

# Saving Kurdistan from its Political Drought

by [Khaled Sulaiman \(/experts/khaled-sulaiman\)](#)

Dec 20, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/antshal-aqlym-kurdistan-mn-jfah-alsyasy\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Khaled Sulaiman \(/experts/khaled-sulaiman\)](#)

Khaled Sulaiman is a writer and journalist based in Canada and originally from Kurdistan, Iraq.



Brief Analysis

## An American and European-backed administrative “Marshall Plan” – contingent upon many requirements – is necessary in order to save Kurdistan.

**D**ecember 20, 2016

The most difficult challenge currently facing Iraqi Kurdistan is how to define and implement its political system. Even expert observers cannot seem to work out whether it is parliamentary or presidential.

Prior to the end of his third term as president, Masoud Barzani had extensive executive powers. Yet the constitution defines the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as a parliamentary system, similar to the Iraqi national system.

Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has long pushed for a presidential system, while the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Movement for Change (Gorran) call for a parliamentary structure with amendments to the presidential election law and the president’s powers, to be set by parliament.

The dispute over the nature of the political system has revived problems that observers ascribe to the historical rivalry between the Sulaymaniyah political elite and the Barzani family. This point of contention first emerged in the 1960s, when former Iraqi president Jalal Talibani and a group of his allies broke away from the KDP, then led by Barzani’s father Mustafa.

However, this analysis oversimplifies the political situation and emerging interests of the KRG. The region poses an intellectual and political conundrum concerning rival views on how it should be governed -- a puzzle that, for two decades, has been managed through temporary political solutions.

Kurdish politics has reached a tense stage as investments have stalled, markets have stagnated, and banks have run out of money. However, the crisis consists of multiple other issues as well, stemming mostly from corruption, the petrol economy, and poor management of public services and the public sector. The question of the political system and the role of oil are new developments in the Kurdish region, while the other problems have re-emerged in response to those two factors. They all have their roots in the history of Kurdish self-governance since 1992, when

the first local Kurdish government was formed.

The nature of the KRG's political system became a pressing question after the signing of a 2013 Memorandum of Understanding between the PUK and Gorran, agreed to by Talabani and Gorran head Nawshirwan Mustafa. The forerunner to a political deal formalized in 2016, the MOU called for a parliamentary system in which the president would be elected.

The question of the KRG's oil and the murky way in which it is managed emerged following the signing of Iraq's first constitution after the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein. The division of powers between the federal and regional governments was malleable, and became the subject of nationalist sloganeering between Baghdad and Erbil.

The KRG's current political crisis involves a nationalist narrative mixed with family and tribal values, with little thought for constitutional government or the economy. After two and a half decades, the region has not yet passed a constitution, and thus its political leadership does not provide space for transparency or for political, social, or administrative reform. Nor has it distanced the judiciary branch and the Peshmerga from the influences of political parties.

What is also clear is that the political culture in Iraqi Kurdistan serves primarily to concentrate power in the hands of specific individuals rather than promoting and enabling the values of freedom, democracy, and diversity. Amid all this, oil – and its effect on the economy – played a key role in intensifying the nationalist narrative.

In short, nothing resembling reform has taken place in Kurdistan. Talk of the “rule of law” and the “Kurdish model of democracy” are nothing short of lies coated in a veneer of truth. The judiciary is in hock to political parties, and school curricula are highly politicized. Despite popular sentiments, the Peshmerga has not become a professional army to protect the KRG. Rather, its integration into the Iraqi defense system is little more than ink on paper as the Iraqi government has not met its obligations to provide Peshmerga forces with supplies and salaries. Meanwhile around half a million people are employed by the public sector, the internal security forces, and the police, which is a financial and administrative burden that the regional government is clearly unable to handle.

But what is the solution, if the Kurds have a real desire to save their region from drowning? Can they build bridges of trust with Baghdad in the framework of a national program, avoiding regional polarization?

Is it possible to bridge the gap created by political intransigence? And does it make sense to look to Washington for clarity and assistance?

Washington's influence on events and developments in Iraq has not ended, despite some claims to the contrary. Frequent statements by American officials indicate that they support change and reform. But it is impossible to successfully implement reform unless there is domestic support.

Therefore, in order to help solve Kurdistan's crises, Washington's support should be conditional on reaching an agreement on a system of government compatible with that of Iraq, which would then help create common ground between the federal and regional governments. Pressure could be placed on the KDP, which dominates Erbil, to accept the role of parliament and to re-draw its structure and powers. This would provide political parties with the courage needed to look seriously at corruption, the state of the judiciary, and the management of oil revenues.

In the same vein, much of the aid Washington sends for education, civil society, and the media, while intended to assist in the transition towards democracy and justice, is subject to political influence. Most civil society organizations in the KRG are drowning in corruption and nepotism, and follow party agendas with gusto. This cannot be separated from the wider crisis in the KRG, where local parties exercise pressure and obstruct the projects of international organizations as part of the effort to control public opinion.

Regarding administrative reform, the KRG's institutions clearly suffer from over-staffing, but serious thought needs

to be given to the consequences of dismissing over half a million public employees before alternative jobs are created and private sector investment drummed up. Sending hundreds of thousands of employees home without looking after their livelihoods would create dangerous social problems. Therefore, an American and European-backed administrative “Marshall Plan” – contingent upon the above-mentioned requirements – is necessary in order to save Kurdistan. ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



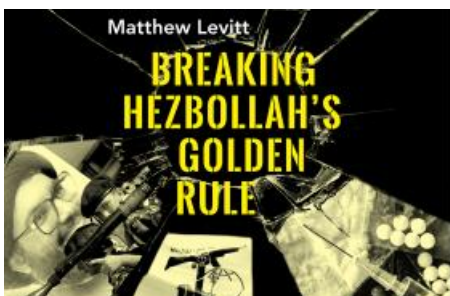
BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆  
Matthew Levitt  
(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-  
analysis/iraq)