

# The “Full Barzani”: How Diplomatic Meetings with the Barzani Family Are Shaping Iraqi Kurdish Politics

by [Winthrop Rodgers \(/experts/winthrop-rodgers\)](#)

Apr 8, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/jwlt-ly-kl-al-barzany-kyf-thdd-allqaat-aldblwmasyt-m-aylt-barzany-malm-alsyast\)](#)



Brief Analysis

---

**For high-ranking officials visiting the capital of Iraq’s Kurdistan Region, there is a well-established expectation that they will meet separately with three political figures from the same family and party: Masoud, Nechirvan, and Masrour Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).**

**T**his ritual reveals some of the dynamics at play regarding domestic politics and diplomatic practices in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) and the country writ large. However outside officials themselves might see it, this protocol reinforces top-down family rule in the KRI and principally serves the KDP’s own political interests. Domestic instances can also be important signals when tea-leaf reading on the government formation underway in Iraq.

For foreign diplomats, it is an unwritten but strongly understood rule that visiting heads of government, cabinet ministers, and ambassadors will request to meet with KDP leader Masoud Barzani, Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani, and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani during trips through Erbil, sometimes just a few hours total after a more lengthy visit to Baghdad. These meetings reflect how power is kept close within the family in the KRI: Masoud is Masrour’s father and Nechirvan’s uncle, making the latter two first cousins. Nechirvan is Masrour’s direct predecessor as prime minister and successor to Masoud as president.

In a nod to the U.S. political concept of [the “Full Ginsburg.” \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Full\\_Ginsburg\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Full_Ginsburg) I have dubbed the protocol exhibition of meeting all three politicians in one go the “Full Barzani.” It’s quite a regular occurrence; I’ve [documented at least 31 instances \(https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1387779059346776064\)](#) of this phenomenon since April 12–approximately one every eleven days. Moreover, this list is non-exhaustive and only includes instances that are publicly acknowledged by the KRG on social media or KDP-affiliated media channels. Private and sensitive meetings are obviously not included, and the KRG and KDP are selective about what meetings with what countries they choose to reveal and highlight.

The occasions for the meetings vary; some are one-off affairs, like when Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde [came through Erbil \(https://twitter.com/SafeenDizayee/status/1462863494248865799\)](#) last November during an Iraq trip, or courtesy calls for new or departing ambassadors, such as [the arrival tour \(https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1442059654922571791\)](#) for France’s new ambassador to Iraq Eric

Chevallier in September. Other officials repeat this cycle regularly, like UN Special Representative for Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert or US Ambassador Matthew Tueller, who has pulled a “Full Barzani” at **least nine times** (<https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1501613542725885955>) since February 2020.

Foreign visitors from all corners engage in this practice. Former UK Ambassador Stephen Hickey did a “full Barzani” at least five times during his tenure, highlighting the UK government’s apparent **desire for close ties** (<https://twitter.com/sblhickey/status/1385178997399633921>) with the KDP. Russian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Mikhail Bogdanov **completed a set** ([https://twitter.com/masrou\\_barzani/status/1466088804658335756](https://twitter.com/masrou_barzani/status/1466088804658335756)) in December, during which Prime Minister Masrou Barzani “reaffirmed the historic friendship between our peoples and more cooperation.” Then Iranian Foreign Minister **Mohammad Javad Zarif did a "Full Barzani"** (<https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1387400175535132678>) last April. German, Australian, Saudi, Canadian, Italian, and European Union officials have completed their own in the past year, while numerous others have **met with two out of three Barzanis** (<https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1465709973120245764>). Still more engage with all three over a **longer period of time** (<https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1453258475849531392>). Pope Francis **managed the rare feat** (<https://twitter.com/K24English/status/1368481378241835008/photo/1>) of getting all three Barzanis in the same room together during his historic visit in March 2021, an exception to the usual protocol dictating separate meetings for each.

For diplomats, the meetings are arranged through the KRG’s Department of Foreign Relations and the offices of the three men. Failure to make a request to meet with all “Three B’s,” as they are colloquially known, would raise question marks and be perceived as a slight by the KDP. Even so, the arrangement is a highly unusual one. While the KRI has some powers to engage with foreign governments outlined in Article 121 of the Iraqi constitution, it is uncommon for such narrow, personal, and partisan protocol arrangements to exist for diplomats at a sub-national level or to be so rigorously expected. Visitors can get angry tellings-off from KRG officials if they deviate from the KDP-approved programming.

Domestically, Iraqi government and party officials also engage in the practice. For instance, **Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi** (<https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1503345605778808839>) met all three Barzanis following the **Erbil missile attack** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/multiple-rockets-fall-erbil-northern-iraq-state-media-2022-03-12/>) in March. Iraqi President Barham Salih has had at least two rounds since last April, including one in November as he **sought reelection** (<https://amwaj.media/article/who-will-be-the-new-iraqi-president-barham-salih-has-a-chance-of-re-election>) in the face of a KDP challenge. Other visits yield their significance in retrospect: notably, Sadrist official Nassar al-Rubaiee’s “Full Barzani” **last June** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20210601130334/https://nrttv.com/En/News.aspx?id=28313&MapID=1>) prefaced the attempt to form a **“national majority government”** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/sadr-committed-forming-iraqs-first-majority-government>) between the Sadrists, KDP, and Sunni blocs following the federal elections in October. With government formation ongoing, it is worthwhile to keep an eye on who pays call on the KDP leadership in Erbil.

