

# Iraq's Political Crises Could Stall the Anti-ISIS Campaign

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Aug 12, 2015

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Brief Analysis

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**As bold reform efforts and political deadlines roil Baghdad and Erbil, Washington should help resolve the crises as soon as possible so that Iraq can turn back to the urgent fight against ISIS.**

**W**hile the world's attention has been focused on dramatic developments in the Iran nuclear negotiations, the war in Yemen, and Turkey's new confrontations with ISIS and the PKK, several major developments have burst onto the scene in Iraq. Taken together, these developments could change the face of Iraqi politics and -- for better or worse -- affect how the international community prioritizes the fight against the so-called "Islamic State."

In Baghdad, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces an ever angrier public, joined by the country's most powerful Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, all of whom are demanding reforms in service provision and the fight against corruption. Meanwhile, a couple hundred miles to the north, Kurdistan Regional Government president Masoud Barzani is facing his biggest challenge since assuming leadership over the KRG more than a decade ago.

Both leaders are addressing their internal problems with considerable resolve, but neither is out of the woods yet. The sometimes-reticent Abadi has responded to the latest public and clerical protests with bold steps that signal a new determination to take charge. This includes injecting new life into anti-corruption institutions and policies, as well as calling for the elimination of seemingly extraneous government posts: namely, Iraq's multiple deputy prime ministers and vice presidents (which would remove former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and former parliamentary speaker Usama al-Nujaifi, two powerful, resourceful, and often-obstructionist figures). Abadi is also proposing to end the quota system in government positions (which has allowed parties and individual politicians to perpetuate rampant cronyism) and eliminate the virtual private armies of bodyguards surrounding each major actor.

Some of these steps would require parliamentary action or even constitutional amendments, both of which are

terribly difficult to secure in Iraq. But with Sistani's strong endorsement of Abadi's program, and with Maliki, Nujaifi, and the KRG at least publicly supportive, the prime minister might be able to pull off at least a partial victory. This would not end corruption or government inefficiency, of course, but it might reduce them significantly. And even partial success would strengthen Abadi's hand against the party barons who run parliament (Maliki, still sore at being dumped from his prime minister perch by Abadi, heads the latter's own political party, Dawa). But if the legislature stymies Abadi, the public and Sistani could blame him for the government's inaction. Therefore, while the current crisis gives the prime minister his best chance yet to emerge as a popular and powerful leader, his inherent political vulnerability makes his position more precarious than that of his colleague in the north, President Barzani.

Barzani's problems stem from the absence of a de jure constitution for the Kurdish region. The KRG is subject to the Iraqi national constitution, but that instrument grandfathered many de facto Kurdish governing mechanisms from before 2005. As a result, the autonomous region's political environment is three-tiered: a presidential republic headed by Barzani (a legendary Peshmerga leader whose father was a Kurdish national hero); the two traditional Kurdish factions, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), each with their own Peshmerga forces and control of bureaucracies in their respective citadels of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah as well as de facto division of regional sinecures; and a democratically elected parliament trying to enforce its will.

The proximate cause of the current KRG crisis is that Barzani is technically supposed to step down due to the expiration of the two-year grace extension of his second and supposedly last presidential term, a past arrangement worked out between the KDP and PUK. Normally another backroom deal would have already resolved this contretemps. Barzani wants to stay in office, he is personally popular, and his clan is well represented in regional positions and holds some posts in Baghdad. More important, the majority of his constituents know that no one else could navigate the KRG through the existential threats of ISIS, massive refugee flows, and financial meltdown.

So why no deal this time? The culprit is the gradual weakening of the PUK, which is a function of Talabani's major health problems since 2012, poor election results, and the splitting off of a reformist wing, the Gorran Party, half a decade ago. These developments have left Barzani's KDP with no partner for the backroom bargaining required to re-extend his term. Instead, the parliament -- dominated by Gorran, several Islamist parties, and the weakened PUK -- has insisted on its own right to decide who will be the next president. Barzani has rejected this demand and called for a presidential election on August 20, essentially bypassing parliament.

Although Barzani's electoral push has less legal legitimacy than Abadi's anticorruption drive, Barzani currently has far more military, financial, and populist power than the prime minister. He is thus far less likely to stumble in his parliamentary battle than Abadi in his -- though in this era of uncertainty not even Barzani can be sure. In principle, the two leaders could support each other, but such cooperation has been hampered by Baghdad and Erbil's continued bickering over military, territorial, and oil questions.

The main U.S. interest in the midst of this crisis is for Abadi to stay in power and, if possible, gain from the reform efforts. Washington also relies on a stable Kurdistan, and that means helping Barzani find a way to remain in power without smothering parliamentary democracy. Ironically, Turkey and Iran see things the same way and have been lobbying KRG political leaders to stick with Barzani.

One way or another, the United States is engaged in finding solutions for both of these Iraqi allies, since the struggle against ISIS would take a bad turn without stability in Baghdad and Erbil. Yet even in the best scenario, this latest set of political crises will at least temporarily divert attention from the anti-ISIS campaign -- demonstrating once again the Obama administration's folly in not treating its goal of "destroying" the group as an urgent priority. In this dynamic, unstable, and uncertain Middle East, America's allies of today may not be around tomorrow, though ISIS may well be if the administration's timeline does not change.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. ❖

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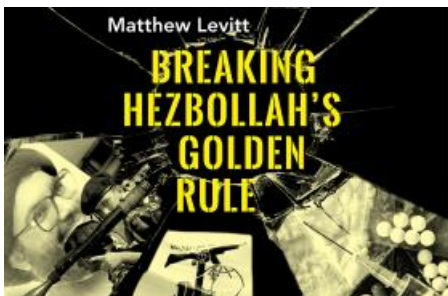
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