

MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

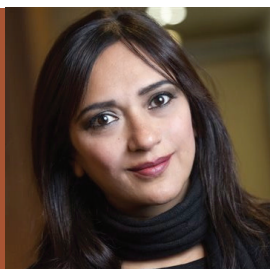
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From Tribe to Nation: Iraqi Kurdistan on the Cusp of Statehood

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“For better or worse, it is hard to escape [the] conclusion that future of Iraqi Kurds lies with their integration into Iraqi state [...] In terms of re-

gional stability, it is probably preferable that [the] Kurdish independence movement does not succeed.” Thus opined an American diplomat stationed in Baghdad in a secret cable dated July 1, 1973.¹

Forty-three years on, official U.S. policy—that Iraq needs to remain territorially intact—has not changed. But there is growing recog-

nition that after decades of dogged, if at times unorthodox, efforts to build their own state, the Iraqi Kurds are on the cusp of formally declaring independence. It is no longer a matter of “if” but “when.”

And the United States, as much as Iraq’s neighbors—Iran, Turkey, and Syria, which have restive Kurdish populations of their own—needs to be ready when Iraqi Kurdistan, the first real Kurdish state in the modern sense, is born. Most importantly, so do the Kurds.

It will be a premature birth on many counts. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) remains at war against jihadists of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Collapsing oil prices have bankrupted the KRG’s rentier

About the Middle East Program

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement in the region and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program concentrates on long-term economic, social, and political developments, as well as relations with the United States.

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economy together with that of the rest of Iraq. The influx of more than a million internally displaced people² (IDPs) as well as Syrian refugees has compounded the KRG's financial burden and sharpened ethnic fissures. Corruption and nepotism are endemic. Distrust and rivalry between the two main political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), remain acute, allowing Turkey and Iran—the regional hegemons—to play the two sides against each other. Iraqi Kurdistan is landlocked and will always feel pressure from its neighbors.

Meanwhile, the war between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the other main Kurdish bloc that sprang from Turkey, has resumed after a more than two-year lull. Turkish fears have been stoked by the fact the PKK has gained control over a big chunk of territory in neighboring Syria in the wake of civil conflict there. The KDP-dominated Iraqi Kurdish government does not need much goading from Turkey to side with it against the PKK. This is because the Turkish Kurdish rebels are now staking claim to parts of Iraqi Kurdistan as well. KDP leaders have vowed to eject them by force if need be. A dustup is brewing.³

One must also consider the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. Can a deal be struck with the Iraqis over new borders, oil wealth, and, just as critically, water sharing? And how will Turkey and Iran react, knowing that without their assent, life for the infant state could be truly miserable, if not impossible?

Turkey or Iran may expect the Iraqi Kurds to help them suppress their own Kurds in exchange for recognition, but this is unlikely to happen. Regardless of what their leaders think, ordinary Kurds are no longer willing to spill each other's blood. Nationalism has overtaken tribalism in the Kurdish psyche.

Finally, and most crucially, what will the U.S. government do? Without ironclad U.S. security guarantees, an independent Kurdistan is unlikely to survive. Iraqi Kurdish leaders have openly hinted they would

welcome American bases in their planned state. Many hope that just as the United States recognized Kosovo's independence when presented with the *fait accompli*, it will do the same for Iraqi Kurdistan.

The challenges are multiple, complex, and, many would argue, insurmountable. An independent Iraqi Kurdistan will be in a prolonged state of incubation for sure. Yet, it has been over a century in the making and despite the obstacles, to some of its leaders at least, it finally seems within reach. Iraq's estimated five million Kurds have been governing themselves for the past 25 years. They formally achieved federal status in 2005. Unlike the Turkish and Iranian states, the Iraqi state is weak. Syria's Kurds have made big gains, but their future is far less certain.

Iraq's Kurds have significant energy resources and large Western oil companies are developing them already. They have well-established diplomatic ties; all five permanent members of the UN Security Council have consulates in Iraqi Kurdistan as well as significant economic interests in the region. Israel has already declared it would recognize an independent Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴ Turkey, once a formidable foe, is now Iraqi Kurdistan's fastest friend. And, in Washington, the Iraqi Kurds enjoy the support of Republicans and Democrats alike.

It is too early to say what effect an independent Kurdistan will have on the region. If the Iraqi Kurds get it right, the new state could well become a force for stability and a showcase for democratic governance where Kurds and non-Kurds, Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, can prosper equally.

The notion that the Iraqi Kurds should be denied a state because this would further fan the flames of separatism in Iran and Turkey is morally and logically flawed. It is up to Turkey and Iran to offer their own Kurds a good enough deal to lay down their arms. Peace in either Turkey or Iran is not for the Iraqi Kurds to deliver. The same goes for Syria.

The Iraqi Kurds have endured far greater horrors

and betrayal than any of their brethren across the borders. Their will for independence is unrelenting. It is ultimately up to the Iraqi Kurds themselves to ensure that their long-awaited state is not stillborn.

Iraqi Kurdish Independence: The Long and Winding Road

When most analysts discuss Iraqi Kurdish statehood, they limit their arguments to a linear, cost-benefit analysis. More often than not they conclude that the costs outweigh the benefits. But for the Iraqi Kurds the desire for independence is not rooted in cold, hard calculations. It is profoundly emotional and closely bound to their history. Without some knowledge of that history it is impossible to grasp why the Iraqi Kurds, despite the gargantuan obstacles, are willing to take the leap.

"It is inconceivable that any nation has been and continues to be suffering as much injustice and oppression as the Kurds have." Masoud Barzani

Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003 ushered an unprecedented era of prosperity and freedom for Iraq's Kurds. Media coverage of Iraq's Kurds was no longer about their misery, but instead about their stellar success. Iraqi Kurdish officials, who once manned roadside checkpoints in tattered uniforms, padded around in designer suits. Glossy, overpriced shopping malls overflowed with spoiled teenagers, many of whom resided in the luxury skyscrapers which rose where bullet-riddled cinderblock huts once stood. This "other Iraq" that beckoned investors, and even tourists, stood

in stark contrast to the rest of the country that was wracked by sectarian bloodletting. Indeed, during the boom years it was hard to feel much sympathy for the Iraqi Kurds, let alone grasp their persistent drive for a country of their own.

The Ottoman Centuries

Until the defeat of the Ottomans by the Allies in World War I, the majority of Kurds were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, with the rest concentrated in neighboring Persia. Therefore, the Kurds of present-day Iraq and Syria were ruled from Istanbul. Today, with an estimated three million ethnic Kurds, Istanbul is the world's largest Kurdish city.⁶

In the early 19th century as the Empire grew weaker, Kurdish princes, or *emirs*, led by the charismatic Bedir Khan Beg, seized this chance to resist the Sultan's bloody campaign to quash the Kurds' semi-autonomy.⁷ The Emir repelled the Ottoman army, severed all ties with the Sublime Porte (the central Ottoman government), proclaimed independence, and established his capital in Cizre, a historical town skirting the banks of the Tigris River. Cizre remains a crucible of Kurdish nationalism and has the site of some of the most brutal excesses of Turkish security forces in the renewed onslaught against the PKK today.⁸

"I want a country of my own, a safe haven that I know I can retreat to when my people come under attack. That place for me now is Iraqi Kurdistan."
Bahman Ghobadi, Kurdish Iranian film director

As with other Kurdish rebellions, most notably the rebellion led by Sheikh Ubayd Allah of Nehri, Bedir Khan's success was short-lived.¹⁰ He was forced to surrender and exiled to Crete, where he and his men

helped put down the rebellion of the Cretan Greeks in 1856. The Emir was rewarded for his loyalty and sent to spend the rest of his days in Damascus, where he died in 1868. The Turks must have come to rue their clemency. In the early 20th century, Bedir Khan's descendants became the intellectual torchbearers of a ballooning Kurdish nationalist movement, the *Khoyboun*,¹¹ which was centered in Damascus. Urban intellectual Kurds throughout the region caught the bug. But it was a tribal leader, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who in the battlefield as at the negotiating table, towered over pan-Kurdish politics for the better part of the 20th century.

Even before Mullah Mustafa burst onto the scene,¹² hopes of an independent Kurdistan seemed tantalizingly within reach. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, struck between the victorious Allied Powers and the Ottoman government, abolished the Empire and obliged Turkey to renounce all rights over Arab Asia and North Africa. It also provided for an independent Armenia and an autonomous Kurdistan. But the Kurds' dreams were crushed three years later when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, renegotiated the terms of peace in the Treaty of Lausanne. The Ottoman Kurds were divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.¹³

"Chemical Churchill"

Iraq, including the Vilayet of Mosul, which roughly corresponds to the area controlled by the Iraqi Kurds today, had already been placed under British mandate during the San Remo Conference held in April 1920. Two Kurdish leaders—Sheikh Mahmud Barz-inji of Sulaymaniyah, who in 1922 declared himself the "Shah," or king, of Kurdistan, and Sheikh Ahmad of Barzan, an eccentric Muslim cleric who happened to be Mullah Mustafa's older brother—were already agitating against the British and cutting deals with the Turks.¹⁴



Figure 1: Map of Mosul Vilayet (Pinkerton, J., *A Modern Atlas, from the Latest and Best Authorities, Exhibiting the Various Divisions of the World with its chief Empires, Kingdoms, and States; in Sixty Maps, carefully reduced from the Largest and Most Authentic Sources*. 1818, Philadelphia, Thomas Dobson Edition.)

Winston Churchill, then Britain's secretary of state for war, ventured that the surest way to tame Iraq's restive Arabs and Kurds was to gas them.¹⁵ "I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes," he said, decades before Saddam Hussain's cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid ("Chemical Ali") ordered the 1988 gas attack on the town of Halabja that killed 5,000 people in a single day. The British, however, eventually settled for conventional bombs. "The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means, within 45 minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured," gloated a certain Squadron Leader Arthur Harris, whose statue stands on Fleet Street in central London today. In 2010, al-Majid was executed for his crimes.¹⁶ The British have yet to formally utter a word of remorse for theirs.

