

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Dream of Independence Meets Reality

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Since 2014 and until recently, the Kurdish region of Iraq has been embroiled in a crisis. Its peak was the September 2017 referendum on independence that, within a month, led to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) losing control of large chunks of Iraqi territory that had been conquered during the war against the Islamic State (IS) between 2014 and 2017. The valuable, oil-rich Kirkuk region and other areas were seized from the Kurds during an October 2017 attack by the Iraqi government and Shi'i militias. The political and economic situation was exacerbated by the blockade imposed on the KRG by Turkey, Baghdad, and Iran, threatening the hard-earned autonomy that the KRG had created since 2003.

This turmoil has had a far-reaching effect on the strategy and political discourse within the Kurdish region of Iraq. Whereas until the crisis, the focus was on achieving independence for the region, subsequently the KRG's efforts have been directed towards opening communication with Baghdad in order to reach a federalist solution, as was proposed in the new (2005) Iraqi constitution. The terms "independence," "separation," and "self-determination" have all but disappeared from the Kurdish leadership's political discourse.¹ This change has led to an identity crisis among the younger generation of Kurds, which feels frustrated by the failure to achieve the

¹In contrast to the leadership's stance, the issue of the referendum and the question of independence were discussed widely in the Kurdish media. For example, see: Hassan Shangali, "[The referendum is a milestone in the history of Kurdistan](#)," *Basnews*, September 22, 2019.

Kurds' national objectives, which had been so heavily instilled in the Kurdish youth by their leadership.²

The September 2017 referendum exposed the severe internal rift and power struggle between the region's two largest political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

The economic component of this struggle played out in the fight to control Kirkuk, and the distribution of economic resources derived from Kirkuk's oil revenues. Essentially, the PUK aspired to build an oil pipeline that would connect the KRG to Iran, allowing the PUK to export Kirkuk's oil to Iran and profit from the oil revenues. But the project has never materialized. The KDP, on the other hand, had established control over Kirkuk's oil exports, and profited from a pipeline that sent Kirkuk's oil to Turkey for export. Since Baghdad reasserted its control over Kirkuk in October 2017 the situation became more complicated. As will be shown, the power struggle ultimately led to both the KDP and the PUK losing control over Kirkuk.

The political-ideological aspect of the KDP-PUK struggle manifested itself as a struggle between Kurdish nationalism and pro-Iraqi nationalism. The Barzani-led KDP promoted Kurdish nationalism, while some parts of the PUK, particularly the Talabani family, represented a pro-Iraqi nationalism approach for the KRG that also meshed with pro-Iranian sympathies. The Talabani camp was represented by Jalal Talabani, who was Iraq's president between the years 2006-2014, but who died after a long period of incapacitation on October 3, 2017. His wife Hiro Ahmad, his sons Bafel and Qubad, and his niece and nephews Ala, Jengi, and Lahur inherited his leadership role in the PUK. The current president of Iraq, Barham Salih, who was a senior member of the PUK, is one of the leading voices of pro-Iraqi nationalism. The Talabani motive for embracing this approach is instrumental. Their objective is to obtain positions of power in the Iraqi central government in Baghdad, and translate political power into economic aid that it can use as patronage in the Kurdistan region to weaken the KDP's standing there. The two manifestations of this approach were the appointment of Barham Salih as the Iraqi president in October 2018 and the support that Bafel and Lahur Talabani provided to Iraqi central government during its military operation to retake Kirkuk from the KRG in October 2017.³

² Yerevan Saeed, "[Without diversifying its rentier economy, pessimism among Kurdish youth will increase](#)," *Fikra Forum*, September 25, 2019.

³ PUK leader Kosrat Rasul himself accused some members of treason. "[Kurdish VP Accuses Certain PUK Leaders of fall of Kirkuk, Calls them 'Apostates'](#)," *Rudaw*, October 18, 2017.

The power struggle between the KDP and PUK has also played out in how the KRG has managed its military forces. The KRG's military, or *Peshmerga*, consists of two parallel forces that obey the orders of the KDP and PUK respectively, rather than the KRG government. In the aftermath of the post-referendum crisis, both sides accused one another of betrayal. The KDP blamed the PUK for allowing its Peshmerga to stand aside and allow Iraq's military forces supported by Shi'i militias (the Popular Mobilization Units, or *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*) to seize Kirkuk on October 16, 2017. On the other hand, the PUK claimed that rather than confront Iraqi military forces, the KDP withdrew its Peshmerga forces from large swathes of territory that had been under Kurdish control since 2014. The trauma that resulted from the Peshmerga's inaction has led to an ambitious reform project to unite the parallel Peshmerga forces in which the U.S., the U.K., and Germany are taking part. Still, this project, which is titled "the Peshmerga of the future," has yet to prove its viability due to the ongoing political rivalry between the parties.⁴

As for the regional context, the KDP has always been strongly tied to Turkey, whereas the PUK has always been strongly tied to Iran. This geopolitical constellation led to mutual accusations that each side is jeopardizing the autonomy of the Kurdish region. Following the October 2017 crisis, the KDP has focused its attention on strengthening its relations with Iran, perceiving that Iran is the real power broker in Iraq and not the United States. On the other hand, the PUK's efforts to strengthen its relations with Turkey have not succeeded.

