

Breaking the Ice: Erbil-Tehran Relations after Barzani's Visit

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Brief Analysis

Although many in Erbil lament Iran's significant influence in Iraq, President Barzani now seems open to leveraging its power to address the KRI's election dispute.

From May 5 to 6, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) President Nechirvan Barzani visited Tehran, opening up the possibility of a renewed era of cooperation. During his trip, Barzani met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Hussein Salami, and a host of other high-level officials. This visit—the first of its kind in three years—signals a potential shift in KRI-Iran relations.

Khamenei has long taken an adversarial stance towards the pro-U.S. orientation of successive Kurdish governments, and the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is often at odds with Iran's allies in Iraq. Moreover, this sudden about-face also comes relatively quickly on the heels of Iran's strike on KRI-capital of Erbil with ballistic missiles in January. Despite their tumultuous past, Iran and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have a vested interest in resolving some of the quarrels that plague Iraq's political scene, and Tehran sees an opportunity to further expand its influence in the region.

During President Barzani's meetings with officials, Iranian media [reported \(https://www.hamshahronline.ir/news/849490/5-%25D9%2585%25D8%25AD%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1-%25D9%2585%25D9%2587%25D9%2585-%25D8%25B3%25D9%2581%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25DB%258C-%25D8%25A8%25D9%2587-%25D8%25AA%25D9%2587%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25DA%2586%25DB%258C%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AE%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA-%25D9%2588%25DB%258C%25DA%2598%25D9%2587-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25DB%258C%25D9%2584-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B2\)](https://www.hamshahronline.ir/news/849490/5-%25D9%2585%25D8%25AD%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1-%25D9%2585%25D9%2587%25D9%2585-%25D8%25B3%25D9%2581%25D8%25B1-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25DB%258C-%25D8%25A8%25D9%2587-%25D8%25AA%25D9%2587%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25DA%2586%25DB%258C%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AE%25D9%2588%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA-%25D9%2588%25DB%258C%25DA%2598%25D9%2587-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25DB%258C%25D9%2584-%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B2) that issues related to security, economics and the KRI's internal politics were discussed. Barzani and his KDP are currently mired in a protracted political stalemate with the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and it is possible that Tehran may be asked to play the role of mediator between the two sides.

Yet the ruling KDP—and by extension the KRG—has traditionally been at odds with Iran, as Tehran maintains close relations with both the PUK and the central government in Baghdad. Additionally, the KRG has sought a more balanced stance in the face of the regional rivalry between Iran and Turkey. Although many in Erbil lament Iran's significant influence in Iraq, President Barzani now seems open to leveraging its power to address the KRI's election dispute.

Intervention in Kurdish Domestic Politics as a mediator

The two dominant parties in the KRI—the KDP and the PUK—have several long-standing conflicts regarding security, economic, and political issues. Tensions between the two Kurdish parties came to a head in February of this year, when the Iraqi Federal Court (IFC) deemed the eleven minority seats in the Kurdistan region's parliament unconstitutional. The case brought forward by the PUK weakened the KDP's power, as all of these quota seats were historically filled with its allies, but it also diminished the KRG's political pull overall.

In response the KDP declared that it would not participate in the elections scheduled for June 10. Exactly three hours after In the midst of Nechirvan Barzani's meeting with Khamenei, his cousin and KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani also [submitted](#)

[a petition of objection to the ruling. Following that, the court, where the Iraqi Shia political parties are influential, called <https://peregraf.com/ku/news/6938> for the suspension of the election until further notice.](https://www.kurdistan24.net/ckb/story/257615-%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25DA%25AF%25D8%25A7%25DB%258C-%25D9%2581%25DB%258C%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25DA%25B5%25DB%258C-%25DA%25A9%25DB%2586%25D9%2585%25DB%258C%25D8%25B3%25DB%258C%25DB%2586%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A8%25DB%2595-%25DA%2595%25D8%25A7%25DA%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AA%25D9%2586%25DB%258C-%25DA%2595%25DB%258E%25DA%25A9%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25DB%2595%25DA%25A9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25DB%258C-%25D9%2587%25DB%2595%25DA%25B5%25D8%25A8%25DA%2598%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2586%25DB%258C-%25D9%25BE%25DB%2595%25D8%25B1%25D9%2584%25DB%2595%25D9%2585%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586%25DB%258C-%25DA%25A9%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B3%25D8%25AA%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D9%25BE%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8%25DB%2595%25D9%2586%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25AF%25DB%2595%25DA%25A9%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA)

PUK member Jabbar Yaver [claimed \(http://alwaght.net/en/News/252031/What-Are-the-Security-and-Political-Objectives-of-Barzani%25E2%2580%2599s-Visit-to-Tehran?\)](http://alwaght.net/en/News/252031/What-Are-the-Security-and-Political-Objectives-of-Barzani%25E2%2580%2599s-Visit-to-Tehran?) that during Barzani's visit, internal political issues in the KRI would also be discussed. After his meetings, President Barzani emphasized that he did not bring up KDP-PUK mediation, but he did admit that his delegation requested help from Tehran in resolving the problems between Baghdad and Erbil. To this end, Barzani subsequently visited Baghdad for the second time in the same month, where he met with the IFC President and other election officials. The fact that the KRG and federal officials agreed to hold such meetings could signal Tehran's tacit approval in regards to election postponement.