The Rise and Fall of Mullah Mustafa Barzani

After years of flight and exile—including in Turkey—Mullah Mustafa engineered his escape to his tribe's verdant patrimony in Barzan in 1943 and ignited what became a protracted insurrection against the Iraqi state. Some historians argue that the Barzanis were acting not so much out of nationalist fervor as the narrow self-interest of their tribe. This criticism has stuck with them until this day.¹⁷ Either way, the effects of their attacks against government forces were immediately felt. Although Baghdad sought to address the Kurds' grievances, hostilities swiftly resumed and in 1945, and when hit by the defection of a key ally, Mullah Mustafa fled to Iran with his followers.¹⁸

There he found himself in the midst of further ferment spawned by the Anglo-Russian invasion of Persia. The collapse of Iranian authority over the tribal northwest of the country allowed the Persian Kurds—with Soviet blessings—to form the notionally independent Kurdish Republic of Mahabad.¹⁹ In truth it was no more than a Soviet puppet. The Republic was duly proclaimed in January 1946, the same year that the KDP and Mullah Mustafa's son, Masoud Barzani, Iraqi Kurdistan's current president, were born.

Mullah Mustafa was charged with Mahabad's defense, but the Republic collapsed within eleven months of its founding. The Red Army's withdrawal from Iran was the deciding factor, but internal feuding, not least between Mullah Mustafa and the Republic's president, Qazi Muhammad, accelerated its demise. Muhammad was publicly executed on March 31, 1947 on treason charges in Mahabad's central square. Mullah Mustafa took refuge in the Soviet Union,²⁰ where he learned to speak Russian and play chess, a skill that came handy as he plotted his next move.

The 1958 revolution in Iraq, which culminated in the overthrow of the British-installed monarchy, marked a new chapter in Mullah Mustafa's fight for Kurdish autonomy. Paradoxically—it was true then,

as it is today—Iraq's Kurds enjoyed greater freedom than their cousins across the borders. The 1970 autonomy agreement struck between the KDP and Baghdad gave the Kurds sweeping rights on paper, but it was never implemented.²¹

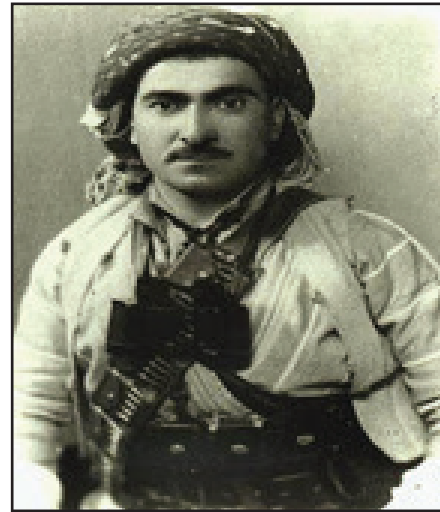



Figure 2: Young Mustafa Barzani during the 1931-1932 revolt
“Barzani,” Wikimedia Commons. Uploaded 17 August 2006.

The period starting with Mullah Mustafa's return to Iraq and ending with the indefatigable warrior's death from lung cancer in Washington, D.C. in 1979²³ tragically highlighted the regional and Western powers' ruthless exploitation and abandonment of the Iraqi Kurds. It also exposed bitter divisions among the Iraqi Kurds themselves.

*“Kissinger bears the main responsibility for the disaster which befell the Kurdish people after 1975. For me, he is enemy number one. I will never forget what the Kurds had to pay as a result of his stances, maneuvers, and the deals he made without taking into consideration the suffering these caused.”*²²

Masoud Barzani



The seemingly endless hostility between Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, and the successive Iraqi governments served Mullah Mustafa for a time. The Shah backed the Iraqi Kurds against Baghdad, providing arms and sanctuary for them. Egged on by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the Nixon administration (which was allied with the Shah) began covertly funneling cash to the Iraqi Kurds as well. In exchange, the Iraqi Kurds helped Iran beat back its own rebellious Kurds.

This arrangement was in place until the Shah struck the 1975 Algiers Agreement with Iraq, under which the Iraqis renounced their claims over the Shatt al-Arab waterway. In exchange, the Shah washed his hands of the Iraqi Kurds. Washington followed suit, cutting off millions of dollars of CIA aid. “Covert action should not be confused with missionary work,” Kissinger declared.²⁴

Once again Mullah Mustafa retreated to Iran. Around 200,000 Iraqi Kurds—fearing Baghdad’s retribution—crossed over the border with him. As the Barzanis were licking their wounds, Jalal Talabani, a charismatic law student turned *peshmerga* fighter then living in Damascus, broke away from the KDP to form the PUK with like-minded leftist urbanites, sparking a blood-drenched, decades-long feud with the Barzanis.²⁵

Anfal

The 1980s had greater horrors in store for the Iraqi Kurds. As Iran and Iraq slugged it out in a ruinous war that cost almost a million lives, the KDP and PUK conducted their own battles against Baghdad—and each other. The first taste of the barbarities that lay ahead came in 1983 when Saddam Hussein’s forces rounded up 8,000 men from the Barzani tribe and murdered them en masse. Then in 1988, Saddam launched the genocidal Anfal campaign involving the use of chemical agents such as mustard gas against Kurdish rebels

and civilians alike.²⁶

*“My daughter Narjis came to me, complaining about pain in her eyes, chest and stomach. When I got close to see what’s wrong with her, she threw up all over me. When I took her in to wash her face ... all my other children were throwing up. Then my condition got bad, too. And that’s when we realized that the weapon was poisonous and chemical.”*²⁷ Testimony of a victim of the 1988 chemical bomb attack in Halabja

“On March 13, the Anfal campaign reached an obscene apex in the town of Halabja on the Iranian border: at least 5,000 people died in the course of 24 hours after Iraqi war planes rained chemicals over them. More than 100,000 Iraqi Kurds perished by the time Saddam was done with his slaughtering spree. The Iraqi Kurds’ attempts to publicize their suffering fell largely on deaf ears. The West needed Saddam as a counterbalance to Iran’s Islamic regime.

Global indifference to his monstrous crimes fed Saddam’s confidence. On August 2, 1990, Saddam’s army rolled into Kuwait and conquered the emirate in a few hours. Although he did not know it at the time, the Iraqi dictator had sealed his own death warrant and given the Iraqi Kurds’ struggle for independence an unprecedented boost.

In January 1991, the U.S. army easily beat back the Iraqi army, which was forced out of Kuwait, and by mid-February they had announced victory against Saddam. But Kurdish hopes that the United States would overthrow him proved empty, even though they had good reason to believe that this was likely to happen. On February 15, President George H. W. Bush declared: “There’s another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside.”²⁸

The Shi’as in the south and the Kurds in the north took his words as a green light to rise up against Sad-

dam—and they did. By mid-March the Shi'as had taken a string of cities in the south. In the north, the Kurds overran Erbil and Kirkuk. But when Saddam realized U.S. forces were not pursuing him beyond Kuwait, he swiftly struck back. Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani displayed remarkable valor, but the *pesh-merga* were no match for Saddam's tanks and helicopter gunships.

*"The whole of Kurdistan was flowing up the road. People were fleeing from hospitals – with IV drip feeds hanging off and people in beds rolling along – because someone said they'd smelled poison gas."*²⁹ BBC Middle East correspondent Jim Muir

On March 31, 1991, Iraqi troops retook Erbil. As they butchered their way across Kurdistan, the Kurds fled by the hundreds of thousands, massing on the mountains bordering Turkey and Iran. The Iranians allowed entry of up to a million Kurds, but some half a million more pressing to enter Turkey were ruthlessly shut out. As the humanitarian tragedy unfolded, the West failed to respond. It took the combined efforts of a clutch of Kurds and foreigners—notably Morton Abramowitz, the U.S. ambassador to Turkey; Peter Galbraith, a Senate staffer; and Jim Muir, the BBC's veteran Middle East correspondent—to shame the West into action.³⁰ But not before Talabani and Masoud Barzani's nephew, Nechervan Barzani, met with Saddam in a desperate last stab at a truce.

Operation Provide Comfort

On April 7, the United States joined the United Kingdom and France in agreeing to re-enter Iraq and create

a safe haven for the Iraqi Kurds. On April 20, U.S. and British troops entered the town of Zakho on the Turkish border, and by October Saddam had pulled out of Iraq's three Kurdish provinces (Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk, and Erbil). Coalition planes based at Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey began patrolling the skies north of the 36th parallel to keep Saddam out. Baghdad effectively relinquished control of the three Kurdish provinces. What started out as a humanitarian mission called "Operation Provide Comfort" serendipitously formed the embryo of an independent Kurdistan. The Shi'a-led Iraqi opposition, also based in Iraqi Kurdistan, began plotting Saddam's demise with the help of the CIA.³¹

The Iraqi Kurds seized on this unexpected reversal in their fortunes, holding their first-ever parliamentary elections in 1992. The outcome, which gave Barzani's KDP 45 percent of the vote and Talabani's PUK 43.5 percent, led to the effective partitioning of Iraqi Kurdistan between the two parties.³² It was not long before they were at each other's throats. But in a bid to placate Turkey, they took a whack at the PKK first in a short, sharp war that did little to weaken the Turkish Kurds.³³

Fratricide

While the personal rivalry between Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani played a big part, a fight over money tipped the two parties into full-scale conflict. Geography favored the Barzanis and the KDP. The area under their control borders Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds' only outlet to the West and to a free-market economy. With plenty of help from crooked Iraqi and Turkish officials, the KDP and its allies were raking in the proceeds of a booming diesel trade conducted in violation of UN sanctions against Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds black-listed Western reporters who dared to write about this and denied them entry in their territory, sometimes for several years.³⁴ The PUK, whose trade was limited to



Figure 3: KDP leader Masoud Barzani (left) with PUK leader Jalal Talabani (right)

"IRAQ President Jalal Talabani - Barzani," Flickr user Jan Cefci ([CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)).

sanctions-hit Iran, demanded its fair share to little avail. Thus, the PUK had to content itself with far more modest business with Iran.

Similar grievances are echoed by the PUK today over the KDP's control of the energy portfolio. The energy minister, Ashti Hawrami, was brought in by Nechervan Barzani. This is compounded by the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan's oil is exported via KDP-controlled territory to Turkey. The precise nature of these transactions remains opaque.³⁵ As a result, KDP-dominated Erbil is strikingly more affluent than the PUK's capital Sulaymaniyah.

