

# The Kurdish Security Dilemma, Explained

by [Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Nov 7, 2017

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Yerevan Saeed is a Ph.D. candidate at the Carter School of Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason. He previously served as White House Correspondent for Kurdish Rudaw TV and has worked for news agencies including the New York Times, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the BBC, and The Guardian as a journalist and translator.



### Brief Analysis

**N**ovember 7, 2017

Former Kurdistan region president Masoud Barzani miscalculated the potential fallout of the referendum. But political miscalculation by itself cannot explain Barzani's decision to hold the controversial referendum on September 25th. Rather, the security dilemma in which Iraqi Kurds have lived since the foundation of Iraq in early 1920 can better shed light on the motive of the former Kurdish leader's ill-fated decision.

After overthrowing the Hashemite monarchy, former Iraqi leader Abdul Karim Qasim invited Barzani's father, Mustafa, and his Peshmerga forces to return from the Soviet Union in 1958 after eleven years in exile. Qasim lured the elder Barzani on the promise of giving Kurds a real partnership in Iraq, including a vice presidential post and cultural, economic, and political rights. In addition, Qasim promised to formally recognize Kurds as one of two nations living in Iraq. Mustafa Barzani took Qasim at his word and returned to Iraq. But Qasim had other plans.

After regime change in 1958, Qasim faced stiff resistance from Arab nationalist forces, spearheaded by the Baathists. Threatened with a number of attempted coups against him, he wanted a strong alliance to crash the pan-Arab nationalists. The best choice to help eliminate this threat was to rally the help of the Kurds.

With the help of Mustafa Barzani, Qasim was able to quell the Baathists and stabilize his regime. But as Baghdad became stronger, Qasim's Kurdish alliance became weaker and Iraq became more hostile towards the Kurds. He backtracked on his earlier promises to grant Kurdish rights, arrested Kurdish officials, banned Kurdish newspapers, and prohibited Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to hold its party conference. Barzani, in response, demanded autonomy for Kurds, which was immediately rejected by Baghdad, leading to drawn-out armed conflict.

With each change of president in Iraq—in 1963, 1966, and 1968—Barzani declared a unilateral ceasefire to give dialogue a chance as an alternative to armed conflict. But each new president in Baghdad used the ceasefire to consolidate its foothold and launch military campaigns against Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Eventually realizing it could not defeat Barzani militarily, Baghdad resorted to negotiations with the Kurds in the late 1960s. In 1970 both sides signed the Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement, in which Baghdad gave the Kurds autonomy, governmental posts in Baghdad, and legislative powers in the region. But again this was short lived. Iraq

was becoming economically and militarily stronger than it had been before. It was flooded with oil money and signed multiple military agreements with the Soviet Union. Thus, the balance of power shifted in favor of Baghdad, and in 1973 the Agreement collapsed and conflict broke out once again.

The United States, Israel, and Iran were supporting the Iraqi Kurds financially and militarily. Thus the Kurdish Peshmerga under Mustafa Barzani were able to fight and defeat the Iraqi army. Then-Vice President Saddam Hussein met with the Shah of Iran at the 1975 OPEC summit, at which, having suffered a number of defeats by the Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraq made a number of territorial concessions to Iran in exchange for Tehran halting military support to the Kurds.

This agreement led to the collapse of the Kurdish revolution in Iraq. Soviet tanks and advanced weapons overran the Kurdish Peshmerga, who only had light weapons and insufficient ammunition. Barzani fled to Iran along with thousands of Kurds.

Masoud Barzani took over leadership of the KDP after his father's death in 1979. As a young soldier, he learned that Baghdad could not be trusted if it was powerful. Realizing that Baghdad's armed forces were only growing stronger, Barzani took a calculated risk of asserting Kurdistan's independence, figuring it was now or never.

This is not to acquit Barzani of his political errors. The former president should have put the Kurdish house together by considering the interests of other parties. Kurdish disunity—and a disregard for the interests and advice of the United States—undermined not just the push for Kurdish statehood, but Kurdistan's autonomy in Iraq.

And yet, like any other country Kurdish leadership acted in its own interests. Its survival was and will be at stake, as shown by historical evidence, as long as there is a strong Baghdad. In turn, only real sovereignty can shield Kurdistan from Iraq's military power. So, Barzani chose to go ahead with the referendum despite strong warnings from regional countries, the United States, and Europe, and despite the tremendous risks facing the Kurdish people.

There has not been a major armed conflict between the Kurds and Iraq since 2003, because the Kurds were the stronger political and military force in the country. That balance of power has shifted after the defeat of the Islamic State and the unconditional support by the United States, Iran, and Europe to Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi at the expense of the KRG. Such support has already backfired and emboldened Baghdad to relapse into its previous modus operandi towards the Kurds.

Iraq's decision to retake Kirkuk and other disputed areas on October 16 and its maximalist demands to deploy Iraqi forces to Kurdistan's borders reinforce Barzani's fear that Baghdad has not changed its political mentality towards the Kurds. But this will have severe repercussions not just for the Kurds, but also for Western countries.

If Baghdad is left unchecked, it could lead to greater instability in Iraq in the same way unconditional support to former prime minister Nuri al-Maliki generated tremendous violence after 2011 when he started cracking down Sunnis. This error should teach policy makers in Washington and Europe that investing in one man in Iraq could prove fatal for peace and the balance of power.

In theory, it is a good modus vivendi to have Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi govern a federal Iraq, balance relations with neighbors, and eventually counter Iran's hegemony in the country. But practically, such an approach reveals a detachment from the reality on the ground. Iraqi politics is completely fragmented, not just on ethno-sectarian lines but within, too. Shia, Kurds, and Sunnis are more divided amongst and within themselves than ever. In turn this provides Tehran with an opportunity to further exploit such cleavages and exert greater influence over the future of Iraq.

For Washington to carry greater weight in Iraq, the best policy is to strengthen Kurdish autonomy, help promote unity within the Kurdish population, and simultaneously assist Iraqi Sunnis in forming a Sunni Region, where they

can have their own local security and governance. However, unless the Sunnis and Kurds realize the magnitude of danger coming from a Shia-dominated Baghdad, U.S. investment in either community can do little to further their cause.

At minimum, such a formula could serve multiple goals, including mitigating extremism, addressing the grievances and basic needs of the Sunnis, and severing Tehran's ambitious land bridge, all while advancing stability and peace. The alternative is perpetual violence, which will only generate more extremism and instability. In turn, both will jeopardize the United States and Europe's security interests at home and in the Middle East. ❖

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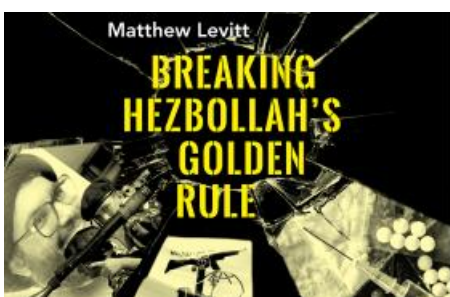
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