

# Iraqi Kurdistan Chooses a New President, But Internal Rifts Deepen

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Brief Analysis

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**The latest step toward ending the KRG's political gridlock obscures more-worrisome Kurdish divisions, many of which threaten wider U.S.-Iraqi security and economic interests.**

**O**n May 28, the Iraqi Kurdish parliament narrowly elected Nechirvan Barzani as the new president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, giving the longtime KRG fixture only 68 out of 111 votes. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the main rival of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, boycotted the vote over several issues, including the KDP's broken promise to name a PUK official as governor of the oil-rich Kirkuk region. Meanwhile, the KDP still controls the northwest part of the Kurdish region and the PUK the southwest, each boasting equally strong armed forces.

Electing a president would normally kickstart the KRG's government formation process, which has been delayed since elections were held last September. The new president is expected to task his cousin Masrour Barzani with forming the next cabinet. Yet the KRG's deepening internal rifts will almost certainly delay the process even further.

## POLITICAL VOLATILITY VS. SYSTEMIC INERTIA

**T**he Kurdish political landscape has shifted to and fro in recent years due to several developments. First, the Islamic State's 2014 onslaught gave the KRG new opportunities for greater international military cooperation and control over territories disputed with Baghdad. As recently as October 2017, Kurdish Peshmerga controlled Kirkuk and its oil fields, thereby doubling the KRG's oil exports and ensuring its economic survival.

Then came the Kurdish push for independence. Empowered by their role against the Islamic State and recognizing Baghdad's embattled circumstances, then KRG president Masoud Barzani ignored foreign and domestic counsel by

holding a 2017 referendum on potential secession from Iraq, which led to a standoff with the federal military and the loss of recently gained territories and resources. After Baghdad seized Kirkuk, the KDP accused the PUK of colluding with federal forces and Shia militias. The two parties have since continued this poisonous blame game and widened the KRG's internal divisions, even as their respective relations with Baghdad began to recover.

Their internal balance of power has shifted as well. When the two parties formed the first KRG cabinet in 1992, they were on equal footing, but by last year the KDP held forty-five seats in the Kurdish parliament compared to the PUK's twenty-one. The creation of the Gorran splinter party in 2009 weakened the PUK significantly, as did the passing of its leader Jalal Talabani in 2017. The party remains leaderless today, though its cadres are still unified by the twin goals of opposing KDP hegemony and clinging to the status quo ante in the hope of putting their house in order and rising again.

In contrast, the KDP has enjoyed internal stability under Masoud Barzani and now seeks to end its parity with the PUK, in part by transforming Kurdish politics from coalition-based to majoritarian. To guard against the PUK's fate post-Talabani, Masoud is overseeing the transition of power to the next generation of Barzanis. Yet given the current military and geographic dynamics between the two rivals, political jockeying in parliament has done little to define the KRG's true balance of power or move them toward agreeing on a regional constitution—a situation that helps explain the KRG's mutable laws and weak institutions.

The PUK has also sought to resist the KDP by taking its political action to the national level. In October, the federal parliament in Baghdad chose senior PUK figure Barham Salih as president of Iraq despite significant opposition from Masoud Barzani. The PUK now wants to put the Kirkuk governorship and a federal ministerial position on the table during KRG government formation negotiations, using its leverage in Baghdad to gain some reprieve from KDP dominance in Kurdistan.

For its part, the KDP aims to compartmentalize Kurdish and federal politics, but this goal may be undermined by the party's own actions. Although Nechirvan Barzani won the presidency and boasts congratulatory messages and policy endorsements from the United States, the KDP has greatly weakened his two main political levers against the PUK: the Kurdish legislature and Gorran. In 2015, Masoud Barzani barred the speaker of parliament, a Gorran leader, from entering the KRG capital of Erbil, in effect shuttering the legislature for two years. The current speaker is a KDP member by default, since the PUK boycotted the February 18 parliamentary session where the leadership was elected. Despite this political monopoly, however, Nechirvan Barzani's presidential decrees will have little or no effect outside the KDP-controlled half of Kurdistan absent a power-sharing agreement with the PUK.

