

A Trump Presidency: Short-Cut to Iraqi Kurdistan's Independence or a Wrong Turn?

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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.



Articles & Testimony

The most reliable road to Kurdish sovereignty still runs through Baghdad, not through Ankara or the Trump White House.

The people who live within today's Iraqi borders have a proven capacity to surprise the outside world, sometimes exceeding expectations and sometimes disappointing hopes. Casual observers watch the challenges and disasters in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, and they often cannot believe that the country, the region and their people will survive. But as with the Da'esh attack in 2014, the Iraqis and Kurds surprised many observers by coming back from the brink of defeat. In recent weeks they have broken down the doors of Da'esh's defenses in Mosul.

But the peoples of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region also show a heartbreaking capacity for stepping back from the brink of victory as well. In Iraq, the promising steps towards stabilization were thrown away after 2010 by a careless, aggressively sectarian government in Baghdad. The Kurds over-reached in 2014, losing almost all their income because they moved too quickly and too unilaterally towards Turkish-backed economic independence.

Right now there is promising momentum between Baghdad and the Kurds over a transfer of sovereign powers to Kurdistan. Now the advent of a Trump presidency begs the question: will the Iraqi Kurds once again be tempted to "short-circuit" the path to independence by seeking to gain the new U.S. administration's support for Kurdish statehood outside of the negotiations with Baghdad?

SHIA-KURDISH NEGOTIATIONS OVER CONFEDERALISM

It is common for Iraqi leaders, even Saddam Hussein, to discuss Kurdish autonomy and even encourage the Kurds

to declare their own state. In recent years former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki nonchalantly encouraged Kurdistan to become independent: today's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has occasionally made similar comments.

But there was always a catch: when the Iraqi Kurds talk about holding an independence referendum, Baghdad protests that the time is wrong. Or Arab leaders in the capital hide behind the excuse of Iran, in effect saying "we would be fine with Kurdish independence, but our brothers to the east are the problem."

My conversations with the most senior Iraqi Shia, Kurdish and Sunni leaders lead me to believe that this pattern may be about to change and that something truly novel is occurring: a genuine conversation between the Kurds and Baghdad on the separation of sovereign powers, aiming at co-equal status. One reason for this may be the pure shock and exhaustion of the war against Da'esh, a war of unrivaled savagery, even by the standards of Iraq's dark recent history. There is a subconscious desire for peace between the factions who fought Da'esh.

Who wants to fight another war now? Maybe the Shia militias and the Turks do, but not the Kurds and not the Shia political and religious mainstream establishment in Iraq.

There is also a political angle. The Barzani leadership and Prime Minister Abadi need each other, and they share a common foe that is trying to divide them -- the renegade alliance led by Maliki and backed by Iran.

International players like the United States, European allies, the IMF and the World Bank are keen to see Baghdad and Erbil cooperate in the anti-Da'esh campaign and over economic reforms. Baghdad is ready for the change. They have stopped fearing the divorce and now want their own freedom to start a new life.

The Shia leaders privately convey that an Iraq without Kurdistan will be better off financially, and will no longer need a law of regional formation. They want a centralized, more traditional and cohesive Shia-controlled Arab Iraq. Against this backdrop, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani was able to begin an unprecedentedly candid discussion this autumn with not just Abadi but all the Shia leaders on the need to formally separate the sovereign powers of two co-equal administrations in Baghdad and Erbil.

THE BENEFITS OF NEGOTIATED SEPARATION

In my view, there are a lot of reasons why a negotiated separation of sovereignty will be better for the Kurdistan Region than a unilateral declaration of independence or other paths to a Kurdish state. A negotiated settlement with Baghdad could prevent a re-militarization of Baghdad-KRG disputes. Negotiations are themselves a confidence and security-building measure. If meetings are frequent enough, it is easier for both sides to avoid misunderstandings and convey red lines. There is less chance of either side demonizing the other.

Co-equal sovereignty and mutual respect could become an attractive idea to both sides because it would stop both Baghdad and Erbil meddling in each other's internal and foreign affairs. Some basic "rules of the game" and red lines would help a lot regarding assuaging Baghdad's fears of Turkish and Sunni state intervention, and also Kurdistan's fear of Shia militia activities (which then give Ankara an excuse to act more erratically in the neighborhood).