After Barzani's petition the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council [stated \(https://shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/Kurdish-leaders-welcome-Iraqi-Judiciary-s-decision-to-grant-minority-groups-seats-in-Kurdistan-parliament\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/Kurdish-leaders-welcome-Iraqi-Judiciary-s-decision-to-grant-minority-groups-seats-in-Kurdistan-parliament) that the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is required to allocate five seats to the minorities in KRI Parliament. At the same time IHEC suggested to KRI's Presidency that the election could be postponed to September 5 which was demanded by KDP and strongly rejected by PUK. The KDP, which boycotted the previous elections, re-announced that they will be [running \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/090620241\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/090620241) upcoming elections. KRI's Presidency has not set the date for elections yet.

Although the PUK has consistently objected to the possible postponement of the elections, it seems likely that Tehran will [play \(https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-kurdistans-president-visits-tehran-ease-tensions?amp\)](https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-kurdistans-president-visits-tehran-ease-tensions?amp) a strong role as a mediator and eventually persuade the PUK to acquiesce. By helping reach an uneasy agreement on the election issue, Tehran will garner enough favor with the KRG, which may allow it to demand concessions in the security and economic sectors.

Tehran's Security concerns

After the United States toppled the Saddam regime in 2003, Iran had the opportunity to establish political and economic relations with the KRG, opening consulates in both Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The KRG was able to open a representative office in Tehran, which operates as a "de-facto embassy," even as such an office has yet to be opened in Turkey. The relations between Iran and the KRG have witnessed ups and downs since 2003 due to regional developments, the emergence of ISIS, and Iran's conflict with the United States and Israel.

One of the main reason for the unstable relations between Erbil and Tehran is the armed Iranian opposition Kurdish parties located in the KRI, namely the Iranian Kurdistan Democratic Party, Komele, PAK and PJAK. With "the strategic security agreement" signed between Baghdad, Erbil, and Tehran in September 2023, the opposition parties (except for PJAK) based in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah have largely complied with the agreement and have relocated armed elements away from the Iraq-Iran border. However, The process of [implementing \(https://en.mehrnews.com/news/215297/Baghdad-to-revoke-passports-of-Kurdish-separatist-groups\)](https://en.mehrnews.com/news/215297/Baghdad-to-revoke-passports-of-Kurdish-separatist-groups) the security agreement is still ongoing.

Although the KRG and Iran have been willing to cooperate on a limited scale, Erbil's strong relations with Turkey, the United States, and the Gulf countries raise concern for Iran. [Tehran sees the KRI as a "second Israel" \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/16/iran-missile-attack-erbil-iraq-israel-spy-irgc/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/16/iran-missile-attack-erbil-iraq-israel-spy-irgc/) due to its claim that Erbil is a nest of Mossad operatives. Iran's security perspective towards Erbil became more evident during KRI's independence referendum in 2017. Ali Akbar Vilayeti, one of Khamenei's senior advisors at that time, [stated \(https://resalat-news.com/fatf-%25d8%25a2%25d8%25af%25d8%25b1%25d8%25b3-%25d8%25ba%25d9%2584%25d8%25b7-%25d8%25a2%25d8%25ae%25d9%2588%25d9%2586%25d8%25af%25db%258c-%25d8%25a7%25d8%25b2-%25d8%25b1%25db%258c%25d8%25b4%25d9%2587-%25d8%25a7%25d8%25ac%25d8%25b1%25d8%25a7-%25d9%2586%25d8%25b4%25d8%25af%25d9%2586-%25d9%2582%25d8%25b1%25d8%25a7%25d8%25b1/?code=271333\)](https://resalat-news.com/fatf-%25d8%25a2%25d8%25af%25d8%25b1%25d8%25b3-%25d8%25ba%25d9%2584%25d8%25b7-%25d8%25a2%25d8%25ae%25d9%2588%25d9%2586%25d8%25af%25db%258c-%25d8%25a7%25d8%25b2-%25d8%25b1%25db%258c%25d8%25b4%25d9%2587-%25d8%25a7%25d8%25ac%25d8%25b1%25d8%25a7-%25d9%2586%25d8%25b4%25d8%25af%25d9%2586-%25d9%2582%25d8%25b1%25d8%25a7%25d8%25b1/?code=271333) that the Muslim community would not "allow a new Israel to take shape in the region," likening Erbil's desire for independence to that of the Jews in 1948.

