

# Iraqi President's Stroke Rekindles Fears of Kurdish/Arab Split

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**T**he condition of President Jalal Talabani of Iraq has reportedly improved since he suffered a stroke yesterday, but fears for the health of the country's titular leader remain acute. Foreign medical specialists have been flown in, and he will likely be transferred by air to Germany within a day.

Whatever the treatment, there is great concern in Iraq and the region about the implications if he dies or is unable to continue with his duties. For Washington, Talabani has helped facilitate often-challenging relations with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki since the withdrawal of U.S. forces a year ago.

There is no obvious replacement for the seventy-nine-year-old Talabani. He helped unite the country after Saddam Hussein's overthrow and, more recently, has sought to ease tensions between Iraqi Kurds and Baghdad over disputed territories and the role of foreign oil companies in exploiting potentially huge reserves (for more on these tensions, see [PolicyWatch 2000 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-oil-future\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-oil-future)). On several occasions in the past few weeks, Iraqi army and Kurdish *peshmerga* forces have come perilously close to actual fighting in disputed areas around the major, ethnically mixed, oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Baghdad and Erbil's newly divergent attitudes toward cross-border issues with Turkey and Syria have further complicated the situation. On Syria, Baghdad still sides with the Assad regime, while Erbil supports its fellow Kurds in the opposition.

Talabani has been a politician and fighter all his adult life, battling the pre-Saddam government in the 1960s, but also knowing when to opt for temporary exile or negotiated ceasefire, even with Saddam. His powerbase in the Kurdish area of northern Iraq is around the city of Sulaymaniyah, close to the border with Iran, with which he has maintained cautious links. Politically, he has operated through the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (essentially his personal movement), which has often been at odds with the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Masoud Barzani.

According to the Iraqi constitution, one of the country's two vice presidents assumes the presidency temporarily if Talabani dies or is unable to continue serving. A new president would then be elected by parliament within thirty days. But one of the vice presidents -- Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni Arab -- is currently in self-imposed exile in Turkey after fleeing Baghdad via KDP territory amid allegations of ordering political assassinations. The other is Khodair al-Khozaei, a Shiite Arab and political ally of Maliki. Talabani's ill health broadens the challenge of maintaining political and ethnic balance while preserving the notion of one Iraq for Shiites and Sunnis, Arabs and Kurds, and other minorities.

Given the high stakes involved, especially in Baghdad's disputes with the Kurds over oil and territory, Washington must handle the situation carefully. The constitution does not mandate that the next president be a Kurd, but political prudence suggests it should be, especially one like Talabani who can mediate between Kurds and Arabs. Effecting this would be difficult in the current environment, but rapid, decisive engagement by Washington could push Maliki and Barzani to defuse tensions and cooperate on finding a temporary or permanent replacement. In contrast, pursuing an option that suggests Shiite dominance could be disastrous.

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