The KDP-PUK conflict, which formally began in May 1994 ostensibly over a land dispute, claimed hundreds of lives on both sides.³⁶ Torture of prisoners and other abuses—committed by the KDP and PUK alike—were graphically documented by Human Rights Watch.³⁷ The fratricide took a grotesque turn on August 31, 1996 when Barzani invited Saddam's troops to help him eject the PUK from Erbil after Talabani had brought in Iranian forces to intervene on his behalf. Saddam's forces used the opportunity to murder hundreds of Iraqi Arab oppositionists on the outskirts of Erbil who were plotting his overthrow with the CIA. The PUK struck back with the help of

Iran's Revolutionary Guards, kicking the KDP out of Sulaymaniyah soon after. It took U.S. mediation to end the war with the signing of the 1998 Washington Agreement,³⁸ but the wounds remain deep.

Both sides believe in independence, but they also continue to believe that they should be in the driver's seat.

Goodbye Saddam, Hello Kurdistan

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the dismantling of the Ba'ath regime gave the Iraqi Kurdish autonomy its biggest push of all. But if Turkey had not refused to let U.S. troops use its territory as a launching pad for the invasion of Iraq, the story may have ended rather badly for the Kurds.³⁹ Thousands of Turkish troops would have entered the Iraqi Kurdish enclave alongside the Americans, adding to the estimated 2,000 Turkish troops already stationed there to hem in the PKK.⁴⁰

During the invasion, the *peshmerga* played a key role in helping the coalition dispose of Saddam. The Iraqi Kurds were amply rewarded in the new constitution adopted in 2005. It enshrined their federal status, allowed them to retain their own army, and gave them effective veto power over any new legislation. Together with Arabic, Kurdish became the new Iraq's official tongue. Jalal Talabani was Iraq's first president, and Masoud Barzani was the first president of Iraqi Kurdistan. Article 140 of the new Iraqi Constitution called for "normalization, census, and referendums in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens" by December 31, 2007.⁴¹ In other words, Kurdish claims to areas that were "Arabized" through the forced relocation of Kurds were to be legally addressed.⁴² But the referendum was postponed indefinitely, the census never took place, and compensation was never paid, adding to Kurdish grievances against Baghdad.

State Building

When Saddam was booted out, no group was as well prepared to advance its own goals as the Kurds. Since the beginning of “Operation Provide Comfort,” the Kurds set about laying the foundations of an independent state, albeit a bifurcated one. Initially the KDP and the PUK had separate administrations and militias. They even had their own sets of representative offices in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. While the KDP allied itself with Turkey, the PUK continued to pay court to Iran. Journalists were affected by this tug of war as well. Those who traveled to Iraqi Kurdistan via Turkey, and thus into KDP-controlled areas, would be discouraged from venturing south to PUK territory. (The PUK has always been easier in its dealings with the press: before Talabani lost his health and had to step down from the Iraqi presidency in 2012, he would charm journalists with his witty anecdotes over bottles of whiskey at his fortress in the hills overlooking Sulaymaniyah. Barzani has always been far more aloof.)

Yet after the Washington Agreement, and under the UN’s watchful eye, the parties managed to cohabitate, if uneasily, weathering several Turkish military incursions against the PKK as well as a deadly campaign by al-Qaeda’s Kurdish franchise, Ansar al-Islam.⁴³

While the Iraqi Kurds pride themselves on being secular, pockets of Islamic militancy survive, especially in Halabja from which many Iraqi Kurdish ISIS fighters are said to originate.⁴⁴ Despite sustained U.S. pressure, however, KDP and PUK *peshmerga* have yet to fully merge, which is a good example of the continued rivalry between the two parties. Talabani’s withdrawal from the political scene for health reasons has left a sustained power vacuum in the PUK.⁴⁵ The lack of a single, authoritative leader on the PUK side has added to the political instability and paralyzed decision-making in the areas under PUK control.


Which Kurdish?

The PUK-KDP divide is also cemented in language. Kurmanji, which is the most commonly used dialect among all the Kurds, is common in KDP-controlled areas. Sorani, the other main dialect, is used in the PUK-controlled south.

The 1970’s autonomy agreement had allowed for the launching of the first-ever Kurdish university in Sulaymaniyah, and Kurdish language education was permitted in mainly Kurdish areas. But this Kurdish Spring was ephemeral. The Iraqi Kurds are now making up for lost time. A new educational curriculum has replaced Arabic with Kurdish as the primary language. And while Arabic remains officially the second language and is compulsory in Kurdish schools, a profusion of Kurdish-only television stations have helped to accelerate the shift away from Arabic. The net effect is that Iraqi Kurds born after 1991 have little connection to Arab culture, and few speak passable Arabic. (It remains to be seen what impact the recent influx of Arab IDPs will have.) The cultural unmooring of Kurds from Arab Iraq is continuing in full swing.⁴⁶

But the question of which of the dialects—Kurmanji or Sorani—should take precedence is causing fresh tensions. For now, Sorani is the official language of the KRG. Some say the reason for this decision was to allay Ankara’s jitters about deepening connections between the Iraqi Kurds and the Turkish Kurds who mostly speak Kurmanji. Others claim that the choice of Sorani was an olive branch extended by the KDP to the PUK.

In any case, the Badîni sub-dialect of Kurmanji is used in schools in Dohuk province, and Sorani in the remaining part of Iraqi Kurdistan. But should Iraqi Kurdistan become formally independent, the language debate is sure to be re-ignited. Michael Chyet, a globally renowned Kurdish linguist, reminds us that it was the British who started the dispute. Chyet explains, “During the mandate period in Iraq (1919-1958),



the British insisted that Sorani be the only Kurdish dialect taught in Kurdish schools, which engendered a fair amount of resentment among Kurmanji speakers. Choosing one dialect over another—or, to put it differently, imposing one dialect on a population which speaks another—is guaranteed to cause dissent.”⁴⁷ Chyet argues that both dialects need to be treated, and taught, equally. Whether the Iraqi Kurdish leadership will heed him is a different matter.⁴⁸

In the meantime, Article 4 of the Iraqi Constitution ensures the rights of Iraqi citizens to educate their children in their mother tongues, including Syriac Aramaic and Turkmen.⁴⁹ The Iraqi Kurds had already granted such rights to minority groups living in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s, as well as quotas for their representation in the parliament. “Iraqi Kurdistan has become the only safe haven for Christians, for Yazidis, for all minorities, even majorities in the Middle East,” asserts Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman,⁵⁰ the KRG’s representative in Washington, D.C. With a 30 percent quota, Iraqi Kurdistan’s parliament has, alongside Tunisia, one of the highest percentages of female lawmakers in the Middle East.⁵¹

The Other Iraq

From 2005 to 2013, while the rest of Iraq was wracked by sectarian violence, Iraqi Kurdistan’s economy took off. Oil prices were skyrocketing and the central government was more or less (the Kurds would argue less) giving the Kurds their constitutionally mandated 17 percent share of the national budget. By 2013, this amounted to over \$1 billion per month. Average annual growth reached double digits. The public sector employee payroll ballooned. This included so-called ghost civil servants and *peshmerga* who drew salaries but did nothing—all part of a scheme to buy votes and loyalty. The KDP and PUK patronage networks flourished as never before. So did graft.

In 2014, the government employed some 53 per-

cent of Iraqi Kurdistan’s labor force. Public servants earned 30 percent higher wages than their private sector peers, not including additional perks.⁵² A newly affluent middle class eagerly snapped up properties in shiny, new housing complexes with names like “Dream City.” Filipino and Bangladeshi workers flocked to serve this new bourgeoisie and do the menial jobs Kurds were no longer willing to do.⁵³

In 2006, a liberal investment law was adopted that was laced with incentives to draw foreign investors.⁵⁴ These included sweeping tax exemptions and the granting of ownership of project lands that do not contain oil, gas, or mineral resources. At the same time, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) was established to oversee Iraqi Kurdistan’s burgeoning energy sector. Foreign companies, many of them Turkish, started pouring in.⁵⁵

It was, in the words of Kamal Chomani, an opposition Iraqi Kurdish journalist, a “gilded” rather than a “golden” age. Public fury over the concentration of wealth in the hands of a select few fueled the rise of Gorran, or the Movement for Change, led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, a former PUK heavyweight, in 2009.⁵⁶ Mustafa remains a political player and retains a loyal core of supporters and media outlets. But he no longer commands the same moral high ground. And his health is failing. Gorran’s fortunes rapidly faded when it joined the KDP in 2014 in a coalition together with the PUK, which its supporters disliked. Mustafa has since fallen out with the KDP in a bitter row over the presidency, which has effectively paralyzed the parliament. In May 2016, he forged a new alliance with the PUK that is calculated to check KDP hegemony.

Differences over the presidency erupted when Gorran, teamed up with the other political parties, objected to Barzani extending his presidency beyond its term when it expired for a second time in August 2015.⁵⁷ It had already expired in 2013 but was extended for two years thanks to a legally dubious deal between the KDP and the PUK.⁵⁸

Euro Kurds

Iraqi Kurdistan's gilded era attracted a growing number of "Euro Kurds"—Iraqi Kurds who had either migrated to Europe or were born there.⁵⁹ These diaspora Kurds, who are labeled as "Europi" (Europeans) or "Xarici" (outsiders), are poised to play a pivotal role in helping to build an independent Iraqi Kurdistan. Persuading them to stay remains a big challenge.

Janroj Yilmaz Keles, a sociologist at London's Middlesex University, has carried out extensive research on British Kurds who have returned to Iraqi Kurdistan, observing, "The majority state that they decided to return to Kurdistan to be part of the new political dynamics and to contribute to the reconstruction of the de-facto Kurdish state."⁶⁰ But the returnees are by no means homogenous, and their motives not always so high-minded. The older generation of unskilled Iraqi Kurds who had not fared well in their host countries and missed their old social networks returned with vague notions of doing better back home. Many younger university-educated Iraqi Kurds who had ties to the political elites sought status through high positions in the government or were seeking a ticket to instant wealth. Not surprisingly, locals vying for the same jobs resented them.

