

# Iraqi Kurdistan: Partner Under Pressure

In order to support the Iraqi Kurds against the blitzkrieg and brutality of the Islamic State (IS), some European states with EU backing are now following the example of the US in providing military support to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). But important questions remain about the KRG's political foundation. Given a dysfunctional Iraq, and a fully functioning terrorist organization with a transnational vision operating there, Western decision-makers have good reason to assess the stability of their new partner in the region. The KRG faces internal pressures as it seeks to fend off the IS and position itself for future independence.

## Brief Points

- The KRG has to choose whether to renegotiate its position vis-à-vis Baghdad or, less likely, declare independence.
- International support for the KRG may be seen as a step towards Kurdish independence, yet many obstacles remain.
- Internally, the KRG faces political divisions and domestic threats as well as a foundational challenge: oil rent.
- Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan as a partner is wise, but so is keeping an eye on its political vulnerabilities and assisting it in overcoming them.

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One reason why Iraqi Kurdistan is often called 'the Other Iraq' is that nationalist feelings run high there. This is particularly true today. Photo (c) Mustafa Khayat, used under CC BY-ND 2.0.

### Iraq: a failed state

Iraq's newly nominated prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, faces a gargantuan task in uniting an Iraqi state haunted by systemic flaws. Marginalized Sunni Muslims seem more intent on placing their bets with a rapidly expanding IS rather than a crumbling and Shia-dominated state. The problem runs deeper than the Shia-Sunni divide. Iraq has been ranked among the world's failed states for a decade, along with such countries as Somalia, Chad and Yemen, and its structural problems cannot easily be fixed. For the Iraqi Kurds, in the comparatively stable and prospering northern region of Iraq, who have been largely autonomous since 1991 but dependent on Iraqi oil, the question now is whether to opt for independence. After the recent fall of Mosul, one of Iraq's largest cities, to the IS, and the subsequent Kurdish seizure of the long-claimed, oil-rich Kirkuk area, the president of the KRG, Massoud Barzani, became notably more vocal in calling for independence and even announced a referendum on the subject, to be held 'within months' of 1 July.

### A bumpy road to Kurdish independence

With Kurdish ambitions for an independent state clearly stated, a number of analysts describe military support from the US and several EU member states, including France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany, as a step towards Kurdish independence in the near future. They cite the following points.

- **Increased military capacity.** Weapons and advanced military equipment boost the KRG's military power.
- **Increased international recognition.** While Syrian Kurds are left to fight their own battles, the KRG enjoys Western protection.
- **The difficulty of backtracking on a referendum.** Having announced such an important referendum, Barzani may lose face by not carrying it out.
- **Kurdish seizure of Kirkuk.** The Kurds have aspired to this for more than half a century and took control within only a few hours. Kirkuk has large oil fields and holds both symbolic and strategic importance.
- **Export of Kurdish oil.** Media reports indicate that the Kurds have found buyers for

their oil already, including Israel. Moreover, the US may lift the legal ban on the export of oil by the KRG as a non-state actor.

Many obstacles to Kurdish independence remain, including

- **Iraqi sovereignty is still upheld internationally.** The international community ostensibly and officially supports Iraqi territorial integrity and maintains that military support for the KRG is intended to bolster Kurdish defences against the presumably technologically superior IS.
- **Hostile neighbouring states.** The states bordering Iraqi Kurdistan – Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey – have a long history of oppressing their Kurdish populations and are loath to see them encouraged by the KRG's ascendancy to pursue separatist tendencies of their own. Iran has even described the referendum as a 'Zionist conspiracy'.
- **Internal division over referendum.** Barzani's call for independence was made without careful consultation with the various parties in the KRG, notably the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is more hesitant.



A Kurdish 'Peshmerga' soldier in Kirkuk, historically seized by the Kurds in June this year. The city is by far the biggest oil field in the north of Iraq, and is now controlled by the Kurds, fueling aspirations for independence. Photo (c) Enno Lenze, used under CC BY 2.0.

● **Kirkuk's composition and local tensions.**

Kirkuk's population is mixed, and it seems highly likely that claims to that territory will be contested not only by IS and Iraqi forces, but also by local ethno-sectarian urban guerrillas.

At the time of writing, Iraqis and Kurds had cobbled together a last-minute government to face up to the jihadist challenge. The Kurdish bloc reportedly made its participation in this new government conditional, saying all the major unresolved issues with Baghdad need to be resolved within three months of 9 September. If the KRG lives up to this threat, this leaves the Kurds with two alternative scenarios, as sketched out below.

**Scenario 1: Kurdistan as part of Iraq, but on its own terms**

In this first scenario, unresolved issues are agreed upon, as KRG takes advantage of its recent expansion on the ground and renegotiates its position vis-à-vis Baghdad on more advantageous terms. This would involve acceptance of three Kurdish demands. First the KRG would demand guarantees that it would in future receive – without hindrance and on time – the 17 percent of Iraqi national oil income to which it is constitutionally entitled. Secondly, the KRG would win the legal right

to export oil (via Turkey) through its own Kurdish infrastructure. Given media reports that the KRG has already found buyers for their oil despite Baghdad's opposition, this demand will be ever-more difficult to refuse. Finally, the KRG would demand Kurdish annexation of Kirkuk, and accession of its oil resources, if its residents voted favourably in a UN-monitored referendum, though the precise borders of the area would have to be negotiated and agreed upon with UN mediation.