Of course, the KDP is hardly the only political party in the Kurdistan Region. KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani of the Sulaymaniyah-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is **occasionally included in meetings** (<https://twitter.com/SafeenDizayee/status/1284114399339438086>) with the prime minister, while his brother — PUK leader Bafel Talabani (<https://twitter.com/pukmedia/status/1493265619835359233>) — might get his own face-to-face with visitors. Nevertheless, the KDP is by far the biggest game in town during official meetings in Erbil. Spare a thought also for the KRI’s opposition parties or independents, for whom there is little time or attention amid a packed schedule of Barzani meetings. One must be content to imagine what officials and diplomats might gain from a more diverse range of perspectives and contacts. There are likewise no women represented in the top ranks

of the KDP, so their voices are effectively excluded from these high-level discussions—which ought to include the **[dangerous rise in femicides \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070320221\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070320221)** in the KRI.

It is also worth reflecting on what this practice means for the state of the KDP itself. The act of meeting separately with each Barzani is reflective of the KDP's tribal, patriarchal, and factional character and serves as a way of balancing egos. In the internal hierarchy of the party, Masoud ranks highest while his son and nephew defer to him during combined affairs. Meeting Masrour or Nechirvan by themselves allows them to speak in service of their own political interests.

However, there are also extreme political and personal differences within the KDP bubbling beneath the surface and at play in the insistence on separation. A particularly **[combustible rivalry \(https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/12/28/kurdistan-region-in-a-time-of-kurdish-crown-princes/\)](https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/12/28/kurdistan-region-in-a-time-of-kurdish-crown-princes/)** is developing between Nechirvan and Masrour (the latter backed by Masoud), which has the potential to explode at a future date. The pettiness of this factionalism was ludicrously on display at this year's Munich Security Conference, when **[Masrour and Nechirvan led separate delegations \(https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1495300047528943617\)](https://twitter.com/wrodgers2/status/1495300047528943617)** and even met **[some of the same people \(https://twitter.com/KurdistanRegion/status/1494967266831704064\)](https://twitter.com/KurdistanRegion/status/1494967266831704064)** in **[different meetings \(https://twitter.com/RudawTurkce/status/1495037599022555138\)](https://twitter.com/RudawTurkce/status/1495037599022555138)**.

While tracking “Full Barzani” meetings may also be instructive for casual political analysis, the substantive impact of this insistence on separate meetings is more insidious. It is clear that KDP's purpose in enforcing this protocol is to reinforce a perception about the Barzani family's centrality in Kurdish and Iraqi politics to the exclusion of all others. Moreover, these meetings help strengthen the power of Masoud, Nechirvan, and Masrour both within the party and in the broader political field. Officials who acquiesce to this arrangement are legitimizing and playing into these implicit messages, even if this is not their intent.

Ask many ordinary citizens in the KRI to describe their political leaders—both KDP and PUK—and they will call them “mafias.” Anti-democratic signals are flashing bright red: **[voter turnout \(https://twitter.com/abdullahawez/status/1447571105091407873\)](https://twitter.com/abdullahawez/status/1447571105091407873)** is down; young people and middle-class families are **[leaving in droves \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59419953\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59419953)** for Europe; **[journalists and activists \(https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/iraq-kurdistan-law-6.php\)](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/iraq-kurdistan-law-6.php)** are arrested and **[jailed on trumped up charges \(https://iraq.un.org/index.php/en/166267-human-rights-and-freedom-expression-trials-kurdistan-region-iraq\)](https://iraq.un.org/index.php/en/166267-human-rights-and-freedom-expression-trials-kurdistan-region-iraq)**; the KRG is **[not paying public servants \(https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/67671\)](https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/67671)**. It is up to outside officials to decide how to manage those dynamics and perceptions about how they engage with the Kurdistan Region's political leadership: whether it is business as usual or time for a new approach. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



## BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Terror and Turbulence in Israel and the West Bank](#)

Apr 8, 2022

◆  
Anna Ahronheim,  
Matthew Levitt,  
Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/terror-and-turbulence-israel-and-west-bank)



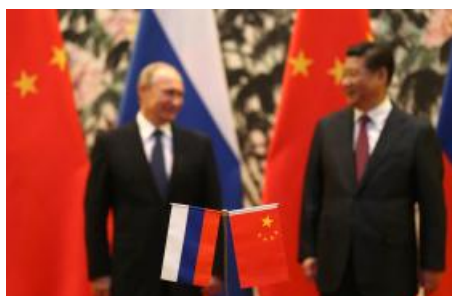
## BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [How Big Is the Islamic State Threat in Israel?](#)

Apr 8, 2022

◆  
Ido Levy

(/policy-analysis/how-big-islamic-state-threat-israel)



## ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [West's Weakness Led Putin into Ukraine—and Other Enemies Are Looking for Similar Signs](#)

Apr 8, 2022

◆  
Dennis Ross

(/policy-analysis/wests-weakness-led-putin-ukraine-and-other-enemies-are-looking-similar-signs)