

# Iraqi Kurdistan as U.S. Ally and Partner in the Middle East

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Masoud Barzani is president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Brief Analysis

**O**n April 5, 2012, His Excellency Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

## IRAQ'S INTERNAL POLITICAL CRISIS AND U.S. POLICY

**D**espite a budding national political crisis originating from the consolidation of power under Prime Minister Maliki, the Kurdish region of Iraq has seen a number of successes in recent years. Per capita gross domestic product has risen dramatically since the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, illiteracy has been reduced from 56 to 16 percent, and the security situation has been greatly improved. Furthermore, the economic and commercial sector has seen increased foreign investment, and the people of Kurdistan have accepted a tolerant policy that rejects revenge and retaliation. In recent meetings with President Barzani, President Obama and Vice President Biden praised these achievements, reaffirming their commitment to a democratic, federal, and pluralistic Iraq.

Notwithstanding Kurdish achievements, the status quo in Iraq remains unacceptable. The people of Kurdistan have waited six years for promises that have not been delivered and agreements that have not been honored. The constitution is breached on a daily basis, and the same individual holds the powers of prime minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, defense minister, chief of intelligence, and interior minister. The central bank may soon be under his purview as well. It is important that these constitutional violations be addressed. The law requires that Iraq be ruled in a power-sharing partnership that consists of the Kurds, the Sunni and Shiite Arabs, and minority groups such as the Turkmens. If this problem is not resolved, the Kurdish leadership will be forced to return to the people and allow them to make their own decision.

The Irbil agreement, signed November 2010, was envisioned not just for the sake of forming the government, but also to solidify a genuine partnership in the country, a commitment to the constitution and its implementation, and the return of balance to all institutions. Had this agreement been implemented, the current crisis could have been averted. Based on the just-concluded Barzani meetings in Washington, the Kurdistan leadership hopes and expects that the United States will support the Iraqi constitution, regardless of personalities. The Kurds do not believe that the U.S. military withdrawal means the end of a positive American role in Iraq.

## "FUGITIVE" VICE PRESIDENT TARIQ AL-HASHIMI

**T**he Kurdistan leadership is clear on this issue: Hashimi remains the vice president and has not been convicted of any crime. Because the problem has been greatly politicized, the Kurdish leadership initially suggested that the

three executive leaders of Iraq sit together to sort out its political aspects. This meeting has not taken place, however, and the office of the commander-in-chief has improperly influenced the judicial system.

Hashimi recently found safe refuge in the Kurdistan region, and Baghdad is now accusing the Kurds of covertly "allowing" him to leave on a tour of neighboring countries. Ironically, however, it was Baghdad that asked the Kurdistan government to let him travel abroad.

## **FOREIGN RELATIONS: FOCUS ON TURKEY, IRAN, AND SYRIA**

**T**he Kurdish leadership is prepared to play a role in helping Turkey resolve its conflict with the PKK peacefully. A great and welcome change has taken place in Turkey, demonstrated by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's brave and important step during his recent visit to Irbil, when he stated publicly that the days of denying the Kurdish people are over. The Kurdistan government is therefore willing to assist, provided that all sides take a peaceful approach. They must not resort to violence, which would only lead to more bloodshed.

Kurdistan recognizes Iran's importance in the region as well. The Kurdish government would like to have normal relations with Iran, as the two countries share a border and thus have shared interests. This does not mean, however, that the parties agree on every issue. The Kurdish government, for instance, is committed to UN Security Council resolutions, including sanctions, on Iran, and in no way will it violate these resolutions. Furthermore, the clear position of the Kurdish people and leadership is that, in light of the sacrifices the people have made, no outside entity should be allowed to make decisions on their behalf. Iraqis themselves must find solutions to their domestic problems and must not be influenced by neighboring countries. Only after the people of Iraq have found these solutions should the international community step in to help.

With regard to Syria, the future government of that country must be a democratic coalition that respects the rights of Kurds as well as all other citizens. The Kurdish leadership is committed to supporting the Kurds in Syria morally, financially, and politically, and will use its influence to help them solve their problems. Recently, in line with this commitment, the Kurdistan government held a conference in Irbil that aimed to have Syrian Kurds elect a leadership and devise a unified statement for the future, which is essential. Although neither the current government of Syria nor the opposition has something concrete to offer, it is important that all parties engage in negotiations. The Kurdistan leadership hopes to be able to support the outcome of these negotiations.

## **OIL PRODUCTION, PIPELINES, AND REVENUES**

**A** good deal of oil has been discovered in Kurdistan, but the current pipeline is insufficient to carry the amount of oil that could be produced. The natural resources ministries in Kurdistan, Turkey, and Baghdad have therefore begun a series of talks to resolve this issue. It is important to note that any discussion of oil in Kurdistan is a discussion about improving the situation of all of Iraq, not just the Kurdish people. In accordance with the constitution, the oil and gas that have been found in Kurdistan belong to the people of Iraq, and any resulting revenue should be distributed among the entire population.

The Kurdistan government has abided by the constitution in its dealings with foreign companies as well. The agreement reached in 2007 on a draft hydrocarbon law stated that if the legislation did not pass by May 2007, both parties would be free to continue signing contracts with foreign companies. The Kurdish government has therefore acted legally and within the framework of the constitution with regard to oil sales. Four months ago, a number of delegations traveled from the Kurdistan region to Baghdad to address the issue of reimbursement payments for foreign oil company expenses. The absence of these payments is the sole reason for the current halt in oil exports from the Kurdish region.

## **"DISPUTED TERRITORIES" AND ARTICLE 140**

The Kurdish government has shown utmost flexibility in dealing with the problem of territories that have been detached from the Kurdistan region. Article 140 provides the best way to solve this problem within the framework of the constitution: a referendum. Over the past six years, the Iraqi government has sought to evade responsibility for this issue. Yet implementation of this article is in the interest of all of Iraq, not just the Kurdistan region. This issue will not be forgotten, nor will it be resolved by the mere passage of time.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cory Felder. ❖*

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