

# Iraq's Kurds Weigh Their Options, Balancing the United States and Iran

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## Brief Analysis

A trip to Iraqi Kurdistan last week, my first since the abortive referendum on independence there in October 2017, revealed a political landscape at once utterly different and eerily familiar. In the former category is the new, widespread understanding—both among the leaders I met with and among their younger followers in business, academe, and the media—that Kurdish independence is a long-term aspiration, not a realistic near-term policy option. Along with this view is a sharp reduction in attempts to get more deeply involved with Kurdish issues in any of the neighboring countries beyond Iraq's borders—either Syria, Turkey, or Iran.

The common denominator here is a marked shift toward more modest and arguably more realistic political ambitions, whether inside or outside of Iraq. This also means a move toward greater willingness to find practical compromises with the central government in Baghdad. The newfound pragmatism my Kurdish interlocutors exhibited now extends to tough issues ranging from revenue sharing to border controls to security cooperation along the autonomous territory's newly restored demarcation line with the rest of Iraq. It even extends to a degree of resignation over the future status of the disputed key oil city of Kirkuk, which the Kurds had taken from ISIS in 2014 only to lose to the Iraqi army and Iranian-backed militias (the *Hashd al-Shaabi*, or Popular Mobilization Forces) in the immediate aftermath of the referendum.

Connected to these changes is a more acute Kurdish sense that Iran and its proxies potentially pose a direct threat, a significantly different viewpoint from my previous trips. Their capture of Kirkuk vividly demonstrated how much they can hurt the Iraqi Kurds; and, in the words of one very senior KRG official I met privately on this visit, “no one can stop them.” Other local Kurds often reminded me how in the past two years Iran has periodically attacked Kurdish exiles deep inside Iraqi Kurdistan with missiles, assassination squads, or kidnapping teams.

Iran is also more actively seeking to expand its engagement and influence inside Kurdistan, not just among its usual proteges near the common border but also in the capital of Erbil and in the ranks of the previously more reticent KDP party centered there. Qassem Soleimani—head of Iran's IRGC Qods Force and a major power behind the scenes in Iraq—reportedly visits Erbil about as often as Baghdad these days, unannounced yet almost royally received in

both places.

Much of Iran's overall political, economic, and security influence in Kurdistan is also exercised in the shadows rather than in public official channels. For example, the high-profile Sulay Forum conference I attended March 6-7 featured presentations by senior officials and experts not only from Baghdad, but also from many other countries: Arabs, Turks, Americans, Europeans, Russians, and more. Yet as I have always noticed at similar events, not a single Iranian official spoke—and not for want of an invitation. Indeed, I have previously agreed to appear on conference panels in Kurdistan with Iranian diplomats, only to have them fail to show up at the last moment. Rather, Iran's preference is to shun such public events with other nationalities, the more to highlight (or perhaps hide) its own, supposedly unique, private role in Kurdistan.

That role is hardly a benign one. Not long ago, to cite one example, an Erbil businessman told me he had been twice approached by Iranian agents who wanted to borrow his truck for some unspecified purposes. On this trip, I heard from several Kurdish security sources that Iran is now secretly using such unmarked commercial trucks to ferry advanced missile parts across Kurdistan, as in other parts of Iraq, to unknown militia destinations—either inside or outside the country. The only possible limit local officials saw on such activity is Iran's growing domestic economic difficulties. Asked to give a concrete example, one local observer wryly said, "Well, we see lots more Iranians crossing our border to find work lately. In fact, right now most of the prostitutes in Erbil are from Iran."

Most of the Kurds I spoke with say they resent these Iranian encroachments. They add that unlike many other Iraqis, and despite some political or cultural ties with Iran, the largely Sunni Kurds have little common religious affiliation with most Iranians—and much pent-up anger at Iran's brutal treatment of its own Kurdish minority of around ten million. Yet today, Iraqi Kurds often feel pushed to curry greater favor with Tehran. Two senior KRG officials told me privately that they had invited Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to add Erbil to his Baghdad visit last week, although they had not received a positive reply. And in a public interview this week, the KRG prime minister refused to commit to enforcing American economic sanctions against Iran, punting the ball to the Baghdad government instead.

This brings us to the crux of the matter: Iraqi Kurds no longer feel they can fully count on American support to counter Iran, even inside Kurdistan. A number cited the on-again, off-again U.S. military mission to the Kurds in neighboring Syria as an ominous portent. And several senior KRG officials told me they would welcome a continuing American military presence in Kurdistan, even or especially if the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad carried out current threats by pro-Iran factions to expel U.S. forces from Iraq. As one put it, "You were right to warn us that the U.S. would not come to our aid if the referendum backfired. But now, if Iran's pressure on Baghdad proves too great to resist, could the U.S. possibly pivot to Kurdistan instead?" The Kurds' desire for American protection is not new. However, their uncertainty about its prospects is clearly far greater than it was on my last visit, just before Qasem Soleimani masterminded the attack on Kirkuk.

At the same time, in other ways, Kurdistan today also gives me an acute sense of "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*" (the more things change, the more they stay the same). The region is back to its old borders, where the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) still enjoys a great deal of day-to-day autonomy from Baghdad. It also continues to enjoy, based on my recent experiences, a much larger measure of public safety than most other areas of Iraq, along with a notably friendlier attitude toward the United States. Kurdistan's economy has regained most of its previous coping mechanisms, with the majority of workers still on the KRG government payroll labor and their salaries freshly increased, all funded by a combination of local and Baghdad-supplied oil revenues.

Moreover, despite the great upheaval after the referendum, the same political parties and even the same individuals still largely rule the territory: the KDP and the Barzani family in Erbil and the west and the PUK and the Talabani family in Sulaymaniyah and the east. The most recent regional elections yielded the usual advantage for the KDP.

Negotiations are currently underway regarding the precise distribution between these two parties of parliamentary chairmanships, cabinet ministries, and other perquisites political power. The stability of this alignment, based on my latest conversations on the scene, owes something to a sense of shared responsibility for recent reverses: the KDP is blamed by some for pressing ahead with the referendum at any cost, while the rival PUK is blamed by some for losing Kirkuk when Iraqi and Iranian-backed forces responded to the vote with force.

So entrenched is this traditional power structure that the top positions in government are about to be reshuffled among the Barzani clan: Nechirvan will switch from prime minister to president; his first cousin, Masroor, will take over as prime minister. And the final arbiter behind the scenes, according to my conversations with senior officials in both those offices, will remain the former president who chose to resign officially right after the referendum backfired: Massoud Barzani, Masroor's father and Nechirvan's uncle.

In this important sense, then, not that much has changed inside Iraqi Kurdistan, notwithstanding the tumultuous events of the past two years. What has changed is how these Kurds weigh their outside options. They tell me, I think sincerely, that they would much prefer the United States to any other ally. But they are also much less certain than before how much the United States reciprocates that sentiment. ❖

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