

# Split Shift

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



## Articles & Testimony

It's not often that William Safire and Al Jazeera agree but, in the last week, both have drawn explicit comparisons between the anti-Western anger rolling through central and southern Iraq and the relative calm of the Kurdish north. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Safire wrote Wednesday, "we can see success: Rival Kurdish parties have come together to work within an Iraqi parliament when elections come." Meanwhile, Al Jazeera, not known for underplaying antipathy to the West, noted on its website Tuesday that unlike "most other parts of Iraq--where people are actively hostile towards, or barely tolerate, the foreign invaders--Kurds do not feel the strains of occupation." As a result, one might be tempted to conclude that the Kurdish north is the only area of Iraq immune from the repercussions of this past week's anti-American revolt.

But that is far from true. Indeed, there is reason to fear that the effects of the Sunni and Shia uprising will be felt in northern Iraq, with potentially disastrous consequences. To understand why, one has to remember that Iraqi Kurdistan--while enjoying both a higher level of freedom and a higher standard of living than just about anywhere else in Iraq--is a deeply divided place. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controls the western part of the region and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) controls the east. The differences between the KDP and the PUK are deep-rooted. In the 1990s, the two parties fought a bitter civil war. When the United States intervened to broker a ceasefire, the KDP and the PUK agreed to stop fighting, but they also split up northern Iraq into two cantons and exchanged populations. As if they belonged to alien ethnic communities, KDP members in PUK areas left for the KDP zone, and PUK members in KDP areas left for the PUK zone. Though this split is largely ignored by the mainstream press these days, it appears to be growing wider. And there is now reason to believe that the past week's events to the south will drive the KDP and PUK further apart, which would represent a major blow against the already tenuous dream of a federal Iraq.

The two parties have far different political priorities. The PUK sees itself as having a substantial stake in a multiethnic Iraq, and is thus generally aligned with U.S. interests. The KDP, by contrast, is not particularly taken with federalism and is quietly entertaining the idea of an independent Kurdish state. This is in large part due to the KDP's relative financial independence from the rest of the country. It controls the Habur border crossing between northern Iraq and Turkey. After years of impoverishment and international sanctions, Iraqis are hungry today for Turkish consumer goods and products; as a result, Habur is thriving. Much of this wealth flows directly to the

Barzani family, the KDP chieftains. According to one Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) official, the KDP charges the thousands of truck drivers who cross Habur daily an "inspection fee" at the gate and at checkpoints elsewhere, raising a substantial amount of money. The party has used its financial muscle to establish a diverse portfolio, exercising a monopoly over most businesses in the region. Today, KDP companies dominate the Barzani enclave: For example, Kani, a KDP firm set up in 1997, monopolizes cigarette imports and smuggling into the Kurdish-controlled area, while Sirwan Barzani, a nephew of KDP leader Massoud Barzani, runs Korek Telecom, a company that effectively controls the region's telecommunication and cell-phone markets. Once a political party, the KDP is now a vast clan-run business empire.

As a financially independent, politically self-serving institution, the KDP is not much interested in the rest of Iraq. Both the KDP's wealth and confidence can be seen in Erbil, its capital city. Compared to towns in the Sunni triangle or the Shia south, Erbil is warm and welcoming. The bustle of the city's cafs and the youthful culture of its university make for a stark contrast to the rest of Iraq. Things work there, people are happy, and American soldiers do not have to fear for their lives. But there is a problem with this otherwise-rosy picture: The KDP does not see why it should sacrifice its own interests to help the CPA successfully transform Iraq into a state run by all Iraqis. The KDP's prime minister, Necherwan Barzani, puts it this way: "If things deteriorate in Iraq, if there is a political meltdown in Baghdad for example, the KDP would go its own way."

The PUK's outlook couldn't be more different. At the end of the Iraq war, the PUK halted trade across the border with Iran at the CPA's request. As a result, according to the PUK's minister of public works and reconstruction, Sadi Dizayee, the PUK today finds itself "financially dependent on the CPA to cover its budget." What's more, while both the PUK and KDP are tribal parties, the PUK also contains a sizeable urban and middle-class constituency, concentrated in the city of Suleymaniye. (Suleymaniye is easily Iraq's most sophisticated, cosmopolitan city. With a stretch of the imagination, it could pass for somewhere in southern Europe.) This has led the PUK to adopt a pragmatic attitude and a willingness to moderate its own demands and aspirations. It also makes the PUK much more secular--as the PUK's minister of cooperation and foreign affairs, Abdul Rezzak Mirza, says, "Secularism is an outstanding issue between the PUK and the rest of Iraq"--which means that the party is a more natural ally of American interests in the region. This has led the PUK to place a far greater political stake in the success of the multiethnic Iraq that America favors.

To be sure, the PUK has its own agenda, which could put it at odds with the process of constructing a federal Iraq. The party currently controls the multiethnic city of Kirkuk--and by the CPA's account, Kurds are not a majority in the city, which lies over 40 percent of Iraq's oil. The cash-stricken PUK would be loath to give up Kirkuk's wealth. Nevertheless, the PUK remains far more invested in helping the United States than the KDP: The party's leader, Jalal Talabani, was the first member of the Iraqi Governing Council to visit all 18 of Iraq's provinces upon assuming the council's rotating presidency. According to Mirza, "The party would use all democratic means to ensure that Iraq's future remained close to its political vision."

All of which means that you currently have one half of Kurdistan that is deeply invested in seeing the U.S. occupation succeed and one half that wouldn't be particularly sad to see it fail. The worse things get in the Sunni triangle and the Shia south, the more contentious the split between the KDP and the PUK is likely to become. And the less control the CPA appears to have over the country, the more likely it becomes that the KDP will throw up its hands and say publicly that it wants out. Should that happen, a federated Iraq would be dead on arrival.

Soner Cagaptay is the head of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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