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Pushing for Reforms from Iraqi Kurdish Ruling Parties

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Brief Analysis

If the Biden administration is serious about addressing human rights violations, it should push for a more democratic, free, and just government in Iraqi Kurdistan.

On December 28, incoming U.S. National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan tweeted](#), "The Biden-Harris administration will stand up against human rights violations wherever they occur."

Often, Americans familiar with the Kurds know them as reliable allies, courageous fighters, stateless people, and a people often betrayed. The Kurds sacrificed thousands of lives in the fight against the ISIS and proved to be one of the most pro-U.S. nations in the Middle East. However, Americans are often unfortunately unaware of how the ruling Kurdish parties treat their people.

The Kurds in Iraq rule over an autonomous region known as Iraqi Kurdistan established by the United States after the first Gulf War in 1991. Two dominant parties rule Iraqi Kurdistan: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), respectively, led by the Barzani and Talabani families.

In nearly three decades of governance, these ruling families have failed to create a prosperous region for all Kurds to enjoy. The region's governance lacks accountability and transparency, and corruption, nepotism, and human rights violations are rampant. U.S. interactions with the Kurds in Iraq have not gone beyond the ruling families.

The Biden administration has an opportunity to change this tradition and stand by its promise to stand up against human rights violations wherever they occur. In order to do so, the Biden administration and Congress must focus on domestic grievances in the Kurdistan Region.

Attacking Protestors

Kurds have occasionally amassed on the streets in protest for years now, most recently in December. Their demands are simple; they want essential services and an end to corruption and nepotism. For nearly three decades, the KDP and the PUK have crippled the region and prevented it from moving forward. Protesters are faced with heavy-handed responses; KDP and PUK forces have shot at, beat, abducted, threatened, and killed protestors. The Financial Times reported [eight protestors killed](#). Loyal supporters of the ruling families are empowered by acting as foot soldiers without facing any consequences. [A video](#) caught a staunch KDP supporter shooting at young protestors. The individual has not been held accountable.

In response, local and international human rights agencies have called on the ruling families to listen to, rather than punish, protestors. [The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq](#) in particular has urged "the Kurdistan Regional authorities to safeguard assembly and expression freedoms."

For the United States, this is a particularly relevant issue. The ruling KDP and PUK forces, have openly used U.S. [military equipment](#),—provided to Kurdish forces to use against ISIS— [against civilians during](#) these protests. These KDP and PUK forces are funded, armed, and trained by the United States through the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

Targeting Journalists

Journalists in the Kurdistan region risk their lives every day to cover these types of issues, and have consequently been targeted by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Authorities threatened a [Voice of America journalist based in Kurdistan](#) to remove his camera during the demonstrations, or they'll have his throat "cut." [Human Rights Watch](#) stated that Kurdish authorities "unlawfully closed two offices of a private media outlet, NRT, for over a month, apparently for covering protests and for broadcasts critical of the ruling party."

The KDP and the PUK even went to such lengths as shutting down the internet. A Stockholm-based international foundation, [SkyLine International](#), has stated that "it had compiled testimonies indicating that the Iraqi Kurdistan authorities have slowed down internet service and blocked social media pages in the areas they control."

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani most recently [accused](#) five journalists and activists of being "foreign spies" and "terrorists" before a trial began in which the journalists were accused of meeting foreign consuls, notably including the United States representation in Erbil. This ruling suggests that the KDP will imprison Kurds who communicate and share their grievances with foreigners, even Americans. The PM undermined the independence of the judiciary and interfered in the ruling. As expected, days later, the sham courtroom, which is closely aligned with the PM himself, sentenced the five individuals to six years in prison. The State Department's [2020 Human Rights Report](#) stated "KRG senior leaders reportedly influenced politically sensitive cases. Judicial appointments and rulings were reportedly also influenced by the region's strongest political parties."

The KDP should know that Kurdish civilians would not go to foreign consulates if they felt they had a just and reliable government they could count on. [The Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ) called on Prime Minister Barzani "to respect press freedom." CPJ demanded the release of "imprisoned journalists" and to allow local broadcasters and journalists to "carry out their work freely and safely without fear of reprisal."

Ruling Clans

Today, loyalty to the ruling families often holds weight above all else. For far too long, the United States has provided the KDP and PUK parties a platform in which they have demonstrated no desire to share power with the rest of the Kurdish population. For ordinary Kurds, this approach is often seen as a weak point in U.S. policy towards the Kurdistan region.

While members of the ruling parties cry "economic crisis" to Western diplomats, they quietly purchase [mansions abroad](#). A number of [companies based in Kurdistan](#) with ties to the ruling families are being investigated by the United States Department of Justice for bribery and for attempting to "secure a monopoly on Pentagon fuel contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars."

The Kurdish people are desperate to be heard. Now is the time to listen to their demands and shed light on the failure in governance by Kurdistan's ruling clans. The United States cannot allow the KRG to become a complete political, economic and military totalitarian regime. Instead, an inclusive Kurdish government that represents the entire population should be the goal.

Along with Congress, the Biden team should consider making U.S. support to the autonomous region conditional on healthy human rights practices in order to ensure that Kurdish citizens are represented by their governments. Military and political support should be given to the region in exchange for tangible reforms.

The United States should no longer take a blank-check approach to the Kurdistan region simply because they are allies. The United States, given its position, has significant leverage over KDP and PUK actions; if both parties wish to maintain strong U.S. support, they should understand that it must work to fulfill the demands of the Kurdish people.

The Kurdish people can create a thriving region that adheres to the rights of all. The clans should not stand in the way, and U.S. taxpayer dollars should not go towards fueling and bolstering corrupt leaders at the expense of their people, even when they are close allies. ❖



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