To be sure, the KDP could simply ignore its rival's obstructionism and complete the government formation process with the help of Gorran's votes. Ultimately, though, neither side wants the KRG to collapse into two separate provinces, a scenario that could happen given the current facts on the ground.

## **THE PERILS OF A WEAK KURDISTAN**

**A**lthough Kurdish factionalism is nothing new, the KDP and PUK previously managed to present a united front where it mattered most: in dealing with Baghdad. Such unity served the KRG well politically and economically, helping it enshrine Kurdish rights in the Iraqi constitution and attract international business into the local petroleum sector. Kurdish unity serves U.S. interests as well, since a strong Kurdistan is better equipped to prevent the accretion of terrorist movements and lawless zones that nearly ripped Iraq apart. Today, however, the repercussions of intra-Kurdish fissures threaten all of these interests.

For example, Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi has sought to turn a new page with the Kurds by letting Kirkuk's oil flow through the KRG pipeline and resuming federal budget transfers that his predecessors cut beginning in 2014. Yet internal Kurdish dynamics could spoil this honeymoon if the KDP and PUK work against each other at the

national level. In addition to potentially dooming a permanent deal with the federal government over the increasingly combustible Kirkuk and other disputed territories, squabbling between the two parties could undermine KRG coordination with the Iraqi security forces in these areas. The Islamic State **is already exploiting this nascent security gap** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-state-inside-iraq-losing-power-or-preserving-strength>) to regroup.

Similarly, factions within the federal government may start reaching informal agreements with the KDP and PUK separately rather than with the KRG. Earlier this month, for example, the KDP struck a deal with the chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces to appoint Mansour Marid, a member of the militia network's associated parliamentary bloc, as governor of Nineveh province. Meanwhile, the PUK seemingly supports a Kurdish parliamentarian's legal case against the KRG over diverted budget transfers, arguing that federal funds earmarked for public salaries were used to pay back debts to oil firms. Such controversies could lead officials to revisit a mechanism through which Baghdad would pay public employees in PUK-controlled territories directly rather than through Erbil—a notion that was taboo in Kurdistan only a few years back.

Sadly, the KDP and PUK are not fighting over which party has the better plan for instilling more accountable governance and better serving Kurdistan's citizenry, but instead over who controls the patronage networks that stem from and perpetuate the KRG's institutional weakness. The KRG parliament has not passed a budget since 2013, and ongoing squabbles divert attention and energy from crucial institutional reforms. Even after witnessing firsthand how partisan rifts exacerbated their military and political setbacks after the independence referendum, the two parties are still trying to manage the political landscape rather than reform it. That is why the weak but persistent Kurdish opposition endures—as the rise of Gorran showed, a large segment of the public wants a third way.

## IRAN AND OIL ISSUES

In addition to harming U.S. counterterrorism interests, a divided KRG provides an open door to Iran at a time when the regime is looking for new ways to ease its sanctions pains. The Kurds have recalibrated their relations favorably with Tehran since the referendum, in part due to fear of Iranian threats resulting from that initiative, and also because of their disappointment at how Washington reacted to the plebiscite. Moreover, American officials need the KRG's help in blocking efforts by pro-Iran parliamentary groups to **end the U.S. training mission in Iraq** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-u.s.-iraq-security-partnership-avoiding-the-pitfalls-just-ahead>); although such legislation is tabled at the moment, it could pass if reintroduced amid deep Kurdish divisions.

It is therefore in Washington's interest to reengage the KRG more seriously on governance reforms, particularly on Peshmerga and economic issues. Despite some progress, the KRG economy remains oil-dependent and unable to create adequate jobs. Its banking sector lags behind as well, with government employees still paid in cash handouts—a situation that is conducive not only to corruption within the KRG, but also to Iran gaining access to U.S. dollars via its networks there.

Relatedly, the KRG and Baghdad are overdue for a stable, long-term petroleum revenue sharing mechanism that depoliticizes the federal budgeting process. U.S. officials should facilitate this deal, whether directly or through the UN mission in Iraq. The prospects of such an agreement coming to fruition would encourage KRG unity in negotiating with Baghdad, instead of the KDP and PUK making separate side deals.

*Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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