

The KRI's Difficult Stand Amidst Chaos in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Political conflicts, sectarian disputes, and clashing interests between regional and international actors have heightened Iraq's instability in recent years. An interview with KDP advisor Kifah Mahmoud teases out these challenges and the KRG's response.

The country's problems seem to be endless: a fragile government, security violations, criminal networks, [resurging \(https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/middleeast/isis-syria.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/middleeast/isis-syria.html) terrorist organizations, political polarization, mismanagement, worsened standards of living, and corruption.

Against this backdrop, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)—an area long considered a bastion of security and growth—is increasingly struggling to maintain stability. Since 2004, the KRI has been weakened by budget disputes, the emergence of ISIS, the oil price collapse, and poor relations with Baghdad. In recent years, as the region tried to recover from its misstep, it lost Kirkuk and Sinjar as a result of its secession referendum, and felt itself abandoned by Washington, its historic ally at this crucial moment. As countries in the region united against the KRI and benefited from U.S. silence on the matter, KRI citizens increasingly came to believe that survival lies in reconciliation with Baghdad and strengthening the region internally. However, the KRI has not resolved either of these issues.

Still, Kurdish politicians are playing a major role in the laborious efforts towards Iraq's post-elections government formation. Voting for the country's next president is now scheduled for March 26 after months of delay. Moreover, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has shown itself playing a key role in Iraq's ongoing negotiations over government formation, as it won a **large number of seats**

[\(https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11769\)](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11769) in the October parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, there is ongoing speculation about an Afghanistan-style **U.S. withdrawal from Iraq**

[\(https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-us-repeating-iraq-error-isis-surge-oil-prices-withdrawal-transition-](https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-us-repeating-iraq-error-isis-surge-oil-prices-withdrawal-transition-)

asia-indo-pacific-pivot-11639688193), which contributes to uncertainty about the fate and future of the KRI—further complicated by the recent direct IRGC attack on Erbil. To understand these matters, I conducted this interview with Kifah Mahmood, an advisor to President Masoud Barzani and a prominent leader in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

How do you view the internal situation in the Kurdistan Region?

Since Masrour Barzani took power, everything has moved in a positive direction, other than the economic issues resulting from problems with Baghdad. Over the past two years, particular milestones included the reform law and the government's focus on infrastructure. As a result, the region saw **billions**

([https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.KLT.DINV.CD?](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.KLT.DINV.CD?end=2019&locations=IQ&most_recent_year_desc=false&start=1970&view=chart)

end=2019&locations=IQ&most_recent_year_desc=false&start=1970&view=chart) in infrastructure investments from Iraqi and foreign companies. The KDP's achievements in the parliamentary elections improved the economic situation and may lead to alliances with Baghdad to solve the overarching issues.

In terms of Iraq, what distinguishes Erbil from Baghdad in public affairs?

The problem in Baghdad is that the decision-making centers are fragmented. What sets us apart from the center, and from many countries, is the unity of decision-making, especially in terms of security and military. In Baghdad, there is a group of armed forces other than the constitutional forces—the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—and forces wearing the mantle of the PMF. There are also uncontrolled factions that receive support, and perhaps instructions, from a regional actor. As a result of this fragmentation, global organizations describe Iraq as a “failed” state.

What else does this fragmentation cause?

Fragmentation is one of the reasons for the significant decline in services and worsening security. This, in turn, has contributed to the resurgence of ISIS, which now operates freely in the surrounding areas of Baghdad and **Kirkuk** (**(<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/071220214>**), and in the outskirts of **Mosul** (**(<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/151220211>**), **Sinjar** (**(<https://www.jpost.com/international/article-695561>**), and **Miqdadiyah** (**(<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/27/isil-attack-iraqi-village-kills-11>**). These groups have caused security structures to deteriorate and have distracted Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga. Disagreements between Baghdad and Erbil have enabled ISIS to spread and re-activate its initiatives.

Can the Peshmerga and Iraqi forces control security without the Iranian-backed militias?

