

Can Kurds Coexist with Arabs in Iraq?

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Brief Analysis

November 7, 2017

Watching a televised debate last week on the current tension between Kurdistan and Iraq, Haitham al-Jibouri, an Iraqi parliamentarian from the dominant Da'awa Party, made this proclamation: "The Barzanis violated the rights of the Kurdish people by misusing power and wealth. We will correct all these misfortunes by smashing the heads of Masoud Barzani and Nechirvan Barzani!"

Sadly, such violent abuse directed against the former president and the current prime minister of Kurdistan suggests that for too many Shia politicians in Baghdad, the dispute is not really about the constitution or the referendum, but about their desire for ethnic and sectarian domination and oppression of others. Indeed, over the past few days, some are already talking of amending the very constitution they just pretended to champion, simply in order to further abridge the Kurdish rights guaranteed therein.

Other ironies are even more grotesque. For Baghdad to complain about corruption in Erbil, Kurdistan's capital, is absurdly hypocritical. And for Da'awa politicians to forget that they found refuge in Kurdistan during Saddam's reign of terror is shameful. Kurds have always suffered from Arab, Turkish, or Persian chauvinism; but in Iraq today, that problem is compounded by Shia sectarian extremism, backed by Iranian expansionism and greed.

Yet whatever the rights and wrongs of our current plight, events since the September 25 independence referendum demonstrate that Kurds are in a much weaker position than we believed. The Iraqi army and Popular Mobilization Shia militias easily overran Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Kirkuk and its vital oil fields, Sinjar, and elsewhere back to our 2003 borders, and now control the crossings to Turkey and Syria as well. The future intentions of these forces are far from clear, despite the recent fragile cease-fire.

On the international front, too, Iraqi Kurds are facing tougher economic and political pressures than we anticipated from our other neighbors, Turkey and Iran. Trade and oil flows, while still moving, are subject to interruption. Rhetorical blasts against the KRG, and Turkish and Iranian support for and security coordination with Baghdad's agenda, are routine. Our friendly diplomatic ties with Ankara, and correct ties with Tehran, have abruptly collapsed.

The level of support from the United States has also proved disappointing. We knew that the United States government opposed the referendum, yet hoped that pro-Kurdish sentiment would protect us anyway. In reality, however, it seems the United States decided that its interest in balancing Iran would be better served by aligning with Baghdad.

But this U.S. strategy appears grievously flawed. Secretary of State Tillerson recently visited the region and made statements against Iran's IRGC and its allied militias. But what if nobody takes those statements seriously? With just 5,000 or so troops in Iraq, will the United States really kick Iran out and dissolve its proxy forces? With this in mind,

it is no wonder that many in Iraq, and in the region as whole, now see Qasem Soleimani as a much stronger player than Brett McGurk, or any other American envoy.

Even some Kurds -- particularly but not only in the PUK party, or in the city of Sulaimani closer to Iran -- may be tempted today to look toward Tehran for some minimal degree of protection. So far most Kurds, despite their deepening internal divisions over the past three years, are resisting this temptation, and insisting on a unified KRG stand in formal political negotiations with Baghdad (which the latter has yet to accept). Nevertheless, both Baghdad and Tehran keep trying to divide and conquer the Kurds: by suddenly referring, in official documents, not to the Kurdistan Region but to its separate provinces; by dangling offers to pay some government salaries at local levels; by informally negotiating with individual Kurdish parliamentarians or other political and security officials; and so on. The latest proposed federal budget deals with the KRG as a unit -- a relief compared to recent trial balloons about separating each of the region's provinces. But it also arbitrarily reduces the KRG's budget share from 17 to 12.6 percent.

Looking ahead, what then is the best course for Kurds in these dire new circumstances? And how can the United States adjust its policy to better serve our common interests in countering Iran's ambitions, in Iraq and beyond? The greatest hope, as we approach the Iraqi national election due next May 15, is for the United States to help broker a deal for Iraq's Kurds and Sunni Arabs to support a coalition headed by Iraq's incumbent prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, rather than risk a more pro-Iranian successor. In the meantime, given the immediate prospect of further major changes on the ground, such a deal might also provide Abadi with a surer incentive to avoid additional encroachments on Kurdish rights or territory.

For most Iraqi Kurds, this outcome would at least salvage something worthwhile from the rubble of the referendum. Better to be a partner with the Arabs of Iraq than a vassal of Turkey or Iran. And better, perhaps, to remain a truly autonomous region for the foreseeable future, rather than a self-proclaimed independent state in a losing conflict with all of its neighbors. Many Kurds will still aspire to independence someday, but their top priority must be to preserve their dignity today. ❖

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