

# Saving the KRG Is Vital to U.S. and Iraqi Interests

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Brief Analysis

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## If the Kurdish region is rolled back by federal forces or implodes into civil conflict, the consequences would threaten Iraq's constitutional structure and undercut U.S. efforts to contain Iran.

**T**he ongoing crisis between Iraq's federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government has resulted in the KRG losing much of the land, oil, and power it began to acquire after Saddam Hussein's 2003 ouster. At home, Kurdish leaders are losing legitimacy, and the KRG's very survival could be at stake given the internal political discord and continuing military operations by Iraqi security forces (ISF).

For the most part, the KRG political leadership has itself to blame for the calamities it is enduring. Yet many Kurds also feel let down by the United States, which seems unwilling to intervene to protect their enclave. For more than two decades, successive U.S. administrations helped create and defend the KRG, and it needs saving once again -- not only from itself, but also from an emboldened Iraqi military under significant Iranian influence. For legal and geopolitical reasons, Washington already concluded long ago that it could not support all of the KRG's post-2003 territorial gains absent support inside Iraq or among its neighbors. The question now is whether U.S. officials understand that urgent action may be needed to protect the core, constitutionally enshrined KRG from being rolled back as well.

## SPECTER OF INVASION OR IMPLOSION

**A**lthough this is not the first time the KRG has faced an existential threat, the multitude of dire scenarios -- being fully rolled back by the ISF and accompanying militias, disintegrating across party lines, or imploding into fratricidal internal fighting over a shrinking economic pie -- make this perhaps the most acute crisis to date. In summer 2014, the KRG survived a perfect storm of military onslaught by the Islamic State and economic hardship due to crashing oil prices and mass refugee flows. It survived thanks to internal unity and U.S. military and economic

support.

Today, however, the KRG has lost the international backing it once enjoyed due to a miscalculated independence referendum its leaders pushed for last month, despite U.S. opposition. The resultant backlash has also emboldened the battle-hardened ISF to push Kurdish Peshmerga forces out of territory they have controlled since 2014 and back to their core 2003 boundaries.

Meanwhile, simmering Kurdish factionalism is now boiling over at home. As the Peshmerga withdrew from Kirkuk, the two main parties controlling the KRG, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), used their rival media and political machines to exchange accusations of treachery. A partisan proposal for removing the PUK stronghold of Sulaymaniyah from the KRG was endorsed by influential national figures such as former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. The PUK's appeal for outside support has alarmed Kurdistan watchers, who recall that the KRG's current unbalanced power structure resulted from the KDP asking Saddam's forces to help eject the PUK from Erbil in 1996, then soliciting Turkey's support in the decade that followed. Similarly, Iranian artillery proved instrumental in helping the PUK hold some ground.

With much more power and petroleum now up for grabs, and the rise of a younger, more ambitious, and less pragmatic leadership, the specter of side deals and even a Kurdish civil war looms. Accordingly, the KRG's survival hinges on establishing internal unity to stop the hemorrhage of political and economic capital, bracing for imminent economic hardships, and negotiating with one voice in Baghdad.

## **EVERYONE NEEDS THE KRG**

**T**he KRG's survival is crucial for the stability of Iraq and the wider region. If the past is any indication, a fragmented KRG amounts to inviting Iranian and Turkish military interventions that undermine Iraq's sovereignty, as happened in the 1990s. Moreover, even if Baghdad had the requisite local legitimacy, it could not reimpose direct rule in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq, which have been self-governing since 1991. To stabilize the country and govern effectively, Baghdad needs a strong, representative, and accountable counterpart in Erbil. And whether Iraqis realize it or not, they need Kurdish politicians in the capital to introduce Western views and interests to the otherwise Iranian-dominated power structure. For their part, the Kurds may yet believe that preserving the KRG as part of a federal Iraq is the wisest route -- after all, they voted in favor of the post-Saddam national constitution at a higher rate than their own independence referendum.