As for the balance of power between the KDP and the PUK, it seems that after the 2017 crisis, the PUK has been further weakened, in comparison to the KDP, as a result of internecine struggles for power within the party. Even the Talabani family itself has been riven by internal disputes. Qubad, Jalal Talabani's son, received the role of Deputy Prime Minister of the region. However, his brother Bafel was excluded from any position of power in the Kurdish government; at the same time, he continues to have strong ties with Baghdad and Qassem Soleimani – the head of Iran's *al-Quds* force, who is considered the strongman in Iraq. Qubad and Bafel's mother, Hiro, the family matriarch, has withdrawn from politics due to terminal illness, whereas her sister, Shanaz, has been trying to assume a leading role, but she has had some friction with the current PUK leader, Kosrat Rasul.

By contrast, the KDP, which was established in 1946, seems much more cohesive and unified than the PUK, notwithstanding the latent rivalry between the region's current

⁴ Mohammed Rwanduzi, "[How serious are the Peshmerga reforms?](#)," *Rudaw*, April 25, 2019.

president, Nechirvan Barzani, and the Prime Minister Masrour Barzani.⁵ The KDP demonstrated its power during the last KRG election cycle, which took place in September 2018. Despite the referendum crisis, the KDP won the election with 45 seats, seven more than it had in the 2013 elections. The PUK received 21 seats three more than the 2013 elections. Still, comparatively speaking, it lagged far behind the KDP. This suggests that the KDP, which stood at the forefront of the push for independence in September 2017, is still popular, and so is the aspiration for Kurdish independence that the KDP represents. The Gorran ("Change") Movement, a party that was the surprise of the 2013 elections thanks to its agenda focusing on important social issues, lost half of its political power, when it received only 12 seats, and descended to the third place. It is also important to note that the two Islamist parties lost a total of five seats in comparison to the 2013 elections cycle. In 2018, they jointly received 12 seats, which suggests that Islamism has been contained in the Kurdish region.⁶

How has the region managed to overcome its severe crisis after the referendum? First, the main factor responsible for the crisis was not the referendum itself, but a combination of circumstances that had preceded it and jointly accelerated the crisis: The halt on budgetary transfers from Baghdad to the region as early as 2014; the KRG's absorption of about two million refugees, mainly Arabs from Iraq itself but also Kurds from Syria, as well as the war against the Islamic State, both of which resulted in an immense outlaying of expenses; the global decline in oil prices; the corruption that spread throughout KRG institutions; and, finally, the blockade on the KRG that was imposed in 2017 as punishment for carrying out the referendum.⁷

What worked in favor of the Kurdish region during this period of crisis was the transition to a new generation of leadership in the KRG. Long-standing President Masoud Barzani, who had spearheaded the plan for Kurdish independence, resigned after the referendum and his governmental responsibilities were transferred to others. Nechirvan, Masoud's nephew, who was then prime minister, appeared as the right man at the right time. He is a pragmatist who rarely made far-reaching statements regarding independence, in contrast to his uncle and cousin, Masrour Barzani. He had cultivated positive relationships with Ankara, Tehran, and Baghdad,

⁵ Telephone interview with a Kurdish researcher who requested to remain anonymous, September 17, 2019.

⁶ The authorities have taken steps to prevent mosques from becoming platforms for incitement. For example, in 2009 the authorities prohibited the preaching of 15 imams as a result of antisemitism and anti-Israeli incitement. [Public Library of U.S. diplomacy](#), February 18, 2009.

⁷ The population of the region grew by 32%, and the expenses for one year reached \$1.4 billion, 25% of which was covered by international actors. Khoshang Mohamad, Joint Crisis Coordination Center, [BrandKurdistan Region of Iraq](#), September 9, 2019.

which he used to negotiate an end to the debilitating blockade that was imposed on the Kurdish region.

The 2018 KRG elections led to the emergence of a new, younger, and less conservative generation of Kurdish leaders. Today, the triad that holds the power in the region consists of the 50-year-old prime minister, Masrour Barzani, the 42-year-old deputy prime minister, Qubad Talabani, and the 53 year-old president, Nechirvan Barzani. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the previous president, Masoud Barzani, is still unofficially operating as an overarching authority.