Iran's hostile stance towards the KRG is more than mere rhetoric. On January 15, the Iranian military [targeted \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-revolutionary-guards-say-they-have-attacked-espionage-centers-iraqs-erbil-2024-01-15/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-revolutionary-guards-say-they-have-attacked-espionage-centers-iraqs-erbil-2024-01-15/) the homes of two important business men with ballistic missiles, claiming that the buildings were being used by Israeli operatives. According to an official readout, then-President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi [told \(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5004161-raisi-urges-barzani-prevent-%25E2%2580%2598exploitation%25E2%2580%2599-kurdistan-launch-attacks-against-iran\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/5004161-raisi-urges-barzani-prevent-%25E2%2580%2598exploitation%25E2%2580%2599-kurdistan-launch-attacks-against-iran) Barzani that they expect the KRG government to "prevent <https://president.ir/fa/151679> the exploitation of their land by Zionist elements and groups opposed to the revolution of Iran." At the meeting he held in Tehran, Barzani re-affirmed that the Kurdistan region will not allow its territory to be a national security concern

to its neighbors, adding that as a matter of principle, it is not acceptable for any armed groups to attack neighboring countries and withdraw back to the KRI.

In his comments to Kurdish media in Tehran after the meeting, President Barzani said that they did not hide that they had problems with Tehran before, but he added that a new chapter was opened in bilateral relations and that they would sign a new agreement soon. A few days after the meeting, Supreme Leader Khamenei [shared \(https://x.com/Khamenei_fa/status/1788969764515111216\)](https://x.com/Khamenei_fa/status/1788969764515111216) a message to the public that echoed a similar sentiment, saying that "We see a closer relationship between ourselves and the Kurdish community - whether in Iran or Iraq - than any other nation; they are among us." With this message, Khamenei hoped to portray Iranians as "big brothers" rather than seeing Erbil as a strategic partner or neighbor.

Erbil wants a power of balance between two regional countries

One of Iran's primary aims in hosting President Barzani was pulling the KRG away from Turkey's orbit. For years, Erbil has aligned itself much more closely with Ankara than with Tehran. The KRG's icy stance towards Iran was due to the difficult relationship between Erbil and Baghdad during the Iranian-backed Nuri Maliki period (2006-2013), among other factors. During this period, the KRI was in close contact with Turkey both economically and politically. Despite all the objections and harsh reactions of the Iraqi central government, Erbil signed a [50-year strategic agreement \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-and-iraqs-kurds-agree-50-year-energy-deal\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-and-iraqs-kurds-agree-50-year-energy-deal) with Turkey to export oil, in a move that completely circumvented Baghdad.

Today, Erbil is the transit route of a significant project that will increase Turkey's influence in Iraq, though how much part the KRI will take in the project is a mystery. The implementation of the [Development Road Project \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/35055-Development-Road-Project-to-pass-through-Kurdistan-Region\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/35055-Development-Road-Project-to-pass-through-Kurdistan-Region), which was the main topic of Erdoğan's visit to Baghdad and Erbil, is on the agenda between Baghdad and Ankara. The financial involvement of the UAE and Qatar in the project has raised expectations, but Iran's stance on this issue is not yet clear.

However, in order to avoid making a mistake similar to 2014 and allay Iran's potential concerns, analysts [believe \(https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Forging-regional-bonds-President-Barzani-s-diplomatic-odyssey-in-Tehran\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Forging-regional-bonds-President-Barzani-s-diplomatic-odyssey-in-Tehran) that Barzani, with his visit to Tehran, tried to convince Iranian officials that the Development Road project was not a strategic target for Iran. Another concern of Iran is potential Turkish military operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) fighters in Duhok and Erbil governorates in the summer. Such an operation will pave the way for Ankara's influence in Iraq to grow. In order to stymie Ankara's influence in the KRI, Iran provided cover for certain PKK elements by bringing them under the banner of the semi-official Popular Mobilization Forces, complicating any future attacks by Turkey. In that context, after Erdoğan's visit to Iraq, it is said that Iranian officials [discussed \(https://thenewregion.com/posts/503/iran-concern-over-potential-turkish-operation-in-iraq\)](https://thenewregion.com/posts/503/iran-concern-over-potential-turkish-operation-in-iraq) potential Turkish military operations and its repercussions with their Iraqi counterparts. It is important to note that after Erdoğan's visit, the Khormor gas field, operated by UAE's Dana Gas, was the target of a missile attack, and Iranian-backed Shia militias are the suspected culprits.

Iran has tried to undermine Erbil's capability through the government in Baghdad and its influence on PUK in Sulaymaniah, but now Iran seems willing to reign in its antagonism and open a new phase of positive relations with the KRG, as such a détente could be more beneficial for Tehran.

Although Erbil wants to balance Ankara and Tehran's rivalry in the region, due to its close relations with the United States, the western countries and NATO member Turkey, Iran seems to continue pressuring Erbil in an attempt to have the same influence it enjoys in Sulaymaniyah. The KRG's ability to convince Iran that Erbil does not threaten its interests in Iraq can be considered as a necessary move to prevent Tehran from pressuring it through its proxies or directly through military action. ❖

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