

# The U.S. Must Fulfill Role of Negotiator Between Baghdad, Kurds

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Oct 20, 2017

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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**To keep Iraq united and help minimize the divisive sectarianism that has characterized past elections, Washington and the UN need to push for dialogue on the KRG crisis.**

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi published an [op-ed \(https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/opinion/iraq-will-remain-united.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region&region=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&r=0\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/opinion/iraq-will-remain-united.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region&region=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region&r=0) in *the New York Times* on Wednesday, denouncing the "illegal" referendum held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq last month, but more importantly, making an impassioned case for Iraqi unity in the aftermath of ISIS' defeat. The potential break-up of Iraq has been a perennial issue ever since the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, but such a split has yet to happen fourteen years later -- and six years since almost all U.S. forces left the country. There are good reasons why a country like Iraq is harder to break up than to keep together.

The idea of a clean division of Iraq into three main ethno-sectarian blocs -- one Shia, one Sunni Arab and one Kurdish -- was always a fantasy and a gross over-simplification due to the complex social weave of Iraqi society. Proponents of partition stressed that Iraq could never be a strong, durable state because of its extraordinary ethnic, sectarian and linguistic diversity (Such proponents seemed oblivious to the irony of American and European citizens casting doubt on the durability of nations that have diverse populations).

The recent case of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) independence referendum underlines the difficulties of disentangling the peoples of Iraq into ethno-sectarian cantons. The Kurdish people in Iraq can make one of the strongest claims to a separate administration, and the bolting-on of some Kurdish lands to northern Iraq is perhaps

the most glaring design flaw of the 20th century Iraqi state.

But the inclusion of ethnically-mixed areas such as Kirkuk in the KRG's referendum was one of the aggravating factors that has drawn threats of blockade from all of the Kurds' neighbors in federal Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Drawing the internal lines of division is where the rubber hits the road in any partition plan, and the patchwork quilt of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, Yezidis, and other micro-minorities in northern Iraq would make the Dayton peace accord's division of Yugoslavia seem like a child's jigsaw puzzle.

Proponents of partition often point to the possibility of a Sunni Arab regional government to mirror the Kurdistan Region's semi-autonomous government, but whenever I have held detailed talks with Iraqi advocates of such a scheme, they have shown themselves to be supremely un-qualified and un-informed about the practical challenges of forming a region within Iraq. It means creating new institutions -- a parliament, laws, ministries, security forces, and a constitution -- and can easily be blocked by the federal government. Baghdad fears that if the Sunnis form a region, so too would the oil-rich parts of Shia southern Iraq, which would become as rich as Abu Dhabi or Kuwait, leaving the rest of Iraq in a state of deep economic collapse.

Indeed, the only actor to try to carve out a Sunni region in Iraq was the Islamic State, which made a daring effort to carve out a state within a state inside Iraq in 2014, professing to shatter the Sykes-Picot borders, which partly set the current Iraqi-Syrian border. The international community rallied strongly to Iraq's defense after the fall of Mosul and remains committed to the stability of the country, with the U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force offering to remain in Iraq after the liberation of all Iraq's cities, to aid the next stage of rooting Islamic State cells out of rural areas and covert hideouts.

One fact overlooked by proponents of overthrowing the Sykes-Picot borders is that borders can only change if the states on both sides agree or if both disintegrate. On none of Iraq's borders do such conditions prevail. A more realistic threat is that Iraq's borders endure but its internal cohesion crumbles without any formal administrative changes -- not devolution of the state, but instead, failure of the state.

Modern Iraqi governments have used two methods to hold the country together: buy the cooperation of the diverse population by recycling oil wealth through the central government, and use military force and intelligence services (paid for by petrodollars) to coerce those who still resist. The first option -- buying off the population -- is slowly disappearing in a low oil price environment where Iraq's reconstruction needs and population outstrips its resources. Though Iraq's military may grow stronger, the military tool has been made less useful by the growth of military rivals -- the Kurdish Peshmerga and persistent Sunni insurgencies -- and by international opposition to such coercive measures.

The last remaining alternative is the exact vision that the United States sought to impose on Iraq in 2003: that of a representative democracy that would incentivize membership for all of Iraq's components. The prospect of ethnic and sectarian reconciliation, and of unifying leadership, is emerging as a motif in Iraq's next general elections, due in April or May 2018. Even if such unifying themes are only adopted by political leaders to improve their electoral strength and their post-electoral roles in government, this is preferable to an election fought by stoking ethnic and sectarian tensions, as was the case in other Iraqi elections since 2003.

In the aftermath of the Islamic State's defeat, there is the tantalizing potential for Iraq's first unifying election and potentially for its first issue-based (not identity-based) election campaign. It would be a shame if this prospect were swapped for an election defined by ethnic tensions between the post-referendum Kurdistan Region and federal Iraq, especially if this dynamic ultimately benefited Iranian-backed militias who may exploit ethnic fault lines to undermine moderates such as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. The United States and the United Nations need to strongly support a process of dialogue between Baghdad and the Kurds in order that Iraq not only stays united, using

whatever specific mechanisms Iraqis and Kurds wish, but also a stable and a positive actor within the Middle East.

*Michael Knights, a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute, has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. ❖*

[The Cipher Brief](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/exclusive/middle-east/u-s-must-fulfill-role-negotiator-baghdad-kurds) (<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/exclusive/middle-east/u-s-must-fulfill-role-negotiator-baghdad-kurds>)

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