The formation of a new government was delayed by 10 months, and it was sworn in only on July 10, 2019. The reasons it took so long were two-fold: 1) the ongoing internal divisions within the PUK; 2) the KDP's insistence on forming the widest possible Kurdish coalition in order to present a unified front vis-a-vis Baghdad. Indeed, the KDP's objective was achieved: Fourteen Kurdish parties have formed one unified list of candidates for the upcoming provincial elections scheduled for April 20, 2020. In doing so, they hope they will receive broad support.⁸

As for the relations between Erbil and Baghdad, there appears to be a new positive working relationship between the administrations. This change began with the rise of 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi to the prime minister's position in October 2018. As opposed to his two recent predecessors, he was not determined to reassert Baghdad's control over the Kurdish region by force. In addition, the leaders of the Kurdish region supported 'Abd al-Mahdi in his rise to Prime Minister in 2018. Moreover, Kurdish support serves to balance against hostile Shi'i elements who oppose 'Abd al-Mahdi and try to remove him from the prime minister's position in any way possible. Erbil itself went back to being a "pilgrimage" site for high-profile politicians from Baghdad, who visit in order to consult with and seek support from the region's leaders.

In spite of the somewhat normal working relations between Erbil and Baghdad, the two most urgent problems remained unsolved: 1) how to distribute the oil revenues between Baghdad and Erbil; and 2) how to solve the problem of the disputed territories of Kirkuk and other oil rich areas whose fate were to have been determined through a census and a referendum by 2007, this according to law no. 140 of the constitution. However, all previous governments avoided carrying out this project, pushing the KRG to hold their own referendum. Unlike his predecessors, though 'Abd al-Mahdi appeared more open to discussing the budgetary issue and the

⁸ ["Ex-Governor of Kirkuk elected head of 'Kurdistani alliance'," Basnews](#), October 1, 2019.

census. Indeed, there were formal statements from Baghdad about the intent to hold a census in 2020. Therefore, despite the severe damage the referendum inflicted upon Kurdish region, it did force the leaders in Baghdad, due primarily to American pressure, to discuss the thorny issue of the disputed territories. Still, the Kurdish leaders are worried that before the census is carried out, Baghdad will take actions that will change the demographics in the disputed area to the Kurdish population's detriment.

After several years of economic, social, and political crisis, the Kurdish region has recently started to flourish again. This return of prosperity is a result of the renewed relations with Baghdad and the return of foreign investment in the oil industry. The agreement with Russian oil companies, on the eve of the referendum, provided financial stability to a region, which was on the brink of total bankruptcy, and restored faith in the region's standing and reputation as an area worthy of investment in its oil and gas sectors. The new Prime Minister, Masrour Barzani, has focused his efforts on developing the economy, attracting foreign investors, and creating new fields of economic activity in order to alleviate the dependency on oil revenues.⁹ Indeed, the main issue confronting the region's economic development had been its rentier dependency. If the KRG can succeed in diversifying the economy, it can reduce its dependence on neighboring states.¹⁰

Meanwhile the Kurdish leadership also managed to mend fences with the U.S., after the rift that had been caused by the referendum crisis. The Kurds had been deeply frustrated with the American stance that neither supported the referendum nor warned Baghdad against the attack on Kirkuk. But for all the feeling of betrayal, the Kurdish leadership understood that in order to survive in the chaotic region they need to cooperate with the Americans. For their part, the Americans too understood that they needed the Kurds as a balancing power vis-a-vis Baghdad and Iran as well as for providing an important base for American military activities. A case in point was the American operation against ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at the end of October 2019, which ended with his killing and several others. It soon transpired that the Americans had benefitted from intelligence provided by the Kurds and that the eight helicopters participating in the operation took off from Erbil airport.¹¹

⁹ "[Developing economy among top priorities of KRG: PM Barzani](#)," *Basnews*, September 30, 2019.

¹⁰ Yerevan Saeed, "[Without diversifying its rentier economy, pessimism among Kurdish youth will increase](#)," *Fikra Forum*, September 25, 2019.

¹¹ Alex Ward, "['Jackpot': Inside the US military raid to kill ISIS leader Baghdadi](#)," *Vox*, October 28, 2019.

In conclusion, the Kurdish region of Iraq has managed to bounce back from the 2017 crisis, thanks to the insight that any other alternative would have brought a second genocide upon the Kurdish people of Iraq and would have eliminated their autonomy.¹² Nonetheless, the uprisings in the Arab part of Iraq, which erupted in the beginning of October 2019, and the political turmoil that has followed, may endanger the Kurdish region's recovery. The main threats looming are: that the possible ousting of 'Abd al-Mahdi from power would remove a moderate personality with whom the Kurds managed to establish a productive working relationship; that the Iraqi constitution would be amended to the detriment of the Kurds; and that a new wave of Iraqi refugees would flock to the region, a trend that has already begun.

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*The original Hebrew text for this article was rendered into English by Mr. Matan Uberman.

¹² The first genocide took place in 1988 when the Iraqi government killed c.180,000 Kurds in what was termed the Anfal campaigns.