Certainly. Security has deteriorated in Kirkuk and Sinjar, and the presence of these militias is stifling. With these militias overrunning Kurdish areas outside the Kurdistan Region, they have become a new incubating factor for ISIS.

How do you view the Region's situation and its effects on Iraq?

Here, there are two groups to look at.

First are the countries bordering Iraq. These countries are involved in Iraqi issues, depending on their size and

interests. Both Turkey and Iran are indirectly involved. Turkey relies on of the PKK's presence in the Qandil region, northern Dohuk, and Sinjar to justify its involvement. The Iranians, on the other hand, rely on sectarianism since they claim to represent the world's Shia.

Second is the international coalition: Both the Kurdistan Region and Sunni Arabs completely reject the latest U.S.-Iraq agreement about scheduling the withdrawal of American forces. A withdrawal would enable militias to spread and dominate Iraq, which is exactly what they want to do.

What are the main threats to the Kurdistan Region currently?

In my opinion, after the referendum, the Kurdistan Region had many realizations. The most important was the need for a revolution in industry, agriculture, and production. The referendum revealed that we are only consumers, and that this status quo must shift.

Is this a general view among the leadership?

I hope so. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's approach to industrialization, agriculture, and strategic services appears to follow this direction. After the referendum, Kurdish elites discovered that another major problem is corruption. I do not think that the leadership is capable of completely eliminating this issue, but at least its sources are drying up and the space for corruption to fester is narrowing. Aside from the impacts of Ankara and Tehran, all the negative repercussions that happened to the Kurdistan Region were the result of corruption. There is no political independence without economic independence. As long as we remain economically dependent on a share coming from Baghdad, our decision-making will depend on federal decisions. This is a call to strengthen the local economy, not for secession.

And as for relations with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party?

Although historical relations between the PUK and the KDP have been frequently marred by conflict, I believe that it is in the interest of the people of Kurdistan that they remain allied. The two have been leading forces in both development and failure, and have fought corruption since 1991. Therefore, they should support the current prime minister in his plans to fight corruption, both in PUK and KDP areas of influence. Regardless of the number of parliamentary seats they hold, the relationship between the two parties is part of the Kurdistan Region's strength.

Does Washington have any role in the negotiations between both sides?

They have a role in most negotiations. The Americans are a strategic ally, despite their position on the referendum. They affirm at all levels that the Kurdistan Region's security is part of their historic responsibility. They are working to bridge the rift between Kurdish political actors, but will not interfere without an invitation. The disputes have not reached the level of inviting Washington.

Do they usually have a role in the negotiations between you and Baghdad?

Certainly. They work to bring views closer together through their representatives in Baghdad and Erbil, and through their own representative, the international coalition.

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, how do you see the Kurdistan Region's future in Iraq?

Iraq is not like Afghanistan. What happened in Iraq is part of a major U.S. project to redraw the map of the Middle East. Even if some military forces withdraw, the United States will remain an important player in Iraq, especially since the U.S.-Iran conflict is largely centered in Iraq. And let us not forget the Iranian factor in Syria and the U.S. presence there.

From your perspective, will returning to the nuclear agreement limit or increase Iranian influence in Iraq?

The Americans will not allow it. I believe they have lines we may not know about regarding so-called "Iranian expansion." When Iran reaches those red lines, the U.S. reaction will be different.

Do some in the Kurdistan Region's leadership feel that it is necessary to look for alternatives to the United States (e.g., China and Russia)?

Before anyone allies themselves with you, they ally themselves with their own interests. The idea of placing the fate of the people of Kurdistan in the hands of outsiders has not existed since the days of Mela Mustafa Barzani. The Peshmerga forces themselves are the ones who protect the people of Kurdistan, and this people's desire for life and peace. From 1991 to 2003, there were no armies protecting us except for Resolution 688, which established the no-fly zone. We were able to build up our region amid a domestic and foreign embargo. Despite the infighting, two or three years after fighting ended we were able to become an oasis of peace and security that attracted most of the Iraqi opposition. The Kurds and their partners have a single goal, which is for the region to prosper and to live in peace and good neighborliness.