Keles notes that there is another category of returnees who shun the political establishment and are "frustrated by the mismanagement of Kurdish institutions, corruption, bribery, nepotism, and the lack of transparency and accountability in Kurdistan."⁶¹ Typically, these "excluded new elites," as Keles terms them, express their critical opinions in Kurdish language newspapers or during televised debates. If they are in academia, they push for more progressive curricula like gender studies in the face of stiff resistance from religious conservatives. Thanks to their efforts, says Nazand Begikhani, a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol, there are currently three gender-

based studies centers in Iraqi Kurdistan: the Gender and Violence Studies Center at the University of Sulaymaniyah established in 2011, the Kurdistan Center for Gender Studies at the Soran University established in 2014, and the Center for Gender and Development Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) established in 2016.⁶² Founded by Barham Saleh, a former KRG prime minister and a globally acknowledged public intellectual, AUIS produces some of the finest graduates in the region.

Overall, the Euro Kurds contribute to pluralism and bring new ideas, but entrenched patronage networks prevent them from having a transformational impact. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the economic meltdown has propelled many to leave. "A lot of young people don't see a future here anymore. It's the brightest women and men who leave first,"⁶³ says Wladimir van Wilgenburg, a veteran foreign correspondent in Iraqi Kurdistan. Many such returnees were employed in the oil sector.

Kurdistan's Oil Riches: A Mixed Picture

Independent or not, the Iraqi Kurds' reliance on oil (and eventually natural gas) revenues is near complete, and will remain so for the foreseeable future; local taxes account for a mere 2.6 percent of GDP and 4.7 percent of total public revenues. In the absence of any other significant income-generating sector, this leaves the Iraqi Kurds at the mercy of global oil prices, and, because Iraqi Kurdistan is landlocked, of its neighbors.⁶⁴

Quarrels over oil revenues lie at the heart of the ongoing crisis between the Kurds and the central government.⁶⁵ The failure to agree on a hydrocarbons law setting out how the country's vast energy riches would be divided has further muddled the waters. Clearly the polarizing former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki—who in the day worked so closely with the Kurds against the Ba'ath regime that he earned the

Kurdish *nom de guerre* “Kak Jawad” (Brother Jawad)—did more than any to sour ties.⁶⁶ Maliki first withheld budgetary payments to the Kurds, and went as far as to accuse them of collaborating with ISIS.⁶⁷

The Iraqi Arabs, in turn, argue that the KRG lit the fire when it decided to export its oil independently through a pipeline that links up with export terminals in Turkey’s southern port of Ceyhan.⁶⁸ Baghdad has declared the sales as illegal.⁶⁹ The Kurds retort that faced with Baghdad’s flip-flopping on budgetary payments, they were left with no other choice.⁷⁰ In February 2014, Baghdad halted payments altogether after the sides failed to overcome their differences. The Iraqi Kurds began independent oil sales soon after, albeit at heavily discounted prices because of Baghdad’s threats of litigation. Much of the oil ended up at the Israeli port of Ashkelon.⁷¹

If Iraqi Kurdistan were independent, it could sell oil at market prices. Washington initially opposed Iraqi Kurdish moves to export their oil independently, above all to placate Baghdad, and in September 2015 a U.S. federal court ruled against the KRG’s attempted oil sale to Texas.⁷² But with the onset of the economic crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan and the KRG’s desperate need for funds to finance its campaign against ISIS, Washington has gone silent on the issue.

Meanwhile, there is heated debate as to whether the Iraqi Kurds’ oil reserves are all they are chalked up to be. This was painfully evident when the Anglo-Turkish Genel Energy—the first foreign company to sign a production-sharing contract (PSC) with the KRG in 2002, even before Saddam’s fall—released a statement to the London Stock Exchange in February 2016 announcing the halving of reserves at the Taq Taq oil field where it began production in 2008. Needless to say, the value of Genel’s shares has plummeted.⁷³

The KRG’s Ministry of Natural Resources estimates oil reserves at 45 billion barrels. When the disputed territories, mainly Kirkuk, are tagged on, the figure rises to 70 billion barrels. Company reports and

public data sources suggest that proven oil reserves and discovered contingent resources together add up to some 10.8 billion barrels without Kirkuk. By this

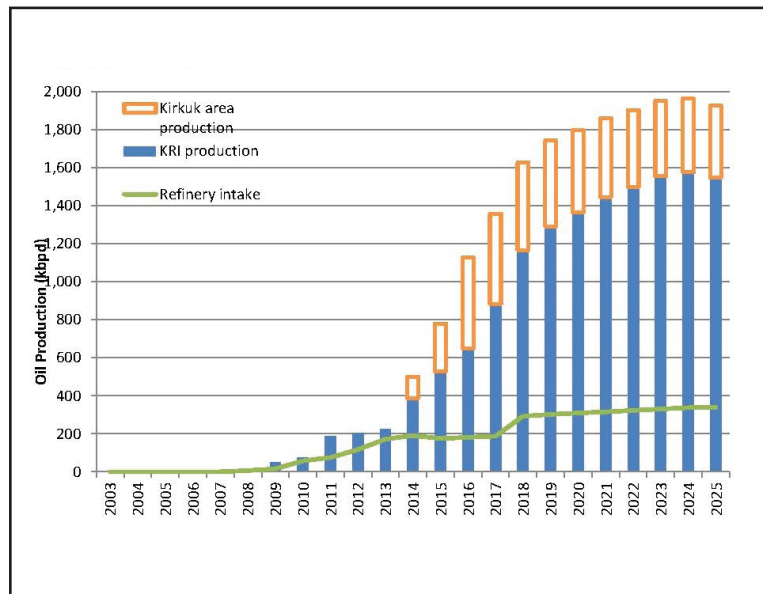


Figure 4: Oil production in Iraqi Kurdistan (Ministry of Natural Resources), graph courtesy of the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies/Robin Mills

reckoning, Iraqi Kurdistan still has more oil than Azerbaijan and Colombia combined. The International Energy Agency estimated in 2012, however, that Iraqi Kurdistan had only 4 billion barrels of proven reserves. In a comprehensive January 2016 study, the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies predicted that “exports of around 1 million bpd [barrels per day] of oil and 10 bcm [billion cubic meters] of gas by the early 2020’s, rising to 20 bcm per year by the mid 2020’s, are plausible given the discovered resource base and current stage of development.”⁷⁴

The KRG’s bullish energy minister, Ashti Hawrami, predicted that Iraqi Kurdistan would be pumping 1 million barrels per day (bpd) by the end of 2014. Production is currently averaging between 500,000 to 700,000 bpd. Even if production were to rise, the existing export pipeline grid to Turkey would not be able to accommodate significantly increased volumes. And

for as long as oil prices remain down, the oil companies will not invest in new infrastructure.

Exploration in areas that are now formally part of Iraqi Kurdistan was very limited until 2004. The political risk was too steep, and there were richer pickings elsewhere in Iraq. It was only after Saddam's ouster that a handful of small companies decided to take the plunge.⁷⁵ In November 2011, ExxonMobil, the world's largest non-state oil company, entered the market.⁷⁶ Another U.S. giant, Chevron, came soon after. They apparently cared little what either Baghdad or Washington, which sided with the central government, had to say, bolstering Iraqi Kurdish confidence in their independence plans. For all Iraqi Kurdistan's economic travails, both companies say they are in it for the long haul. A rapid clarification of the legal status of KRG exports is clearly in the international oil companies' interests as well.

Iraqi Kurdistan has abundant, and largely untapped, supplies of natural gas that will likely overtake oil as the main income earner. Significantly, most of the gas fields are in PUK-controlled areas. This could help redress the imbalance between the KDP and the PUK and make independence that much more palatable to the latter. Much of the gas will have to be exported through KDP-controlled territory, thus providing an incentive for the sides to cooperate.

A November 2013 agreement signed between the KRG and the Turkish government foresees exports of up to 20 bcm of gas by 2020 through a pipeline that will likely be financed by Ankara. But the financial crunch has hit the fledgling gas sector in a big way, and potential investments have receded into the future. In addition, the United Arab Emirates' Crescent Petroleum and its affiliate DANA gas are seeking billions of dollars in damages from the KRG for overdue payments and contractual issues that the companies say have hurt their business.⁷⁷

In the end, the future of Iraqi Kurdistan's hydrocarbons industry—as Iraqi Kurdistan's overall future


for that matter—hinges on several factors: the KRG's ability to enact radical economic reforms, crack down on graft, resolve its internal political differences, and manage relations with Baghdad and its neighbors. The KDP's near monopoly over the sector amid allegations that its leaders are pocketing a sizeable chunk of the proceeds needs to be addressed. Officials on the oil and gas committee of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament remain in the dark as to how much revenues flow from KRG oil sales and where the funds are allocated. Another critical yet underreported issue is pipeline security: the PKK has sabotaged the Iraqi Kurdistan-Turkey pipeline at least twice so far.⁷⁸ Until Turkey makes peace with its own Kurds, energy pipelines will remain under threat.

Annus Horribilis

The year 2014 was one of the most horrible years ever for Iraq, especially so for the Kurds: the combined effects of weakening oil prices,⁷⁹ the central government's decision to halt budgetary payments, the onslaught of ISIS, and the ensuing influx of refugees brought Iraqi Kurdistan to its knees. For a while Iraqi Kurdistan was militarily humiliated, and it remains financially bankrupt.

*"People feel like they are living in the time of the Pharaohs. Every time a new plague arrives."*⁷⁸ Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, Dutch journalist

When the price of oil tumbled from \$115 a barrel in June 2014 to \$33 in April 2016, the KRG—like governments elsewhere in the region—was caught unprepared. The result, in the words of Qubad Talabani, the KRG's deputy prime minister (and Jalal Talabani's younger son) is "an economic tsunami."⁸¹



Public sector employees' wages, including those of the *peshmerga*, have gone unpaid or have been partially withheld. Iraqi Kurdish officials privately admit that these arrears, now running in the hundreds of millions of dollars, are never likely to be repaid. Consumer spending has collapsed, property prices have crashed, construction projects have come to a standstill, and capacity utilization at cement plants is in freefall. Payments to the international oil companies, and thus exploration, have been badly disrupted as well.

