

# The Kurdish Challenge to U.S. Strategy in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

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The current U.S. administration sees Iran and its rising political clout in Iraq and beyond as a grave threat to its own interests and those of its allies in the Middle East. As a result, Washington has pursued a political strategy that centers on limiting Iran's influence in Iraq. To realize this strategy, the U.S. government has extended its diplomatic support to Haider al-Abadi, Iraq's current Shia Prime Minister. Unlike his predecessor, Abadi has demonstrated willingness to diverge from the Iranian strategy in Iraq and therefore will continue receiving American support, which could help him secure a second term in office during next year's general elections.

With a new mandate in Iraq's top office, the current Trump administration thinks, Abadi will have four years from 2018 and on to roll back Iran and re-establish Iraqis' full control over the policies of Baghdad. The success of the U.S. strategy then partly depends on Abadi's ability to translate the Iraqi army's recent victories over the Islamic State into maximizing electoral support in 2018.

The partnership between the United States and the Iraqi Kurds is also crucial to the success of Washington's political strategy in Iraq. Through their representation in Baghdad since 2003, the secular nationalist Kurdish parties played an important political role in making it difficult for the Iraqi Shia—the allies of Iran—to impose their hegemony over post-Saddam Iraq. Now that the Iraqi Sunnis are weakened and lack leadership, Washington wants the Kurds to remain in Iraq and double down on a balancing act against the Shia majority's complete control. Further, Washington has expected the Iraqi Kurds to work within the framework of its political strategy through assisting Abadi to win a second term in office.

From the United States' perspective, the Kurds' exit from Iraq will further weaken Abadi and strengthen the likes of Nouri Al-Maliki, the former Shia Iraqi prime minister and a faithful ally of Iran. Maliki has strong ties with both the Iranian regime and large parts of the Shia militias active throughout the Arab-inhabited areas of Iraq. Maliki could accuse Abadi of being too weak to be able to face the Kurdish challenge to Iraq's territorial integrity and, with Iranian backing, could step up his effort to cast Abadi out before regaining control of the position of Iraq's prime minister.

Recognizing that the Kurdish quest for independence will endanger his future political career, Abadi decided to take retaliatory measures against the Iraqi Kurds that could lead to a devastating Kurdish-Arab conflict. A day after the Kurdish referendum, Abadi took steps—in coordination with Turkey and Iran—that he thinks will strangle the Iraqi

Kurds economically and isolate them from the rest of the world. The Iraqi Parliament, dominated by the Shia majority, also requested that Abadi send Iraqi federal forces in order to regain Iraqi central government's control over the oil fields in Kirkuk currently under the authority of the Kurdistan regional Government (KRG). Abadi's government also demands the KRG hand the region's two international airports and border-crossings with Turkey and Iran over to the Iraqi central authorities.

It is exactly this form of reaction from Baghdad--trying to bring the Iraqi Kurdish leadership to its knees by imposing a stiff economic and diplomatic embargo--that could cause a Kurdish-Arab war that would allow Iran's influence to thrive in Iraq. It is unlikely that Iraqi forces would be capable of fighting the Kurdish Peshmerga alone, which would incentivize Shia militias to take the lead against the Iraqi Kurds. A larger military role for the Shia militias—armed, trained, and funded by Iran—in turn means greater dependency by Iraqi authorities on Iran. It was largely against this backdrop that the U.S. government opposed the Kurdish independence referendum.

But what did the United States expect the Iraqi Kurds to do? Policy makers in Washington have long ignored Kurdish aspirations for statehood and falsely assumed that Kurdish leaders would continue understanding that a Kurdish state would not survive the harsh realities of the Middle East, particularly when that state was solidly opposed by much stronger regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. Leaving the Kurds to their fate—because they ignored Washington's advice regarding the referendum—will now only undermine the United States' influence in Iraq and beyond in the long term.

Is a Kurdish-Arab war then inevitable in Iraq? Not necessarily. The United States still holds large sway over the policies of both the Iraqi government and the KRG. For now, Washington should employ its diplomatic machinery to reassure authorities in Baghdad and encourage them not to punish Iraqi Kurdish citizens for voting in the independence referendum. The United States must remind Baghdad that all government-sanctioned measures against the KRG, including imposing an economic embargo and freezing flights to and from Iraqi Kurdistan, only further Kurdish leaders' concerns that the central Iraqi government sees the Kurds as enemies and seeks to deliberately harm them. Punitive measures by Baghdad against the KRG will justify an abrupt and unilateral declaration of Kurdistan's independence from Iraq, which would inevitably open the door for Iran to play a more aggressive role in Iraq.

Baghdad should also understand that taking back the disputed territories from the Kurds by force is unrealistic and risky. The use of force by Shia authorities in the past against Sunni Arabs resulted in their alienation from Baghdad and later in the rise of the Islamic State. Baghdad must remember that it will not have the backing of the United States in trying to retake Kirkuk and its oil fields by force.

The recent escalation around the city of Kirkuk demonstrates how dangerous the situation can become. In response to a military build-up by Iraqi federal forces and Shia militias in the south of Kirkuk, the KRG has sent six thousand more Peshmerga fighters to the city in order to reinforce its position against any possible attack by forces loyal to Baghdad. Although Abadi has repeatedly stated that he would not use force against Iraq's Kurdish citizens, the KRG officials interpret the escalation around Kirkuk as Baghdad's preparation for a surprise offensive to regain control over Kirkuk and its oil fields. Achieving a quick and decisive victory in Kirkuk will only invite militant Kurds across the Middle East to join forces with the Iraqi Kurds. The resulting conflict could also encourage radical Shia in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon to come to Iraq and fight the Kurds there.

Abadi's success winning a second term in office will not eliminate Iran's influence in Iraq, even if the Kurds abandon their quest for independence and decide to back Abadi. The Iranian regime values its gains in Iraq and commands a system of allies that include not just armed militias but influential Shia religious figures and politicians. Tehran has the upper hand in Baghdad and is stronger there than any other foreign power. Trying to lessen Iran's influence among Iraq's Shia majority is a lost game. A coordinated blockade of Iraqi Kurdistan by Baghdad, Ankara, and

Tehran followed by an attack on the Iraqi Kurds by the Shia militias would threaten the KRG's survival and would in return weaken, if not end, Washington's influence in Iraq. Thus, the United States should continue working with the Iraqi Kurds in order to hinder Iran's dominance. ❖

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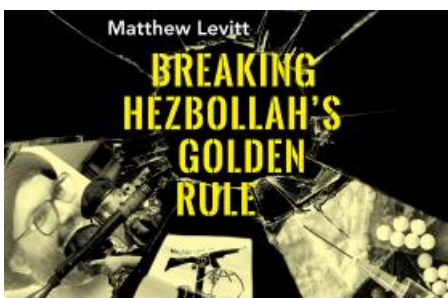
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