13. You have dealt with more than one U.S. administration. Who were you most comfortable with?

The U.S. administration has political constants in its dealings, and its leanings do not change with the change in president. Since 1991, the Americans, French, and British established a role that the people of Kurdistan have faithfully preserved because they supported the passage of Resolution 688 (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/110659?ln=en>). The U.S. administration's stance has been positive in many situations since 1991. In the referendum, they may have thought we were hasty, and stood in opposition accordingly. We respected their position, but held the referendum, and none of the massacres predicted by American experts occurred. This was because of the wisdom of President Masoud Barzani and the diplomacy of President Nechirvan Barzani, who dealt rationally with the post-referendum reactions, such as the occupation of Kirkuk and Sinjar.

Are the attacks targeting Erbil against the United States, or are the perpetrators using this slogan to attack the Kurdistan Region?

They declare that they are not targeting the region, but if we look at their political and ideological backgrounds we find the opposite. They use slogans that mention the U.S. presence. This style of slogan has existed since 1958 in Iraq and the Arab world. The latest is the slogan that the road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala. What I call the "obscurantist" forces continue to use these slogans to keep people ignorant. It is as if you have a patient on the verge of death, and you are thinking about saving a patient in a different house. This is Iraq's reality. I believe these slogans are intended for local consumption.

Do your relations with the United States impact your relations with countries of the region. That is, do regional countries consider you American agents?

No, I don't think so. These labels are used by militias and uncontrolled groups. Otherwise, we would consider all the Gulf states, Turkey, and Latin American countries and so on to be American agents. There are shared interests. The Kurdistan Region has common interests and good relations with Iran, as well as Ankara, despite all that has happened. The same is true of the Gulf states, and Egypt is coming to invest. The U.S. is one of these countries. Our political relations with the U.S. are more solid because of the war against ISIS and the unified stance we share.

From your position, how do you view Syria 's fate?

As President Masoud Barzani said regarding the Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan, their fate is still unknown because of the PKK's dominance over their capabilities. I believe that due to the contradictions and fragmentation in Syria between Turkey, Iran, the United States, and Russia, the conflict will continue. It is a thorny situation. There is no optimism for the foreseeable future, but I believe in the vitality of the Syrian people.

Do the Russians have any active role in Iraq?

So far, no. There are parties in the Iraqi federal leadership who want the U.S. to leave and are directing their efforts accordingly, signaling the need to rely on Russian weapons and strengthen relations with Russia. I believe they have a role, but it is not very important.

Where is Iraq heading?

I believe that these contradictions and what is happening now may be the beginning of a transition phase, especially since the results of the latest elections proved that the Iraqi people reject those who are taking the country off the path of development. This makes us optimistic about a bright future.

Conclusion

The facts show that if the international coalition and Washington withdraw from Iraq in a rushed and disorderly way, it will only benefit extremist militias—especially if the United States remains silent on these militias' crimes. Additionally, the U.S. retreat from playing an active role in Iraq's political scene is motivating its allies in Iraq, such as those in the KRI, to shrink back and feel a sense of danger. This could prompt them to seek alternatives to Washington to protect themselves from surrounding enemies. This would help Washington's opponents and their Iraqi affiliates. The most suitable solution for Iraq's problems is for the international coalition to help promote stability and growth and raise the level of democracy in the KRI. A solution would also include real intervention through diplomatic and political means to mend ties between Erbil and Baghdad. This, in turn, would increase the chance that Iraq becomes a country of laws, free of sectarianism and intervention from its neighbors. Washington should increase its deep commitment to its allies in the Middle East, including in the Kurdistan Region, and should not involve its local Iraqi allies in its conflicts with Iran and Iran's proxy groups. It is also important to keep the Kurdistan Region out of regional conflicts that would destroy its chance to obtain growth and stability. ❖

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