According to the KRG's own figures, poverty quadrupled in the second half of 2014 due in large part to the influx of some 1.6 million IDPs. MarcoPolis, an online business review, noted, "Hundreds of contractors and sub-contractors are said to have gone out of business. In many cases the owners have been financially ruined. Some have even committed suicide."⁸²

Iraqi Kurdistan's status as a sub-sovereign entity has compounded its financial woes. The KRG cannot raise money on the international markets or from international lending institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Nor can it borrow from other countries. The KRG effort to float a bond sale came to naught, because interest rates would have been well into double digits.⁸³ There is no developed banking sector, and virtually all transactions are cash-based. All of this, Iraqi Kurdish officials say, is undercutting the fight against ISIS. A steady stream of Kurdish officials has come to Washington over the past year,⁸⁴ pleading with the United States to bypass Baghdad and provide cash and weapons to the KRG directly.⁸⁵

Not surprisingly, popular anger is on the rise and there have been sporadic demonstrations against the government, some of them violent.⁸⁷ Yet, given the scale of the crisis, they have been surprisingly few and far between. The Kurds may have grown complacent, but they remain resilient. Some cynics even hazard that what people are really complaining about is the lack of opportunity to participate in the corruption.

*"If we are going to continue like this after we declare our independence, I don't think we are going to last for a long time. Only a handful of people have access to many things. If there were a referendum on independence today I am not sure that I would vote in favor."*⁸² Mir Shawan, student at American University of Iraq-Sulaimani

There is a silver lining to the meltdown. For the first time the KRG has worked with the World Bank to come up with a roadmap for sweeping reforms. These include slashing subsidies, raising taxes, developing the private sector, and diversifying the economy away from energy. Tourism, agriculture, and information technology are three sectors slated for development, though Western investors express skepticism that these will generate meaningful income anytime in the near future, least of all with ISIS next door.

The KRG cannot dip into World Bank funds itself unless its goes through Baghdad. But rubbing shoulders with international financial institutions is clearly a useful exercise in state-building. The key is implementation. Since January 2016, the KRG has slashed public sector salaries by up to 75 percent, with the biggest cuts made to the upper crust.⁸⁸ If the KRG can prove it is willing to forego political interests and dismantle the patronage system, this will go a long way toward building the credibility and investor confidence necessary to become economically viable. This is by no means guaranteed. But the truth is that the KRG no longer has the same resources to keep the old system running. The KRG risks running its administration into the ground and could face social and political chaos on an unprecedented scale unless it fulfills its pledges to reform.

Once ISIS is defeated, the Kurds will decline in relevance. Western tolerance for their misbehavior will run out.

Barbarians at the Gate

*“As Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorists were advancing rapidly toward the Iraqi Kurdistan Region on August 7 [2014], we were monitoring the fighting from Erbil with growing concern. The news was grim. ISIL had broken through Kurdish defenses and captured the town of Makhmur, 30 miles southwest of the Consulate, causing tens of thousands of terrified civilians to flee. By the time that wave of civilians arrived in Erbil, families in the capital had crammed what they could into cars and started to head north toward the Turkish border. By 2 AM on August 8, ISIL was within 18 miles of the Consulate, and the staff was reviewing evacuation options. Twelve hours later, President Obama announced he had authorized airstrikes against ISIL to protect U.S. personnel in Erbil, and we breathed a sigh of relief. It was a harrowing moment, but we made the right decision to stay—the Consulate had weathered the storm, but we knew that life and work in Erbil would not be the same.”*⁸⁹ Joseph S. Pennington, former U.S. Consul General, Erbil

When ISIS rampaged across central Iraq seizing the country’s third largest city, Mosul, there was hardly any fighting between the jihadists and the *peshmerga*. Indeed, some would argue that for the Kurds, ISIS proved in many ways to be more of a blessing than a curse. In the chaos that followed the jihadists’ June 2014 assault, the *peshmerga* moved in to take up the fleeing Iraqi army’s place. This effectively allowed them to capture many of the disputed territories, including Kirkuk and its oil fields, virtually without shooting a single bullet.⁹⁰

But if the Kurds believed it was all going to be smooth sailing, that delusion was shattered in August when ISIS overran the Nineveh plain and the towns of Shingal (also known as Sinjar) and Makhmur, bringing the jihadists within striking distance of Erbil.

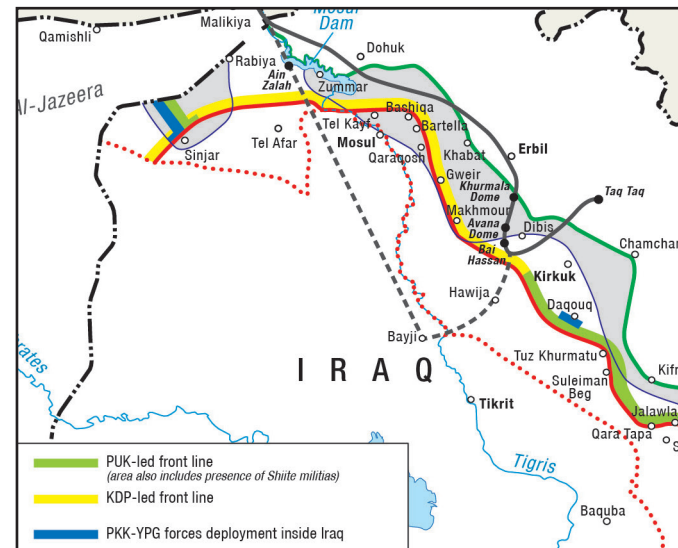


Figure 5: Political and Military Boundaries of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (International Crisis Group)

The *peshmerga* forces melted away, much as the Iraqi army did elsewhere, leaving thousands of Yazidis and Christians at the mercy of advancing ISIS forces.⁹¹ Christian fatalities were low, but the Yazidis were decimated and thousands of their women and girls sold into slavery. Khairi Bozani, the KRG’s head of Yazidi religious affairs, says that at least 1,882 of his people were murdered. But the total is likely much higher. Today Shingal is a ghost town. Row after row of collapsed cinderblock houses line its streets. Few of the 200,000-plus Yazidis who fled the district dare to return.⁹²

The KRG blames the central government for its battlefield woes. The Iraqi army’s failure to defend them against ISIS has only reinforced the Kurds’ desire to split away.⁹⁴ It has also impelled the United States to re-engage militarily with the Kurds. The Iraqi Kurds are the first to admit that without U.S. intervention, Erbil would likely have fallen together with much of Iraqi Kurdistan. The battle against ISIS has also given

the Kurds ammunition to lobby their cause with the U.S. Congress, where they enjoy bi-partisan support.⁹⁵ The recent string of *peshmerga* victories against the jihadists proves that the problem is with Baghdad not with them, they say.

“How much longer do we have to be part of Iraq? How many genocides do we have to face before we get our own country.”⁹⁹

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman,
KRG representative in Washington, D.C.

A succession of KRG delegations has been nagging Congress and the Obama administration to directly arm the *peshmerga*. But the United States continues to pay lip service to its “One Iraq” policy. Therefore, planes carrying arms for the *peshmerga* touch down in Baghdad first. Yet, contrary to the KRG’s claims that the central government is withholding the deliveries, Iraqi customs checks are perfunctory—whatever the United States and its partners send to the *peshmerga* reaches them.⁹⁶

Still, the KRG’s well-oiled lobbying machine has had an effect. A Senate proposal to provide direct military assistance to the Kurds was popular enough to win 54 votes in 2015, just a few short of the 60 it needed to be adopted. The vote is likely to come back to the floor and more likely than not will pass this time, according to Remziya Suleyman, a young Kurd who manages the KRG’s lobbying activities in Washington, D.C.⁹⁷ In May 2016, the United States announced that it had allocated \$480 million for the *peshmerga* to help the KRG pay for food, fuel, and salaries necessary to continue the fight.⁹⁸ Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi backed the move.

The Yazidi Divide and the PKK

In an ideal world the common threat of ISIS should have united the Kurds. It has had the opposite effect. For one, the PKK and its Syrian affiliate, the People’s Protection Units⁹⁹ (YPG), have succeeded in burnishing their credentials, partly at the *peshmerga*’s expense. They helped to evacuate thousands of Yazidis from Mount Sinjar by opening a corridor through Syria.¹⁰⁰ Thousands of lives were saved, but the political fallout was huge. The *peshmerga* were humiliated. Many Yazidis no longer trust them.¹⁰¹ Tensions between the KDP and the PKK are escalating. The YPG’s prowess against ISIS in Syria in tandem with the U.S.-led coalition has further sharpened competition with the *peshmerga*.

Christine McCaffray van den Toorn is the Director of the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at AUIS. The academic has traveled to Shingal numerous times despite its proximity to the ISIS frontlines and conducted lengthy interviews with all the stakeholders there. Van den Toorn believes Shingal is the KRG’s biggest problem.¹⁰² “There are very real differences between Yazidi factions about whether Sinjar should be part of Iraq or the Kurdistan Region, if Yazidis are Kurds or a distinct ethnic group, and which parties best represent Sinjar’s interests,”¹⁰³ she says.

The Yazidis are broadly divided between those who support the Turkey-backed KDP and others who favor the Baghdad- and Iranian-backed PKK. Van den Toorn warns that unless neutral third parties, namely the United States, intervene to defuse the situation, conflict between the sides is inevitable. To be sure, both Barzanis—Masoud and Nechervan—have said the PKK needs to leave Shingal to avoid being ejected by force. But the political cost of doing this will be high. As the KRG’s Suleyman said, “The public will not accept Kurd-on-Kurd violence anymore.”¹⁰⁴

Shingal offered a rare opportunity for the KDP and the PKK to set aside their differences and coop-

erate. For a brief while they did, most memorably in the besieged Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane¹⁰⁵ when the *peshmerga* came in with heavy weapons to help the YPG beat back ISIS in November 2014. But after the *peshmerga*, backed by U.S. forces, liberated Shingal in November 2015, each side rushed to claim credit.¹⁰⁶ The PKK upped the ante, helping the Yazidis to organize a militia called the Shingal Protection Units (YBS) that is allegedly armed by Baghdad and to establish an independent council so they can run their own affairs.¹⁰⁷ Masoud Barzani has responded by severely restricting the movement of goods and people between Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava in northern Syria—the YPG calls it a blockade—and by backing the YPG’s rivals, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDP-S).¹⁰⁸

The External Actors

A Turkish Turn

Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait and the U.S. invasion of Iraq helped catapult Iraqi Kurdistan toward independence. But without Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds would not be where they are today. Turkey is Iraqi Kurdistan’s closest regional ally and a critical pillar in the Kurds’ independence plans. A common refrain among Iraqi Kurdistan leaders is that Turkish and U.S. support would “be enough” for a viable Kurdistan.