A shared international face is one option, and Kurdish and Iraqi leaders are considering a coordinated foreign policy. The KRG got a sense of how confederalism might work when KRG presidential chief of staff Fouad Hussein accompanied Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi throughout his UN General Assembly meetings in New York.

Perhaps most important, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have lots of reasons to cooperate in what is described as their "common economic space." Unsurprisingly Iraq and Kurdistan have a lot of shared economic interests. They use the same currency, their oil and gas infrastructure is connected, and they jointly connect many regional and domestic markets. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other donors and lenders will be far more reassured about working with Kurdistan if its sovereign powers are gained through an agreed process of negotiation.

Finally, if Baghdad supports Kurdistan's co-equal sovereignty or separate statehood, this makes it less likely that any regional state -- say Iran or even Turkey -- could object. Such a spoiler would be isolated as the international community fully embraced a sovereign Iraqi Kurdistan.

RISKS OF A "SHORT-CUT" STRATEGY

Today the Kurdistan Region is very clearly over-dependent on Turkey. Though Ankara is an indispensable partner, the Iraqi Kurds are privately wincing at the actions of the Erdogan government -- the war against the PKK, the 23-day closure of Kurdistan's oil export pipeline in February 2016, the uncontrollable actions of Turkish troops inside the Kurdistan Region, escalated Turkish aerial bombing inside Iraqi Kurdistan, and the arrest of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) parliamentarians and leaders in Turkey.

The lesson here is that alliances may be necessary, but it is unwise to put all one's eggs in any single basket. This is equally true for a new U.S. administration.

The coming years will probably seem like a great opportunity for the Kurds to grab Washington's attention and garner support for independence. But the new U.S. administration is likely to be inexperienced, internally fragmented, and capricious. This might repeat prior tragic episodes of Kurdish history where over-dependence on an external partner -- including Henry Kissinger in 1975 -- led to disaster.

A homegrown Baghdad-Kurdish negotiation on Kurdish sovereignty is infinitely preferable to unstable strategies based on foreign powers. The current discussions are a good start. Kurdistan is not at the brink of success by any means, but it is on the right track and getting closer.

BALANCING BAGHDAD, WASHINGTON, TURKEY, AND IRAN

Kurdistan should not overlook the Trump team: far from it. The Kurdistan Region can strengthen its hand in negotiations by demonstrating that there is now unprecedented support for Kurdish independence in the White House, Senate, and Congress.

The trick for the Kurdish leadership is to develop this U.S. leverage and backup option while keeping their eyes firmly on the real prize -- a functional relationship with Baghdad that facilitates the internationally-recognized transfer of sovereign powers to Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdistan Region should press the new Trump administration to stay engaged, reinforce the success of early talks, and encourage cooperation over Mosul and later in the higher committee on Kurdish sovereignty.

For its part, Washington needs to do no harm, to let Iraqis lead the discussions, to be a friend and an honest broker. If outsiders try to upset Baghdad-KRG discussions, Washington should lend its backing to the negotiations and reassure both sides.

The United States should also keep up the pressure in Kurdistan to strike a deal over the presidency, parliament and cabinet. Without domestic consensus, Kurdistan will weaken its negotiating hand with Baghdad.

For the Kurds, the key is more patience -- and it is hard to even write these lines, knowing what the Kurds have suffered and how long they have already waited. But a process of real negotiations with Baghdad is not just waiting: it is the most valuable thing the Kurdish leadership can be doing right now.

Kurdish visits to Baghdad, supported by the U.S. and other internationals, are what has brought the World Bank into Kurdistan, what has got the Peshmerga armed and equipped by America, and what has delivered over fifty thousand barrels a day of added Kirkuk oil to the KRG's economy. Kurdish visits to Baghdad, encouraged by the world's most powerful economies, are making it harder for Iran to stand in the way of Kurdish independence. The most reliable road to independence still runs through Baghdad -- not through Ankara, and not through the Trump White House

either.

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. This article was originally published on the [Washington Kurdish Institute website \(http://dckurd.org/2016/11/16/a-trump-presidency-short-cut-to-iraqi-kurdistan-independence-or-a-wrong-turn/\)](http://dckurd.org/2016/11/16/a-trump-presidency-short-cut-to-iraqi-kurdistan-independence-or-a-wrong-turn/). ❖

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