

The Kurdish Crescent: New Trends in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights), [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

Nov 21, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



Brief Analysis

On November 14, 2013, Michael Knights and David Pollock addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss their recent trips to the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Kirkuk, and Azerbaijan. Knights is a Lafer Fellow with the Institute and has worked extensively in Iraq as an advisor to local governments, security forces, and foreign investors. Pollock is the Institute's Kaufman Fellow, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq has achieved a good measure of basic stability and security.

Though there are still significant tensions between political factions in the KRG, the government is adept at preventing these tensions from boiling over. The KRG has stretched out leadership transitions using a form of "managed democracy." What matters now is how the KRG uses the political space it has created by delaying presidential and provincial elections: will it take the opportunity to share power between the executive presidency and the parliament, and will it devolve powers to local governments at the provincial level?

In terms of enforcing its internal borders, the KRG blunted Iraqi federal government military threats to the disputed areas in 2012. That year could be labeled the "year of deployments," during which the KRG consistently outperformed the Iraqi federal government in military face-offs along their disputed border. By contrast, 2013 has been the "year of detente." Seeing the 2014 national polls looming on the horizon, the Iraqi government started embracing a conciliatory approach toward the KRG. Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki is seeking, in effect, a nonaggression pact with the Kurds. A shared recognition of the rising al-Qaeda threat has also bolstered the detente between the federal government and the KRG. As 2013 comes to a close, the federal government and the Kurds can

no longer waste their time engaging in futile political bickering, given these bigger fish to fry.

The next stage for the KRG is to demonstrate the economic viability of its landlocked region. In the coming year, the KRG is very likely to export significantly more of its oil and gas independent of Baghdad's control, probably using a direct pipeline to Turkey as well as small amounts of exports by truck. The Iraqi federal government has ceased making substantive threats regarding this issue, and Ankara's commitment to independent KRG oil and gas exports is solidifying. Washington has counseled Erbil and Ankara not to openly break with Baghdad on the exports issue, but the U.S. government will tolerate direct KRG exports if Baghdad acquiesces to them.

In the longer term, the independent KRG exports need to be underwritten by a final arrangement on Baghdad-KRG revenue sharing. Such an arrangement should be regulated by law, but the hydrocarbon law debate has dragged on for years and will not be resolved until 2015 at the earliest. In the absence of such a law, the KRG could take one of two routes. The route of maximum independence would be to keep 100 percent of the earnings from its own exports, using them to cover all its own oil contractor costs while keeping the rest for KRG government revenue. The other route would be for the KRG to maximize its finances while relinquishing some political independence; this would entail handing the export earnings over to Baghdad in return for 17 percent of the overall federal oil revenues (that is, from oil exported from the south as well as from the KRG). This latter route is only possible if Baghdad covers the full costs of contractors in the KRG; so far, Baghdad has only been willing to cover a small part of these costs. Some midway solution between these two poles will likely emerge from the hydrocarbon law debate.

DAVID POLLOCK

Kurdistan's ties with the federal government of Iraq are undoubtedly important. But of even greater historic significance is the rapprochement, albeit fragile, between Ankara and Iraq's Kurds -- and with Kurds inside Turkey and, to some extent, inside Syria as well. It can be said that KRG-Turkey ties are growing. The Turks are increasingly accepting the idea of an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq.

As for Iran and the goals it is seeking to achieve in the KRG, they can be summed up as follows:

1. Keeping an eye on both Iranians and Kurds in the KRG, specifically dissidents and Iranian expats.
2. Ensuring that the KRG embraces policies that support Iran's interests in Iraq and the region at large, particularly Syria.
3. Ensuring that leaders in the Kurdistan region of Iraq do not form alliances with other groups, such as dissident Shiites.

It can be said, in turn, that Iraq's Kurds have no other choice but to yield to a certain degree of Iranian leverage.

As for Kurds outside Iraq, the political picture is quite mixed. In Turkey, the relationship between Ankara and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with which it has fought a decades-long war, is currently an uncertain detente.

In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is an organized faction that controls "Syria's Kurdistan," also known as Rojava, and this group calls the shots in areas located in northern Syria. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) is not as closely affiliated with the PKK as some have suggested and has limited relations with the KRG; indeed, the KRG has decided to step away from the Syria conflict. Ankara, meanwhile, is unnerved by the PYD's military success in Syria, fearing that it could destabilize the Syrian-Turkish border. That said, it seems that the Turks will ultimately accept the idea of having a Kurdish autonomous region along this border. However, both Turkey and the KRG are highly suspicious of the PYD's ambitions, which could extend beyond Syria.

In Iran, the Kurds will not be able to achieve the progress achieved by their Syrian and Turkish counterparts, much less the autonomy gained by Iraqi Kurds, although they still harbor hopes for change within the Iranian establishment.

An important issue for U.S. policy toward the Kurds involves visa problems for people from the KRG. Even some KRG

officials have had significant problems getting U.S. visas because of their past activities in the armed struggle against Saddam Hussein. The U.S. government needs to find a way to remove this stumbling block to better relations with the KRG and two of its major political parties -- the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) -- which are friendly to the United States.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Noam Raydan. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](/policy-analysis/turkey)