

# President Barzani Is Playing a Constructive Role in Maintaining the PKK Ceasefire

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

Nov 27, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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.

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## Gulan Media spoke with Washington Institute fellow Michael Knights about Turkey's outreach to Iraqi Kurdistan and other Kurdish issues in the region.

**Gulan:** Currently, the Kurdish question in the Middle East has become an important card within the political equations, in which there is an overall attempt within all four countries (Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq) for resolving the issue, but in different ways. In your opinion, how do you see the Kurdish question within these four countries and the Middle East generally?

**Knights:** The Kurdish question will be resolved in different ways and with different timelines in each of the four countries. The history and the strategic situation in each of the four countries are completely unique.

In Iraq the Kurds spent twenty years building their state since 1991. They have a major head-start and received strong US support. They are the first Kurdish state.

In Syria the Kurds will soon control a semi-autonomous enclave, but they need to build a sustainable alliance with one actor or they will be landlocked and friendless: it may be Turkey and the KRG, or it may be the Syrian opposition, or it may be the Assad regime and Iran. The PYD has to choose which way it will go.

In Turkey the Kurds are headed towards cultural and political semi-autonomy within a strong state, but change will be slow and gradual. The conflict will be less military and more political, and Turkish Kurds will rapidly become one of the most sought-after voting blocs, giving them increasing leverage.

In Iran the freedom of Kurds may come the slowest. The Iranian state is strong, and often brutal. Iranian Kurds want to believe that the Rouhani period may bring greater freedom for them, but this may be a premature hope.

**Gulan:** Last week we witnessed a historic event: Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan officially invited President Masoud Barzani [head of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq] to Diyarbakir, the biggest Kurdish city in Turkey. In your opinion, to what extent will Barzani's visit help to resolve the Kurdish question peacefully?

**Knights:** President Barzani is playing a constructive role in maintaining the PKK ceasefire. Turkey is very grateful for his assistance in winning time for political compromises to be built. There is always a risk for Kurdish leaders that the necessary relationship with Turkey will be misunderstood and that they will be portrayed as controlled by Turkey. The KRG needs to actively manage Kurdish perceptions of the Ankara-Erbil relationship, to show how it is good for Kurds everywhere as well as being good for Turkey and the KRG.

**Gulan:** A few years ago, if someone had mentioned the name Kurdistan, he would have been punished. But during Barzani's visit to Diyarbakir, Prime Minister Erdogan unexpectedly mentioned Kurdistan's name three times in his speech. Does this mean that Erdogan wants to resolve the Kurdish question peacefully and draft a new constitution for Turkey?

**Knights:** Erdogan has been very committed to the Kurdish opening since 2002, but he needed to build power and reduce the old nationalist "deep state" before he could launch his peace initiative with the Kurds. Erdogan and the AKP have always recognized that they have more in common with Turkey's Kurds than with ultra-nationalists. Erdogan, like many Kurds, was persecuted by the deep state. Erdogan wants the Kurdish peace to be his legacy, and he wants Kurdish votes in the 2014-2015 elections.

**Gulan:** Experts think that the successful experience of self-rule in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the existence of political and economic stability there has been one of the factors driving attempts to resolve Kurdish question in Turkey. To what extent has Iraq's Kurdistan region been an important factor for the transition of the Kurdish question in Middle East?

**Knights:** The KRG has been vital because it has shown Turkey that Kurds can be semi-autonomous and that it does not hurt Turkey's interests or its territorial integrity. The greatest threat to Turkey today is the conflict in Syria, not the existence of a near-independent Kurdish region in Iraq. This is a big change from ten years ago, when the Turkish military threatened to invade Iraq to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state as Saddam fell.

**Gulan:** Turkey is an important actor in the Middle East, and its policies affect the changes taking place in the region. Currently, Turkey considers the Kurdistan region as a strategic ally. In your view, to what extent will the Iraqi Kurdistan region and Turkey affect the Kurdish question in Syria? Do you expect that Syrian Kurds will assert their rights too?

**Knights:** The KRG has found it very difficult to intervene in Syria because the PYD has resisted KRG involvement. The KRG provides great assistance to Syrian refugees instead. The KRG will only be able to strongly influence Syrian Kurdish developments if the PYD is weakened and needs help, or if the PYD opens up to the KRG. Turkey has opened bilateral discussions with the PYD because the KRG-PYD approach did not achieve a breakthrough.

**Gulan:** The Iraqi Kurdistan region is now exporting oil to the outside world. To what extent has its energy wealth affected its attitude in other respects?

**Knights:** Oil wealth in the KRG is dependent on Turkey: this will affect the price of oil and gas being sold via Turkey. The KRG needs to ensure it gets a fair price from Turkey. That is important if oil wealth is to play a major role in building up the KRG and replacing, dinar by dinar, dependence on funding from Baghdad. And the KRG does not want Baghdad to say that the Iraqi Kurds are selling Iraq's oil and gas reserves too cheaply. So bargaining hard with Turkey is important.

It is important for Iraqi Kurds to also understand that oil wealth will not be able to replace Baghdad's money for many years -- at least five. And oil wealth does not simply drop into the KRG's treasury: first the costs of building infrastructure, producing oil and gas, and transporting it must be paid. Then contractors must get their profits. Only afterwards does the KRG take the large remainder. So oil wealth cannot immediately flow into the KRG as it does in Saudi Arabia or such places. It will come slowly, and it will not change everything straight away.

Finally, Iraqi Kurds need to understand that oil wealth can ruin a country. Care needs to be taken to ensure that Kurdish culture and the economy are not damaged by oil. It is easy for an oil-rich country to neglect its non-oil economy, where good jobs are created, for the oil industry, which makes few jobs. And it is easy for oil wealth to teach young people the wrong lessons: there is a danger in the KRG that some young people think they are too good to do normal jobs, like working in a hotel or fixing cars or cleaning the streets. The Anfal is only 25 years ago: it is too soon for the next generation to feel that they are too good to work with their hands. It is not right that Pakistani and Filipino people, or Syrian Kurds and Arabs, are being brought to the KRG as cheap workers when so many young Kurds are unemployed. Oil can be a curse if it changes the culture and reduces the work ethic. ❖

*Gulan Media*

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