“If the current [AKP] government does not recognize and accept an independent Kurdistan I don’t think any other government in Turkey will.”¹⁰⁹ Masoud Barzani


Relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds were rocky for a long time.¹¹⁰ In the Iraqi Kurds’ hour of need, Turkey has often equivocated. Sheikh Ahmad

and Mullah Mustafa Barzani were granted refuge by Turkey in 1920 only to be sent back.¹¹¹ Thousands of Iraqi Kurds took shelter in Turkey following the Halabja attack. Many of them wound up in Tennessee, home to the United States’ largest concentration of Kurds.¹¹² “Operation Provide Comfort” was run out of Turkey’s Incirlik Air Base. And in the early 1990s, President Turgut Ozal issued diplomatic passports to Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani so they could travel freely to promote their cause. Turkey’s military-dominated establishment viewed the Iraqi Kurdish leaders with deep suspicion—and contempt. “A bunch of tribal primitives,” Turkish generals would complain privately. In their view, the Iraqi Kurds were at best useful tools against the PKK. Since the early 1990s, the PKK leadership has been based in the Qandil Mountains separating Iran from Iraq.¹¹³

For much of the 1990s Turkey used the Habur border crossing, the Kurds’ sole exit to the West, to pressure them into fighting the PKK. When the Iraqi Kurds complied, goods and people would flow freely. When they did not, the border would be sealed. Trucks carrying contraband diesel would line up for miles on both sides of the border. Turkey also inserted itself into the KDP-PUK conflict, carrying out bombing raids against PUK targets to ease pressure on Masoud Barzani and his men.

The ascent of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) ushered in a new era in relations.¹¹⁴ At first this ran parallel to the Turkish government’s now defunct overtures toward the PKK.¹¹⁵ The PUK and the KDP played a mediating role between the government and the PKK leadership in Qandil. For a time, a virtuous cycle of peace benefiting Kurds on both sides of the border seemed within reach.

Starting in the 1990s, Turkish businessmen gained a foothold in Iraqi Kurdistan. Today they have a near monopoly on construction. Turkish companies built the swanky Erbil International Airport, which con-



nects the enclave to European and Middle Eastern destinations.¹¹⁶ From food to furniture, the overwhelming majority of consumer goods in Iraqi Kurdistan are from Turkey. KRG leaders cultivate businessmen with close personal ties to Erdogan much in the same way they did Turkey's generals when they were still calling the shots.

In 2010 the alliance was formalized when Turkey opened its first-ever consulate in Erbil. Aydin Selcen, the first Consul General, famously declared that the frontiers between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan would soon go “unnoticed.”

In 2013 the personal friendship between Erdogan and Masoud Barzani reached a new high when the Kurdish leader stood side by side with the Turkish president at a mass rally in the mainly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in southeast Turkey.¹¹⁷ Erdogan's wife, Emine, was unable to suppress her tears as her husband declared to Barzani: “In the same way that we feel Erbil is our home we want you to feel that this is your home here.”¹¹⁸

The feelings are apparently mutual. Barzani told me in a March 2016 interview: “I have met Erdogan many times and I have seen that Erdogan has a better understanding of the Kurdish cause than any other Turkish leader. What I have heard from Erdogan, I have heard from no one else.” Not surprisingly, many criticize Barzani for putting all his eggs in the AKP basket. Like him or not, Erdogan is the sole Turkish leader with the clout to sell Iraqi Kurdish independence to his own people. Declaring independence whilst Erdogan is still around is almost certainly part of Barzani's calculations. Had the July 15, 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan succeeded, Barzani would have been in deep trouble. Barzani's show of support for Erdogan in the immediate aftermath of the coup further strengthened the bond. And on August 23, a day before Turkish troops entered Syria for the first time to fight ISIS—and the YPG—Barzani traveled to Ankara to meet with Erdogan and other Turkish

leaders, thus allowing Turkey to show that its actions against the YPG did not target all Kurds.

Security ties between Turkey and the KRG are clearly deepening. Turkish Special Forces are training *peshmerga* to fight ISIS (some would argue to fight the PKK as well) in separate camps in Diyanah and Sulaymaniyah.¹¹⁹ The military partnership took a controversial turn in December 2015 when Turkey deployed 150 troops and 25 tanks to the Bashiqa camp near Mosul,¹²⁰ ostensibly to support the training of former policemen who hope to participate in the city's liberation. The Iraqi government has called for an immediate withdrawal, saying Turkey's move was not coordinated with Baghdad and is a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. U.S.-mediated talks between Ankara and Baghdad have made some headway, though Turkey insists its troops must remain in Bashiqa until Mosul is liberated and stabilized. There is widespread speculation that the additional forces are there to ensure that Turkey will have a say in any post-ISIS arrangement in Mosul. Some have gone as far as to accuse Turkey of reviving Ottoman claims over the Mosul Vilayet. Either way, the Iraqi Kurds do not seem fazed. The Turkish presence is seen as a counterweight to Iran and to the Iranian-backed militia groups that could yet stir trouble in Iraqi Kurdistan and, Ankara fears, team up with the PKK. Still, the fact that Turkey did not rush to the KRG's defense when it came under ISIS attack has left a bitter taste. This was offset in part by some \$1 billion in cash that Turkey has provided to the KRG to help pay civil servant salaries.

On the economic side, the real beef lies in the mega-energy deal inked between Ankara and the KRG in November 2013 covering export pipelines and gas exports.¹²¹ The agreement is calculated in part to boost Turkey's ambitions to become a global energy hub and to lighten its dependency on Russian natural gas. The deal has been bitterly criticized by the Iraqi Kurdish opposition for its opacity. There are widespread allegations that politicians on both sides are lining their

pockets at the expense of ordinary Iraqi Kurds. Although such claims are impossible to prove, there is little question that the deal offers energy-hungry Turkey highly favorable terms.

In May 2014, the KRG began exporting oil independently via Turkey. The fact that Ankara allowed the KRG to bypass Baghdad deepened the chasm between the Kurds and the central government and was seized on by many as tangible proof of Ankara's growing acceptance of Iraqi Kurdish statehood.¹²²

In the words of Gonul Tol, the executive director of the Middle East Institute's Turkey program: "The energy deals foreshadow a major shift in Turkey's Iraq policy. Gone are the days when the KRG was seen as part of the problem; it is now viewed as part of the solution. Turkey cannot only tolerate an independent Kurdistan but also benefit from it, as long as it remains dependent economically on Turkey."¹²³

Other Kurdish experts disagree. The National Defense University's Denise Natali is one of them. She insists that Turkey does not support Iraqi Kurdish independence. "The Kurdistan Region has become a virtual client state of Turkey and buffer region without the sovereign rights to challenge Ankara through international law," she says. The key question, she adds, is "what would Ankara gain by losing some control over the KRG as it becomes a juridical sovereign entity?" Her response is that "Rather, Turkey—like other regional states—has much to gain from a weakened Iraqi state with its external borders officially intact, and where it can maintain a sphere of influence and access to cheap hydrocarbons resources through its local Kurdish proxies."¹²⁴

But the question is not so much whether Turkey will support Kurdish independence; rather, it is whether Turkey will take active steps to kill it. There are two ways Turkey could do this: by invading Iraqi Kurdistan militarily or cutting off its oil exports. In reality, it is unlikely to do either.

Some senior Turkish officials privately acknowl-

edge that Iraqi Kurdish statehood is a foregone conclusion. If anything, there appears to be growing consensus in Ankara that time is working against the Iraqi Kurds—and Turkey. The longer they wait, the stronger the PKK is likely to grow in Iraqi Kurdistan. This is especially true in Sulaymaniyah, where the PKK has stepped in to fill the vacuum created by the differences between the PUK and Gorran and those within the PUK itself. The economic crisis is accelerating this trend, and neither Tehran nor Baghdad has hesitated to use the PKK as leverage against Turkey and the KDP.

Unless Turkey reaches some form of political accommodation with the PKK, instability in Turkey's southeast will continue to spill over into Iraqi Kurdistan. Pipeline security will remain compromised and the PKK will continue to be a magnet for disaffected Kurdish youths.

All of this vastly complicates Iraqi Kurdish independence. The Iraqi Kurds will need to resist any Turkish demands to eject the PKK from its camps in Qandil—which is likely to prove impossible anyway—as a quid pro quo for Turkish support for their statehood. Given the turf battle over Shingal, the KDP may well be tempted. But the PUK and Gorran, which have allied with the PKK against the KDP, will likely rebuff Turkish pressure. Resuming their mediating role between Turkey and the PKK is a far safer path for the Iraqi Kurds.

Yet, in order to be sustainable, peace between Turkey and the PKK would have to cover the group's Syrian franchise, the YPG, as well. If Turkey were to deal with the autonomous Syrian Kurdish administration in the same way it has with Iraqi Kurdistan, by encouraging friendship rather than rivalry between the Iraqi and the Syrian Kurds, this would be a win-win for all both politically and economically. Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus would have that much less opportunity to stir things up. This would also remove a big source of friction between Ankara and Washington over the



latter's alliance with the YPG in the ongoing effort to defeat ISIS.

There is presently no evidence that Erdogan is ready to change tack and de-escalate Turkey's all-out war against the PKK, which has now literally expanded to northern Syria. But he is the master of U-turns, as witnessed in his decision to mend fences with Israel¹²⁵ and to apologize to Russia over the downing of its jet.¹²⁶ A grand bargain between Turkey, the KRG, and the PKK is not definitively off the table.

The Persian Puzzle

Relations between the Iraqi Kurds and Iran are far harder to pin down than those with Turkey. The Iraqi Kurds and Iran share a long history, some of it happy, most of it not. As previously noted, much like Turkey, Iran has sought to use the Iraqi Kurds to suppress its own Kurds and continues to do so.¹²⁷

The main Iranian Kurdish opposition groups—the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, or KDP-I (there are two of them), and Komala (there are at least three of them)—are effectively corralled in camps inside Iraqi Kurdistan, well away from the border with Iran. Recent attempts by the Mustafa Hijri-led KDP-I faction to re-ignite an insurgency are unlikely to gain much traction, because the KRG would be loath to incur Tehran's wrath just as it is pondering its independence move.

