



The Biden Administration Needs to Support Kurds

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Brief Analysis

Good relations with Iraqi Kurdistan are a valuable strategic asset for the United States, but support from the Biden administration should not be unconditional.

As the Biden administration recalibrates U.S. policy toward the Middle East, it will be important to pay attention to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), an autonomous region that occupies an important geo-strategic location in northern Iraq. The KRI has been Iraq's most stable region and a steadfast partner to the United States for nearly three decades. Moreover, it has been critical in countering threats from groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda in Iraq and neighboring Syria, and it has remained a welcoming place for U.S. troops and Western diplomats and businesses.

While reconfiguring its Middle East policy, the Biden administration should commit to supporting Iraqi Kurds on two critical fronts. First, the administration should continue to provide support and protection for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to counter increasing threats from pro-Iran militia groups and ISIS militants who target Iraqi Kurds primarily due to their association with the United States. Secondly, the administration should make this

support for the KRG conditional upon serious reforms in local governance, including the institutionalization of security forces under the KRG's command and the improvement of human rights, the latter being a pillar of Biden's declared foreign policy.

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 of these attacks occurred on February 15, 2021 when an alleged Iranian-backed Shia militia fired a barrage of rockets at Kurdistan's capital city, Erbil, targeting the city's international airport, which hosts a U.S. base and a number of civilian neighborhoods. The attack left two dead, including a U.S. military contractor, and injured over a dozen people, including local civilians, U.S. government contractors, and a U.S. service member. A group called Saraya Awliya al-Dam, widely considered to be an Iranian militia façade group, has claimed responsibility for the incident.

The militia attacks are partly to do with Tehran's efforts to gain leverage against Washington in anticipation of expected nuclear negotiations, but they should also be viewed as part of a broader Iranian campaign to assert its regional hegemony. As part of that campaign, Iran and its Iraqi allies are attempting to weaken and possibly dismantle the KRG, the only major Iraqi institution that has largely resisted growing Iranian influence in Iraq while remaining friendly to the West. Even as the United States attempts to rekindle diplomacy with Iran, strengthening the KRG can provide Washington with further leverage in handling Iranian security threats, regardless of whether the United States can reach a deal with Tehran on nuclear and regional issues.

Another source of instability comes from ISIS, which has slowly but steadily ramped up its activities in Iraq and Syria in recent months. Kurds are critical in efforts to counter this jihadist threat, Erbil being a major hub for operations in northern parts of both Iraq and Syria. ISIS has increased its activity in the border areas between KRG territory and the rest of Iraq. The recent double bombing in Baghdad, which arrived after a years-long lapse in such attacks, is a further sign that ISIS is growing in boldness and capabilities while Iraqi forces struggle to operate effectively. Divisions between the Iraqi military and Shia militias, which are nominally under control of the Iraqi government under the rubric of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), have only further weakened efforts in countering ISIS. This inaction should be a critical area of concern for the United States as recent history demonstrates that failing to act against the still manageable jihadist threat now could mean heavy consequences in the future. As it relates to the KRG, Kurdistan is critical for any effort to keep jihadist violence under control for the security of the broader region and the United States.

Nonetheless, while Kurdistan has shown itself to be a highly capable actor in combatting ISIS and providing a relative counterbalance to pro-Iranian militias within Iraq, the domestic human rights record of the KRG and its two main ruling parties has deteriorated in recent years. Security forces now often respond to protests with violence, exemplified by the military crackdown on the Sulaymaniyah protests in late 2020. Furthermore, in a move condemned by domestic and international press freedom organizations, a court in Erbil recently sentenced five journalists and activists to six years in prison.

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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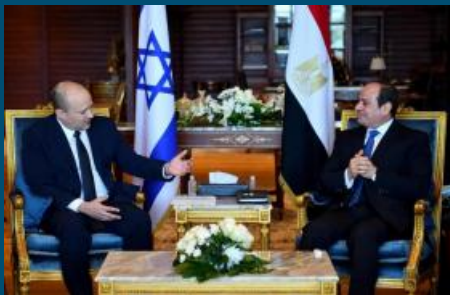


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