Perhaps most important, the KRG's existence is enshrined in the Iraqi constitution, so the recent calls for dividing it and exerting federal control over its three Kurdish governorates are contrary to the laws of the land. Just as it was wrong for KRG leaders to extend their independence referendum to disputed territories, so is it wrong for Baghdad to sidestep the constitution and all pretense of negotiating disputes just because the balance of power is currently in its favor. As the U.S. State Department pointed out on October 20, "The reassertion of federal authority over disputed areas in no way changes their status -- they remain disputed until their status is resolved in accordance with the Iraqi constitution." The same goes for Erbil and Baghdad's longstanding disagreements over oil, revenue, and power sharing.

In geopolitical terms, dismantling the KRG runs counter to U.S. interests in the region, especially given the significant military and political capital Washington has already invested in its creation and survival. The KRG emerged thanks to a safe haven that American forces helped establish and protect from 1991 onward. During the height of the Kurdish civil war in 1994-1996, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called KDP leader Masoud Barzani and PUK leader Jalal Talabani to Washington to sign a peace deal. Later, U.S. protection helped the Kurds benefit greatly from Saddam's 2003 ouster. Most recently, the United States shielded Erbil from Islamic State attacks in 2014, then armed and trained the Peshmerga to continue the fight.

In return, the KRG has long been a useful ally against Saddam, the Islamic State, and other U.S. antagonists, as well as a force for moderation in Iraqi politics, at least until recently. In broader strokes, it has served as a unique U.S. experiment in democracy promotion and nation building that should not simply be abandoned. As Sen. John McCain wrote on October 24, "If Baghdad cannot guarantee the Kurdish people in Iraq the security, freedom, and opportunities they desire, and if the United States is forced to choose between Iranian-backed militias and our longstanding Kurdish partners, I choose the Kurds."

## MUCH-NEEDED U.S. MEDIATION

**B**aghdad and Erbil cannot negotiate fairly on their own given the sudden developments on the ground, which could supersede the constitution in the absence of an honest, impartial broker. Baghdad is on a winning streak and seems capable of pushing Kurdish forces beyond the 2003 borders and isolating the KRG economically. Kurds are also afraid that Baghdad may not negotiate in good faith given the bad blood their referendum created. As long as Baghdad is seriously threatening to launch military action inside "2003 Kurdistan" and dismember the federal region, then sitting down for talks has little chance of helping the situation, despite Barzani and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's calls for reopening negotiations based on the constitution.

To overcome these impediments to viable talks, the United States should make clear that the KRG needs to speak and act as one before approaching the table. Freezing implementation of the referendum and having Barzani resign as KRG president could ease immediate tensions, but such steps would not answer the question of who legitimately represents the KRG at negotiations.

Washington should also remind the parties that while current events present an opportunity to reformulate Iraqi-KRG relations on more solid legal grounds, addressing practical matters such as oil flows and revenue sharing is more urgent. Despite suffering setbacks since 2014, the KRG economy was slowly recovering before recent events. If it stumbles again in the near term and Erbil winds up withholding all public salaries, then mass demonstrations would likely break out, with great potential for escalating into violence given the bruised legitimacy of Kurdish leaders. Widespread violence -- or even a protracted inability to pay salaries and otherwise govern -- would be just the excuse KRG opponents in Baghdad need to dissolve the region. Washington should therefore push the Kurds to make reforms they promised in the past but did not deliver, such as more transparency in their oil sector.

Finally, the KRG's survival is a necessary U.S. fallback if Abadi loses his reelection bid next year against empowered pro-Iran rivals. In that scenario, anti-American voices in Iraq would likely intensify, and the KRG could become the only reliable U.S. partner in moderating national politics, maintaining the country's independence, and undercutting the Islamic State's reemergence. To avoid such outcomes in 2018, Washington needs to restrain Abadi today, asking him to avoid pushing beyond the KRG's constitutionally protected 2003 borders.

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