

# Politicized Forces and the Issue of an Independent Kurdish State

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Mar 14, 2017

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Brief Analysis

**M**arch 14, 2017

Iraqi Kurdistan has been an autonomous region since 1992. It emerged as a quasi-state after the establishment of the no-fly zone in northern Iraq by the United States – along with the United Kingdom and France – which put an end to Saddam Hussein’s murderous attacks on the Kurds. Since then, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been predominantly ruled by two major parties; the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Mustafa Barzani, established the former in 1946 while Jalal Talabani founded the PUK in 1975 when he split from Barzani’s KDP. Although the two parties have fought the Iraqi regime in the 1980s, they also fought one another in the mid-1990s, before settling into a peaceful power-sharing arrangement.

## Institutionalization Breakdown

The lack of an institutionalized force led to the breakdown of the internal unity of the Kurdistan region’s territory and decision-making abilities. As a result of the Kurdish civil strife (1994-1998) two de facto administrations exist within Kurdistan: the ‘green zone’ (Sulaimani province) controlled by the PUK, and the ‘yellow zone’ (Erbil and Duhok provinces) controlled by the KDP. The KDP exercises limited power over some forces in the PUK zone; the same is true for the PUK with regard to the KDP areas.

Politics, personal interests, and distrust shape the security relations between both groups. Lahur Talabani, the head of PUK’s Zanyari Agency (PUK’s intelligence unit) revealed these divisions publicly, saying that both KDP and PUK intelligence agencies never meet. Moreover, he accused the KDP of carrying out the Hawija raids without his knowledge, even though officially both the KDP’s Parastin agency (intelligence agency) and PUK’s Zanyari were combined under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Security Council, established in 2011 by parliament. Talabani said: “we as a Zanyari agency, have a good relation with more than 30 countries, exchanging information with their intelligence services, but we do not cooperate and share information with the KDP’s Parastin agency.” Moreover, in an interview with Newsweek, Talabani said: “at times, we have had a better working relationship with Baghdad than we have with our counterparts in Erbil.”

This was evident in 2014 when ISIL besieged Kurdish areas in both Syria and Iraq. Distrust reached a point where

the two sides accused each other of conspiracy. For example, the PUK blamed the KDP loyal forces for withdrawing from Sinjar city without a fight, thereby facilitating the massacre of Yazidi civilians. Additionally, when ISIL fighters attacked the Iraqi city of Kirkuk in October 2016, the PUK-affiliated media outlets indirectly accused the KDP forces of facilitating the entry of ISIL fighters to the city.

Since 1991, there have been many attempts to unite these partisan forces within a united Kurdish national army, but these efforts remain unsuccessful since only a few brigades of the Peshmerga are united. To date, these forces largely remain politicized. Yet despite these security and military divisions, the Kurdistan region of Iraq is currently stepping towards independence. President Massoud Barzani has made it clear on many occasions that Kurdistan has the right to separate from the Iraqi state. If this occurs, the new state will certainly need a single army, as with other states around the globe. But can the Kurds of Iraq unite their military and security forces into one single national army, either before or shortly after a declaration of independence?

Some writers, such as Pail Iddon, believe that a national army is not a prerequisite for a Kurdish state. The Kurdish forces could be united, he argues, after the declaration of the state; he refers to the case of the Israeli state as an example of uniting paramilitary groups after independence. But those barriers that today prevent the Kurdish forces from being united will certainly exist even after the declaration of a Kurdish state. This is because the military and security forces are so deeply and nearly evenly divided between the KDP and the PUK that there are now nearly two de facto states within the Kurdistan region.

The PUK will never accept and welcome an independent Kurdish state if this state is governed exclusively by the KDP – especially if it would require loyal PUK forces to fully depoliticize as part of the newborn nation army.

The KDP is currently dominating the Kurdistan region both politically and economically. So PUK leaders would have less impact on security forces if they accept the depoliticization process at the time of independence. Moreover, both the KDP and the PUK look at the depoliticization process as threats to their survival: if they do not have military power, then they could not win elections.

Recent moves toward healing internal PUK splits might only compound the rivalry. For example, the PUK signed an agreement with its splinter Gorran Movement on May 17, 2016. This agreement, at its early stages, was interpreted by the KDP as a hostile power play against it and refused to welcome the shared representative of the two other parties.

## **A Surprising Solution**

Based on the preceding analysis, a counter-intuitive solution is conceivable. The potential Kurdish state should consist of two regions in terms of security and military relations: namely Erbil under the KDP and Sulaimani under the PUK. This means that the security and military relations between the Erbil and Sulaimani region will look roughly like the current military and security relations between the central government of Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government. The Iraqi permanent constitution of 2005 allows the KRG to form its local force and legalizes the existence of the Kurdish Peshmerga, but Baghdad does not intervene in these formations and recruitment processes. Furthermore, the KRG are the only responsible forces protecting Kurdistan and preventing the Iraqi forces from operating within the KRG – but KRG forces are still constitutionally part of the Iraqi national army.

The Iraqi state has not been deploying its forces in Kurdistan since the fall of Saddam's regime. This model might be a solution once the Kurdish state is officially declared. The PUK's loyal forces will be under the control of the PUK's leaders and protect the green zone's security, but also belong to the wider Kurdish army. This arrangement could be legally allowed in the Kurdish constitution, much as the Iraqi constitution gives these forces a special status. The relations between the green zone and the yellow zone should be mirror the relations between Baghdad and Erbil, but

with one exception: the PUK green zone should not be allowed to separate from the central government of Erbil, in order to keep the newborn state united; by contrast, the current Iraqi constitution considers the possibility of Kurdish independence.

This scenario admittedly has some negatives; chief amongst them that the separate forces could be instrumentally used by the KDP and the PUK for political and economic gains, as is the case today.

Nevertheless, it could be a practical expedient in view of the historical division and hostility between the Kurdish forces, and also bring more internal stability to the region. This is because both the KDP and the PUK would do their best to protect their own areas while fearing the consequences of encroachment beyond them. ❖

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