

# New Governments in Iraq and Kurdistan: A Trip Report

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Kenneth Pollack is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.



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Brief Analysis

## Four experts who recently returned from Baghdad and Erbil report on the results of the government formation process.

*On November 1, Kenneth Pollack, Nussaibah Younis, Michael Knights, and Bilal Wahab addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Pollack is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Younis is a senior advisor to the European Institute of Peace. Knights, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. Wahab is the Institute's Nathan and*

*Esther K. Wagner Fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## **KENNETH POLLACK**

**T**he May elections were a disaster, but the resulting government is better than anyone anticipated. The new president, Barham Salih, the new prime minister, Adil Abdulmahdi, and the people of Iraq would all like to see the country change in the right direction. The disconnect between the wishes of the people and the leadership has been a historic problem in Iraq, so the United States should be hopeful.

Still, the situation is not without its complexities. The new government has to deal with three different communities deeply aggrieved by unique issues. The Kurds are furious about their loss of control over Kirkuk, their second-class citizenship, and the status of their oil and security forces. The Sunnis are desperate for reconstruction after the war against the Islamic State (IS), worried about the jihadist group's resurgence, and tired of being excluded from greater political power in Baghdad. The Shia are infuriated about the government's inability to provide basic services and an economic framework for reviving the entire country. Each community is laser-focused on its own problems and does not care about the others' concerns.

On the political front, Prime Minister Adil will preside over yet another national unity government. While he tried to get past the patronage politics of such governments when he chose his cabinet, he was not able to completely overcome them. The riots in the south point to the fact that if he fails to deliver fairly soon, Iraqis will lose faith in the system itself.

## **NUSSAIBAH YOUNIS**

**I**ran and the United States spent a lot of energy jockeying for influence in Iraq during the government formation process, and interpretations of the results have been mixed. The various positive outcomes have led some to regard the new government as a success for the United States, but this is not the case.

Take Salih, for example. Although there is no reason to undermine him or belittle his capabilities, it was Iran, not the United States, who brokered his return to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and shut down opposition within the party. He came out of the May parliamentary elections in a fragile condition. The United States should still work with him, of course, but it should not forget whose actions brought him to power.

In the same vein, while the United States worked with Adil extensively when he was Iraq's oil minister, it supported incumbent prime minister Haider al-Abadi during the elections beyond all reasonable analysis of the situation. By misreading the political scene, Washington lost an opportunity to influence a candidate with some potential sense of allegiance.

In contrast, Tehran has done some extraordinary work in building political alliances the likes of which the United States would not have thought possible. For instance, right-wing Sunnis have been brought into Bina Bloc, the political arm of some Shia militias. The Iranians have intentionally not used the full extent of their leverage, however, because they do not want to humiliate the United States to the point where it imposes even more significant restrictions on Iraq. Tehran is also sensitive to how such interference might play out in local Iraqi politics.

## **MICHAEL KNIGHTS**

**K**irkuk is foundational to an oil revenue deal between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the United States is playing an essential role in bringing it into that process. Before such a deal can be reached, the coming year will likely see Baghdad and the KRG continue pursuing a collaborative oil export scheme. The Kurds will probably keep self-marketing their own crude and exporting Baghdad's Kirkuk crude, while the central government tops up the KRG budget. This strategy will allow the Kurds to maintain their salary payments, social services, and petroleum cost requirements, as well as continue servicing their debts at a level of \$200 million

dollars a month.

On the security front, Operation Infinite Resolve was intended to erode the Islamic State's power to where it was in 2012. Yet while IS has dropped its operational tempo in quantitative terms, it has raised its game qualitatively. The Iraqi security forces need to recruit more members, especially locals, to continue defeating IS pockets. With the group taking advantage of territorial disputes between Baghdad and the KRG, the need for a new generation of joint forces is urgent. Iraqi officials have considered recruiting two new counterterrorism brigades, one from Sulaymaniyah and one from Erbil. They would be under federal control and resourced through Baghdad, but composed of locals from the Kurdish and non-Kurdish communities.

Elsewhere, the Popular Mobilization Forces did well in the national elections, with Asaib Ahl al-Haq jumping from one to fifteen seats in parliament. The United States needs to clearly signal what it is willing and unwilling to do with PMF units in terms of training and support. Some believe that Washington should sanction AAH and certain other units. Whatever U.S. officials decide to do, they should support Iraqi defense institutions. The PMF emerged in the first place because Iraq did not have formal reserve forces, and that gap still exists today. The United States needs to maintain its presence, compete with Iran on security cooperation, and help Iraq develop reserve forces. By doing so, it will be able to beat Tehran every time, because the Iraqis value U.S. security cooperation more than Iranian support.

## **BILAL WAHAB**

**W**hen the dust settled from the government formation process, Iraq had made several notable gains. The transition of power was completed peacefully; the Iraqi polity is now more responsive to the public's demands; IS has been largely defeated; both Iran and the United States gave tacit approval to the new government; and Baghdad witnessed a greater level of engagement by Sunnis and Kurds.

Yet governance remains the primary challenge. In Basra, Shia citizens were willing to protest against a Shia-led government because they did not have electricity or water. In the business sector, the overall economy is still in the government's grasp despite Baghdad's vocal support for free markets.

Meanwhile, Iran continues to exert major influence due to Iraq's weak institutions and transactional politics. Yet Tehran assumes more credit than it is due, especially in naming Iraq's new leadership. The agency of local parties and leaders should not be discounted.

The Kurdish elections were peaceful as well, though turnout was low—probably even lower than in the national elections. Not many young people voted. Moreover, many local citizens believe that the KRG's two ruling factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the PUK, used their positions to print fake IDs and send their supporters to vote in place of others. Whatever the case, Kurdish opposition parties lost seats, while the KDP and PUK prevailed again despite major stumbles such as mismanaging the economy and last year's independence referendum. This indicates that the two ruling parties have been investing heavily in their institutions, establishing a very strong party apparatus that makes KRG power dynamics less dynamic than Iraq's.

The KRG will now have to deal with another source of pressure from Iran and Turkey. Tehran has become increasingly aggressive against the Iranian Kurdish opposition groups that have sought safe haven in northern Iraq. Likewise, the Turkish military presence inside the KRG is growing, which could lead to escalation against Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) forces in the area.

*This summary was prepared by Jo-Ann Estes. ❖*

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