Similarly, the PKK has reined in its Iranian franchise, known as the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PEJAK), which was set up in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The PKK believed Washington's next target might be Iran and believed it might win U.S. support by offering its services via the PEJAK. PKK leader Murat Karayilan claimed in an April 2010 interview with me that "CIA agents" had visited Qandil to take up the matter. Presumably, the idea was that the PKK would put pressure on Iran by stirring its restive Kurdish population. But if there were any such plans,

they went nowhere. Iran gave the PEJAK a big thrashing,¹²⁸ launching airstrikes against their camps in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Iranians are far subtler than the Turks and have a better understanding of the Kurds. Linguistically and culturally, Persians and Kurds have far more in common than Turks and Kurds do. Sorani and Farsi are quite similar if not mutually intelligible, for example. The Iranian Kurds remain politically oppressed but are far better assimilated than the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, or Iraq. This is arguably truer of Shi'a Kurds, who are thought to make up nearly half of Iran's estimated eight million Kurds. Iraq's Kurds are mostly Sunnis, and as such have remained immune to Iranian efforts to export its revolution.

Iran is officially opposed to Iraqi Kurdish statehood and has aired this view on numerous occasions.¹²⁹ Yet when Erbil was under threat from ISIS, it was Tehran rather than Ankara that rode to the rescue. "We asked for weapons, and Iran was the first country to provide us with weapons and ammunition," Masoud Barzani publicly acknowledged at the time. Many of Iraqi Kurdistan's senior leaders, including Masoud Barzani and his son Masrour, were either born in Iran and/or speak fluent Farsi.

General Qasem Soleimani, the controversial head of the elite Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, is a frequent visitor to Iraqi Kurdistan.¹³⁰ The KRG's savvy prime minister, Nechervan Barzani, describes Soleimani as "a man you can do business with."¹³¹ Though Iran has closer relations to the PUK, it weighed in on Masoud Barzani's side in the presidency dispute, saying he should stay on.

Still, the KDP leadership remains deeply distrustful of Iran and especially of the Shi'a militias under its control. Two violent flare-ups between the *peshmerga* and Turkmen Shi'a militias in the town of Tuz Khurmatu in Kirkuk province over the past year have raised the specter of further violence should Baghdad decide to hang on to the disputed territories by force.¹³² The

militias give Iran another lever over the Iraqi Kurds. They are also viewed as threatening by the KRG's regional patron, Turkey, which has assumed an overtly pro-Sunni stance under Erdogan.

Ranj Alaaldin, a Middle East scholar at the London School of Economics, explains "the KRG fears these Shi'a militia groups because of their capacity to function independently of the Iraqi state and for their populist anti-Kurdish discourse. They feel it will be impossible to negotiate and compromise with these groups over the disputed territories, which forms a central part of the KRG's long-term political and security strategy, and feel that the militias function with complete impunity because of the absence of a strong government and effective state security force. As a result, the KRG believes the militias constitute a dangerous rival that has considerable arms and resources but very few constraints on its authority and activities."¹³³

Iraqi Kurdish leaders are keenly aware of the need to keep Iran on an even keel. Boosting commercial ties will help. The KRG has a longer border with Iran than it does with Turkey. But the volume of trade between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran is far lower than that between Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey. Technical talks are under way to build a second oil export pipeline to Iran.¹³⁴ As Nazim Dabakh, the KRG's representative in Tehran, told *The Iraq Oil Report*, "This project shows that Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to cooperate with KRG in multiple fields."¹³⁵ But Dabakh stressed that Iranian cooperation would be forthcoming in the frame of "a united Iraq."

It remains unclear how Iran would react to a unilateral declaration of Iraqi Kurdish independence if it were accepted by Ankara and Washington. Iran may yet decide that it is in their interest as well to maintain friendly ties with Iraqi Kurdistan. The thaw in its relations with the United States in the wake of the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran may give Iran the confidence to do just that. Besides, as Mohammed Salih, a prominent Iraqi Kurdish journalist, said, "instability

can travel both ways."¹³⁶ An Iraqi Kurdistan backed by Turkey, and perhaps even the PKK, could also spell trouble for Iran.


An Amicable Divorce from Baghdad

Iran and Turkey are key players in Iraqi Kurdistan. But winning Baghdad's cooperation is crucial for a smooth transition to Iraqi independence. In an op-ed that ran in the *Washington Post* earlier this year, Masrour Barzani, the KRG's Chancellor for National Security (and Masoud's eldest son), called for an "amicable divorce" from Baghdad. But he did not mince his words: "Iraq is a failed state, and our continued presence within it condemns us all to unending conflict and enmity."¹³⁷

Is an "amicable divorce" from Baghdad possible? Would Baghdad be willing to negotiate a settlement? Baghdad appeared to be entertaining the possibility when in September 2016, it agreed to form two committees—one in Baghdad the other in Erbil—to evaluate the question of Kurdish independence.

In fact, Iraqi Kurdistan has been virtually independent since 1991. The decade after Saddam's fall connected the Kurds to Baghdad both politically and economically, but never in spirit. Some accuse the Kurds of "freeloading" by advancing their goal of independence using the billions of dollars in budgetary allocations from Baghdad when oil prices were high and the money was still flowing. The Iraqi Kurds could rightfully retort that no amount of money could compensate for the cruelty inflicted upon them by successive Iraqi governments. They could also point out that they have dutifully supported the Abadi government—at strong U.S. urging—and deferred their ambitions for statehood to prioritize the fight against ISIS. In a post-ISIS Iraq, Kurds will once again question the benefit of continued engagement in Baghdad's dysfunctional politics and its accompanying risk of further sectarian conflict.

There is growing consensus that when push comes



to shove, Baghdad will not fight Iraqi Kurdish independence even though some Iraqi nationalists, like former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, oppose it. Any putative division of Iraq would unleash a “river of blood,” he warned.¹³⁸ But with their hands already full with ISIS, the Iraqis would be reluctant to open another front against the Kurds. Even Maliki’s former national security advisor, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, acknowledged that “self-determination is one of the basic human rights and the Kurds have the right to go for it.”¹³⁹ Many Iraqis increasingly view the Kurds as more of a nuisance than an asset, says Abbas Kadhimi, a Senior Foreign Policy Fellow at John Hopkins’ School of Advanced International Studies. While he believes Kurdish independence is “not going to happen,” he also agrees that if the Iraqi Kurds “foolishly press ahead nonetheless” that Baghdad will not fight the Kurds.¹⁴⁰

So what would the contours of a possible divorce settlement look like? This will likely be refined during a transition process that would take place between the referendum and any declaration of Iraqi Kurdish independence. The trickiest part will be drawing new borders. Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, which was never implemented, offers the people living in the disputed territories a chance to decide their own future.¹⁴¹

A constitutional process would lend greater legitimacy to the resolution of territorial disputes, and would also be acceptable to the United States. Given the failure of previous Iraqi governments to implement Article 140, the Kurds would be justifiably skeptical about Baghdad’s willingness to follow through. But with active engagement by the United States, the sides would have an incentive to move forward. Such a process would also take time, allowing Baghdad and Erbil to address other outstanding issues as well.

A Kurdish Jerusalem

Of all the challenges to a Baghdad-Erbil divorce, the province of Kirkuk could be the most difficult because

both sides view it as non-negotiable.

Kirkuk is particularly sensitive due to its ethnic diversity and its energy wealth. Parts of the province are mainly Sunni Arab, including the ISIS stronghold of Hawija.¹⁴² The Iraqi Kurds have remained in control of large chunks of the province, including its oil fields, since June 2014 when Iraqi forces fled from ISIS.

The Iraqi Kurds first publicly laid claim to Kirkuk in the 1970s when Mullah Mustafa declared that its oilfields were rightfully theirs. This propelled Baghdad to launch its “Arabization” policy, which resulted in the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Kurds and Christians.¹⁴³ Arabs were resettled in their place.¹⁴⁴ Since April 2003, the Kurds launched their own re-Kurdification process, resettling Kirkuk’s displaced Kurds in the region. Arabs and Turkmen claim many of the Kurds who were bussed in were not originally from Kirkuk and accuse the Kurds of opportunistically shifting the demographic balance in their own favor.¹⁴⁵

The city itself is made up of Arabs, Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, and Kurds, with Kurds representing a plurality. Kurdish forces dominate the city’s security apparatus, but other groups are represented as well. Najmaddin Karim, the governor of Kirkuk and a veteran member of the PUK, has advocated the formation of an autonomous Kirkuk region independent of Baghdad and the KRG as an acceptable compromise for the province’s future status.¹⁴⁶ More likely, Karim is looking to maintain the status quo, which allows Kirkuk to continue receiving budgetary support from Baghdad as well as petro-dollar payments for Kirkuk oil exports from the KRG. Other Kurdish leaders insist that Kirkuk must be incorporated into the Kurdistan Region. In any event, the Iraqi Kurds, who often refer to Kirkuk as their “Jerusalem,” are unlikely to relinquish their claim over the city.¹⁴⁷

But deals between the central government and the Iraqi Kurds can be struck over sharing the province’s oil wealth. Kirkuk’s northernmost oil fields are controlled by the Iraqi Kurds, and production is exported

by the KRG.¹⁴⁸ Then there are the lower oil fields, which are operated by Iraq's state-owned North Oil Company (NOC). Until March 2016 the NOC was pumping 150,000 bpd to Turkish export terminals in Ceyhan through the KRG pipeline to Turkey, but the company then halted exports because the Iraqi Kurds were taking all the proceeds. A compromise whereby the Iraqi Kurds charge transit fees and Baghdad collects its revenues seems like an obvious way out and could be a small step toward energy cooperation. Given the promising projections of natural gas reserves in Iraqi Kurdistan, the relative importance of Kirkuk oil to the region's economy will fade over time, thus providing the Kurds greater flexibility on the Kirkuk oil issue.

Either way, there is plenty of room for horse-trading over territory and energy. Sharing the waters of the Tigris River, which rise in Turkey, will certainly figure in the negotiations, as will the fate of the tens of thousands of Arab IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish-controlled disputed territories.

The other looming issue is ISIS. Independence seems to be out of the question so long as the jihadists continue to control Mosul. The United States would certainly demand that Mosul be liberated first. This, in turn, requires military cooperation between the *peshmerga* and the Iraqi security forces, which is already happening at the planning level. Iraqi tribal forces are gathering and being trained by the U.S.-led coalition together with the *peshmerga* at a camp in Makhmur, inside Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁴⁹ Cynics meanwhile argue that continued conflict between Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a Arabs keeps Iraq weak and helps justify the Kurds' decision to split away.

