leading to the rise of Saddam Hussein.

Yet Joe Biden has his own history in Iraq, and he is well informed and long immersed in the issues of both the region and the Kurdish question in particular. Biden's connection to Iraq stretches back before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Along with his colleague senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), Biden had a memorable trip to northern Iraq and Kurdistan in December 2002. The two senators were in a car together all the way from the Turkish border through the mountains of Kurdistan to Erbil in central Kurdistan, where they were scheduled to speak to the Kurdistan Parliament. The speech was a unique event: "I think we are the only ones—foreigners—that have ever been asked to do that," [Hagel remembers](#).

Biden addressed the Kurdish parliament as the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. There, he [assured](#) the Kurds "we will stand with you in your effort to build a united Iraq" and played off a local saying, stating "the mountains are not your only friends." This speech pleased many Kurdish observers, who were facing a good deal of uncertainty prior to the Iraq war in 2003.

During the same visit, Biden met up with the leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Imad Ahmed, PUK politburo member, was part of the delegation. In the aftermath of the recent U.S. elections, he [recalled](#) asking Biden about U.S. support for Kurds and the Turkish sensitivity to this relationship during their meeting in Saladin Resort, near Erbil. Biden advised them to avoid making Kirkuk the capital of their region—at that time, the Kurdish parties were working on a draft constitution that included Kirkuk as the regional capital.

But Biden is particularly well known to Iraqi Kurds for his 2006 ['exit strategy'](#) op-ed in the *New York Times*, when he suggested the decentralization of Iraq. Biden's proposal was as follows: "The idea, as in Bosnia, is to maintain a united Iraq by decentralizing it, giving each ethno-religious group—Kurd, Sunni Arab and Shia Arab—room to run its own affairs, while leaving the central government in charge of common interests." A more decentralized Iraq was a proposal welcomed by most Kurds and many Sunnis, though rejected by Iraq's Shia majority.

Biden continued to push back on the bipartisan Iraq Study Group's December 2006 recommendation to focus on a centralized government in Iraq, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported in their December 7, 2006 article "Biden: Push to Unite May Further Split." Today, the demand for decentralization and more federation is widespread among common Iraqi people, of all backgrounds, from [Basra](#) to Kurdistan.

Expectations for the Current Biden Administration

Based on these past experiences with Biden, Iraqi Kurds have high expectations for the incoming Biden administration. Aside from the expected support for greater decentralization in Iraq, Kurds believe that Biden will be different from Trump when it comes to the U.S. relationship with Turkey. Currently, Ankara believes the coming changes in international relations will provide an opportunity for Turkey to become a regional player and expand their influence both directly and indirectly in the region. This has already happened in Iraqi Kurdistan, as the Turkish army entered more than 30 km into the territory. Here, Turkish drones are conducting constant surveillance, and killing not only militants but also civilians. Since the ascent of the Islamist AKP party in the early 2000s, the Kurdish Regional Government's relations with Turkey—not to mention other Kurdish organizations in Syria and Turkey—have similarly deteriorated. Whereas Kurds saw the Trump administration as caving to Turkish interests, they are hoping the new U.S. administration will not abandon them and fold to Turkish pressure.

Yet Iraq is a different country from the one Biden characterized in 2006. Many of Baghdad's Shia political elites expect that the United States will leave the country altogether. This idea has been bolstered by the current

administration's own statements suggesting that the United States is considering leaving Iraq, combined with its actual withdrawals from other areas in the region. Whether the threat of departure is real or an attempt to pressure Iraqis, it has resulted in confusion and psychological distress within Iraq.

Withdrawal from Iraq is also directly related to Iran. In this regard, Biden is seen as a continuation of the Obama administration. The popular notion in the region is that Biden will resume the JCPOA, but this is likely a case of nostalgia politics, drawing on emotion rather than reason. It might not be possible for Biden to return to the deal in a way that would please Iranians for a variety of reasons. Biden's world is not Obama's; Biden's campaign pledges regarding Iran may have to do more with the internal Democrat party politics—appealing to the progressive wing of the party—than reflecting Biden's top goals for his administration. There are regional challenges to the return to the deal and domestic challenges, such as the potential of a majority Republican senate.

Among all this uncertainty and complexity, Kurds are also hopeful for the future as they watch the construction of the new U.S. consulate in Erbil. Heading toward the mountains from the city, one passes a major construction site planned to house the new U.S. consulate in 2022 to replace the completely walled and unimpressive consulate that currently lies at the heart of the city. The architecture and size of the new building is reassuring for Kurds. Architecture is seen as intricately tied to political power as it provides a model for the system of structural thought. As the [consulate builder EYP](#) put it: “The goal was to create a community that would have both the features and amenities familiar to the American population while making a connection to the culture of the local people with whom they interact on a daily basis... the new Consulate General will include a Chancery, Marine residence, housing, support facilities and facilities for the community.” Even so, there are signs that the United States is losing interest in the wider region, and Iraq is not among the top priorities of the coming administration, as ambassador James Jeffrey explained during his recent [online talk](#).

In the meantime, though one could argue that there is a decline in U.S-Kurdish relations (the United States did not support Kurdish independence and withdrew its troops from Syria), there are also signs that the United States is here to stay. The U.S. relationship with Kurds is snowballing due both to the increasing frequency of crises in the Middle East and the polarized democratic nature of the U.S. domestic polity. As the last decades show, U.S.-Kurdish relations are expanding, with the new larger consulate being quite a statement in that regard. Moreover, for decades the Iraqi Kurds were only the ‘good Kurds.’ But now that the United States has sustained a relationship with Syrian Kurds and the Kurdish-controlled autonomous region, the United States is seen as an increasingly prominent actor in Kurdish affairs across borders.

Meanwhile, Biden's personal approach to foreign policy is a double-edged sword. Ben Rhodes [describes him](#) in *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*: ‘He would pepper his comments with anecdotes from his long career in the Senate, repeatedly declaring that experience had taught him that “all foreign policy is an extension of personal relationships.” This personalistic approach might be compatible with the nature of the institutions in Kurdistan, but if the United States is looking for a long, stable and mutually beneficial relationship, it might need to support institutions rather than personalities.

It is not just Kurds; Europe and a big part of the world seem to have a nostalgic feeling with Biden. While this may be warranted in certain respects, all need to prepare for the possibility of a different, mixed reality.



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