The Biden Administration Needs to Support Kurds

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Previously, the Biden administration had expressed concern over the human rights record of the KRG and its two main ruling parties has deteriorated in recent years. Security forces now often respond with unacceptable force to peaceful gatherings and protests, especially those led by Kurdish political parties. In late 2020, for example, the KRG security forces crackdown on the Sulaymaniyah protests resulted in at least eight deaths and numerous injuries.

In addition, members of the KRG security forces have been implicated in extra-judicial killings and attacks on peaceful protests. The most recent attack on February 15, 2021, in which Iranian-backed Shia militia fired rockets at a Kurdish political party headquarters in Kirkuk, resulted in the deaths of two people and the wounding of several others.

The KRG security forces have also been accused of torturing and ill-treating political prisoners, and the courts have repeatedly rejected attempts to secure their release. In late 2020, a court in Erbil sentenced two political activists to 15 years in prison for “inciting sedition.” The activists, who had been arrested for participating in a protest demanding the release of political prisoners, are now serving their sentences in a high-security prison.

The presence of U.S. troops in Kurdistan has enraged Iran and its allied Iraqi Shia militia factions who have launched several missile attacks into the KRI over the past year. The most recent attack on February 15, 2021, was followed by a statement from Tehran blaming the U.S. military for “provoking” the attack.

A key challenge for the Biden administration is to balance its support for Kurdish rights and sovereignty with its desire to maintain good relations with Iran. This challenge is made even more difficult by the fact that the KRG is a major U.S. ally in the Middle East, hosting American military bases and serving as an important counter to Iranian influence in Iraq.

The KRG also plays a crucial role in stabilizing the region, providing a safe haven for displaced Iraqi Kurds and other minorities, and serving as a key partner in the fight against ISIS. The Biden administration should work to strengthen the KRG and its leadership, including by providing additional economic and security assistance.

One area where the administration could act is to press the KRG to release political prisoners and end the use of torture and other forms of abuse. The administration could also encourage the KRG to hold fair and transparent elections, and to respect the rights of minority groups, including Christians and Yazidis.

Another area where the United States can press the KRG is to support Iraqi Kurdish demands for greater autonomy within Iraq. The KRG has long been seeking greater control over its own affairs, including over its oil resources and external relations. The Biden administration could pressure the Iraqi government to recognize Kurdish autonomy, or at least to allow the KRG to manage its own oil wealth.

Finally, the administration should work to ensure that U.S. forces in Iraq are used in a manner that is consistent with the KRG’s wishes. The presence of American troops in Kurdistan has been a major source of tension with Iran, and the administration should work to minimize any perceived favoritism towards the KRG.

In conclusion, the Biden administration has a critical opportunity to help ensure that the Kurdish people in Iraq and the region are able to chart a path forward that is consistent with their interests and values. By working closely with the KRG and its leadership, the United States can help to preserve a crucial ally in the fight against ISIS and ensure that the region is stabilize and prosperous for all its citizens.
This degraded human rights situation is closely tied to other aspects of governance in Kurdistan, notably the administrative control of the security forces. While there has been some progress in institutionalizing and unifying party-controlled security forces, there is still a long way to go. The United States and other NATO member states have provided important support in this regard but they should exert more pressure on the KRG and its ruling parties to take more serious steps on this issue.

Hence, while the United States should continue to provide security support to the Kurds as a valuable partner, it must make such aid conditional on the improvement human rights and local governance, the unification of security forces, and the peaceful transfer of power in different levels of the government. Such a holistic approach to security, human rights, and better governance—unlike an approach that sees those issues as oppositional policy choices—will ultimately reflect positively on domestic stability and the overall strength of the Kurdish polity in dealing with external threats, many of which bear on the wellbeing of U.S. interests, military personnel, and even homeland security.

The argument for U.S. support on security and governance to the KRG might sound like a call for another futile attempt at nation-building, but the Kurds are a long-oppressed community surrounded by hostile actors who pose existential threats to their security, and they are well aware that Western, and particularly U.S. support is critical to their survival. This reliance on Western support provides significant opportunities for Western nations supporting Kurdistan, chiefly the United States, to increase leverage on hostile actors like Iran and ISIS. While pro-Iran Shia militia groups, now dominating both the political and security spheres in Iraq to an increasing degree, hope to counter U.S. influence in the country and move closer to China and Russia, Iraqi Kurds still generally hold the view that the United States is their main partner. The bleak situation in other parts of the country, characterized by deepening militarization, growing Iranian influence, and rising ISIS activities, highlights the strategic value of Kurdistan in countering ongoing threats within Iraq and the broader region. The potential for progress on critical security issues calls for deeper mutual engagement by both sides.

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