American Blessings

Of all the external actors who really count, the United States is the least problematic when it comes to Kurdish statehood, and ultimately the most important. Ranj Talabani, a KRG security official (and a close relative

of Jalal Talabani), believes that without U.S. security guarantees, "Iraqi Kurdish independence would not last very long."¹⁵⁰ He is probably right.


Although the United States remains officially committed to its one state policy for Iraq and is highly unlikely to give the green light in advance of any formal declaration of Iraqi Kurdish independence, the reality is that Washington will not oppose it provided that Ankara and Baghdad are not significantly opposed to it either. And if the Iraqi Kurds were to come under attack, the United States would almost certainly feel compelled to protect them. Thanks to their lobbying efforts, the Iraqi Kurds enjoy bi-partisan support in Congress. It is difficult to imagine that any future U.S. administration would be able to walk away from the Iraqi Kurds again.

Military and political relations between the Iraqi Kurds and the United States long predate those between Washington and Baghdad. Many of the same cadres—the Barzanis and Talabanis and others like Hoshyar Zebari, the veteran KDP heavyweight (and Iraq's finance minister), or Karim Sinjari, the KRG's interior minister—have been in positions of influence for more than a quarter of a century, infusing the relationship with a measure of stability and continuity that works to the Kurds' advantage.

Even so, the Iraqi Kurds will have to deliver on promises of economic and political reform, and fast. Otherwise, the sympathy they earned through their recent success against ISIS will evaporate. Once ISIS is defeated, their relevance in Washington will fade.

Conclusion

A popular pastime among Iraqi Kurdish leaders is to come up with an appropriate date to declare independence. Consensus seems to be building around July 4, as a means of seducing Washington. "How can America not support us then?" asks the wife of a senior KDP



official.¹⁵¹ It may sound like a fantasy to many who follow Iraqi Kurdistan closely. Until recently Masoud Barzani would have agreed.

I first met Barzani in 1992, shortly after the Kurds' failed uprising against Saddam. Since then he has consistently told me that every Kurd dreams of independence, but that "it's not realistic at this time," that "we need to be patient." Yet, when I last met him in March 2016, the Kurdish leader told me in confident tones that the time had finally come, that the Kurds were ready. There was no meaningful purpose to persisting in the charade that was Iraq. The Kurds had acted in good faith, done their best to make the new Iraq work, but it had not worked. Barzani had insisted that a referendum to decide the future of Iraqi Kurdistan would be held this year. The Iraqi Kurds will be asked whether they want independence or to remain part of Iraq. Those living in the disputed territories will be asked the same question.

He has talked about holding a referendum so many times before that there is widespread skepticism that he will follow through this time. But it is precisely for this reason that Barzani will need to act on his promise. Otherwise he risks losing all credibility; he will have cried wolf too many times.

But there is a hitch. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament will need to approve the referendum before it can be held. Because of the ongoing fracas over Barzani's presidency, and the subsequent ejection of Gorran from the cabinet and the parliament, the latter cannot convene. Internal divisions stand in the path of independence as they have before. It falls upon the KDP to persuade its rivals that it is ready to share the spoils of independence equitably and that all stakeholders will benefit.

The other hurdle to a referendum is logistics. Holding a referendum is an expensive exercise and, given the state of the KRG's finances, where would the money come from? Masoud Barzani says funds for organizing the vote have been set aside. The Barzanis may well

reach into their own pockets for this.

There is little question as to what the results of the referendum would be. For all their differences, the Iraqi Kurds will vote overwhelmingly in favor. Many have awaited this moment all their lives. No political party or leader can publicly oppose independence without suffering an enormous dent to his or her credibility. Masoud Barzani is well aware of this.

Be it to wrest concessions for Baghdad or from his domestic foes, Barzani has used the referendum card in the past. Critics charge that this time around, he is using it as a means of wiggling out of the deadlock over his presidency and to deflect attention away from the economic debacle. Declaring independence at this time would be tantamount to political and economic suicide, they say.

The voices of dissent come mostly from the PUK and Gorran. Both parties reasonably fret that the present balance of power and wealth, which is massively tipped toward the Barzanis and the KDP, would make for an independent "Barzanistan" rather than a Kurdistan.

Then there is the pan-Kurdish bloc. Iraqi Kurds need to hold off declaring independence, they argue, until their brethren in Iran, Turkey, and Syria are ready to do so as well. The absolutists maintain that any independent Kurdistan worthy of its name would need to unite all 30 odd million Kurds scattered across the Near East and beyond. Such arguments tend to minimize the very differences among the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran that stem in part from living under separate regimes for so long. The Syrian Kurds, many of whom were not even granted citizenship by the Ba'ath government because they were refugees from Turkey, are the sole exception and could conceivably be folded into Turkey.

The PKK has a different gripe. It purports to reject ethnic nationalism and the nation-state as outdated and advocates an obscure form of communalism inspired by the U.S. radical Murray Bookchin that even

its followers are hard pressed to understand.¹⁵² This is purportedly being implemented in the PKK-administered territory in northern Syria, which they call “Rojava.”¹⁵³ But it is the conviction that their own leader, Abdullah Ocalan, is the “true leader” of the Kurds that underpins the PKK’s objections to Iraqi Kurdish statehood. This also explains the PKK’s hostility to Masoud Barzani, who claims the mantle of pan-Kurdish leadership on behalf of his father, Mullah Mustafa.

Then there are those who err on the side of caution saying the Iraqi Kurds are not ready. The “we are not ready” camp cites the economic crisis, corruption, the lack of unity, and opposition from Iran and Turkey as the main obstacles to Iraqi Kurdish statehood. Yet, many of these issues will not be resolved by remaining part of Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds will gain nothing economically by doing so. Politically, they risk getting mired in the sectarian politics of Baghdad. Staying in Iraq does not fix the internal disputes. On the contrary, it allows Baghdad to play the sides off against each other. Corruption is prevalent throughout Iraq.

Yet if Iraqi Kurdistan is to be a viable entity, it will clearly need to address all of these very real problems. The greatest of these remains Kurdish disunity. The Iraqi Kurds are the first to admit this. Yerevan Saeed, an Iraqi Kurdish journalist, recently asked in a poignant critique, “How did Arabs obtain several independent states from the remains of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks carve out a new country, yet the Kurdish hope for a sovereign state remain unful-

filled?” The answer in a nutshell, he concludes, is that the Kurds’ greatest enemy is the Kurds themselves.¹⁵⁴

That is probably too harsh. The Iraqi Kurds have faced external enemies throughout their history. Yet they have always rebounded, finding ways to turn adversity to opportunity at almost every turn. The Kurds support independence not because co-habitation with Iraq has failed. They do so for the simple reason that this is what they want, and this is what so many have given their lives for well over a century.

In the end, the lessons that can be drawn from the Iraqi Kurds’ experience are multiple. For one, it is impossible to suppress ethnic identity. Collective punishment of an entire people only serves to re-inforce that identity. Second, as seen in Iraq, democracy is not a panacea if it comes too late or is imposed from without. And finally, if states are weak, ethnic minorities will seize on this weakness to advance their own goals. But they can only succeed with the help of powerful external actors. This was true for Bangladesh when it split from Pakistan with India’s help as it was for Kosovo, which would never have been born without NATO’s intervention.

Thanks to their own persistence and Saddam’s follies, the Iraqi Kurds are closer than ever to realizing their dream. It is up to their leaders to bury the hatchet and to ensure that this dream for which so many Kurds have laid down their lives is finally translated into reality.



Glossary

Ansar al-Islam: Originally established in 2001 as Salafist Islamist movement, Ansar al-Islam has since merged with ISIS. While the original organization has dissolved, a portion of the group rejected the merger with ISIS, and functions independently as an anti-ISIS faction.

AKP: Turkey's Justice and Development Party (abbreviated as both AKP and JDP) is a conservative political party founded by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Erdogan's predecessor, Abdullah Gul.

Ba'athism: Ba'athism is an ideology that promotes the creation of furthering of a unified Arab state. This ideology rejects political pluralism and is based on pan-Arabism, Arab socialism, and secular principles.

Gorran: The Movement for Change is a secular Iraqi Kurdish political party founded in 2009, following its split from the PUK. It is the opposing Kurdish party to the KDP-PUK coalition.

IDPs: An internally displaced person is someone who is forced to flee their home, but remains within their country.

KDP: The Kurdistan Democratic Party (sometimes abbreviated as PDK) is a main Kurdish party in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani whose son, Masoud Barzani, presently serves as the party's President.

KDP-I: The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran is a Kurdish political party in Iranian Kurdistan and was founded in 1945 in Iran. The party seeks to achieve Kurdish national rights under a democratic republic in Iran. It has split into two factions.

KDP-S: The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria is Kurdish political party and was founded in 1957 in northern Syria. The party seeks to achieve Kurdish cultural and economic rights and enact democratic change. It is mentored by Masoud Barzani and has far less influence than the PYD in Syria.

Komala: The Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan is a Kurdish nationalist political party founded in Tehran by Kurdish university students in 1969. It has split into three factions.

KRG: The Kurdistan Regional Government is the ruling body of Iraqi Kurdistan and was established in 1992.

NOC: The North Oil Company is an Iraqi state owned company headquartered in Kirkuk.

PEJAK: The Kurdistan Free Life Party (also abbreviated as PJAK) is a Kurdish political and militant organization opposing the Iranian government. It is an offshoot of the PKK. PEJAK seeks to achieve self-determination for Iranian Kurds in Eastern Kurdistan.

Peshmerga: The *peshmerga* refers to all guerrilla warriors in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan.

PKK: The Kurdistan Workers' Party is a militant, far-left organization in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan founded in 1978.

PUK: The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan is a Kurdish political party, founded by Jalal Talabani in 1975 and who remains the party's President.

YBS: The YBS refers to a Yazidi militia known as the Shingal Protection Units or the Sinjar Resistance Units founded in 2007. The YBS is an offshoot of the PKK and opposes ISIS.

YPG: The People's Protection Units, also known as the People's Defense Units, is primarily comprised of ethnic Kurds and considers itself a democratic people's army, though Turkey has designated the YPG a terrorist organization. It is also an offshoot of the PKK. The YPG has declared allegiance to Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD) and is part of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

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