**Scenario 2: Independence, but on Turkey's terms**

In this second scenario the KRG opts to break free from Iraq and declare an independent state. This seems unlikely, given that an independent Kurdistan would be dependent on its only regional and adjacent ally, Turkey, through which it exports its oil and imports more than 80 percent of its food. Moreover, an independent Kurdistan would have to fend off attacks from IS and stand up to Iraq and Iran without the Iraqi oil income that has been the main source of the KRG's economic growth and rapid urban development over the last decade, and which has fuelled its bloated public sector and Gulf-like welfare provisions.

**The KRG: Not as strong as it seems**

Implicit in the discussion so far is the view that the KRG is not as strong as some analysts believe. Which of the above scenarios we are likely to witness will depend partly on Baghdad's willingness to compromise, but also on one crucial question: What kind of pressures does the KRG face today and where do its political vulnerabilities lie? Answers to this question will also affect the ability of Kurdish troops, the mythologized 'Peshmerga', to fight back against IS on a thousand-kilometer frontline, as well as the question of whether or not Iraq will survive as a sovereign state.

The external pressures are well known, notably from Iraq, Iran and the IS. The internal pressures facing KRG are less obvious and require deeper analysis. Some of these pressures are outlined below.

**KRG unity under pressure.** Kurdish unity may seem to have prevailed during an eventful summer, yet bickering between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), backed by Turkey, and its main competitor, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), backed by Iran, over which party militia should defend Kirkuk, led to the temporary loss of Kurdish-controlled territory to IS. This exemplified the

latent tension between the two parties, as does the fact that Barzani, representing the KDP, did not properly consult the PUK before announcing the imminent referendum on the existential matter of Kurdish independence. Each party operates its own security forces, and there is a history of factional in-fighting. How arms support from the US and EU should be distributed among these security forces is a potentially contentious issue.

**Domestic security threats.** Checkpoints and security controls are on the rise in Iraqi Kurdistan. While the KRG's largely secular and moderate population is often described as the mirror image of the rest of Iraq, there is evidence that some Kurds have gone to fight alongside IS, notably from Halabja, a gravitational centre for Kurdish Islamism and former base of Mullah Krekar's militia, Ansar al-Islam. More difficult to monitor is the rapid influx recently of an estimated 700,000 refugees, about half of them displaced Sunni Arabs, which the KRG fears could lead to conflict spillover. This could happen directly, if IS recruits sympathisers among the refugees and activates sleeper cells, or indirectly, if the influx strains resources and infrastructure and foments popular discontent.

**A pan-Kurdish cooperation that concerns Ankara.** Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces now fight IS alongside the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) and the battle-hardened Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), with a long history of fighting in Turkey. Their joint efforts have been effective on the battleground, yet the political implications of the alliance may be hard to gauge. PKK's involvement concerns Turkey as well as the EU and US, where it is listed as a terrorist organization. Maintaining pan-Kurdish unity will anyway be a challenge. The PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish parties have criticized the KRG for insuffi-

cient support of their nationalist aspirations and resistance to IS. Efforts to form a Kurdish National Congress were aborted last year owing to personal and ideological differences. Although pan-Kurdish unity is a military requirement, it may affect the pan-Kurdish political landscape as well as the ties between Erbil and Ankara.

**KRG's unsustainable cooptation of society through oil rents.** This is a long-term and foundational challenge, yet of no less immediate importance. While the KRG likes to style itself as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, it seems in many ways evolving into a rentier state. Underneath the relative calm and formal democratic institutions, there is mounting popular discontent and a political structure that will continue to feed it. A dramatic spike in the KRG's GDP per capita over the last decade obscures the equally dramatic increase in social inequality. Those without ties to the political parties are marginalized along multiple dimensions and regardless of meritocratic considerations. Party patronage in the form of public services, salaries and security has exposed political vulnerabilities by creating an insatiable and unsustainable appetite for higher living standards. Unrealistic and unmet expectations may well spur popular protests like the one quelled by security forces in Suleimaniah in 2011, or militant extremism, though this has hitherto been rare. Another implication of the rentier nature of the KRG is that it has limited time to fill its oil coffers through bilateral export, while remaining dependent on Baghdad to finance its day-to-day social welfare function through oil rents. This is a major obstacle to Kurdish independence.

None of these caveats is meant to imply that Western powers should not support the KRG, which would be contrary to the author's view.

The points made here are offered merely to apply nuance to the picture of the KRG as 'the Other Iraq'. The KRG is, and it is not, a mirror image of the Iraqi imbroglio. Internal factional bickering, vulnerability to high-profile terrorist attacks, and the challenge of political unity, as well as the architecture of a rentier state, are all features of Iraqi Kurdistan that need to be addressed, and that it shares with the rest of the country – though to much lesser degrees. On the other hand, the KRG is distinct from the rest of the country in the sense that its people identify with the nation-state, that its population is largely secular and moderate, and that its political elites are pragmatic. The last point is best illustrated by rapprochement with Turkey. Moreover, not a single US soldier was ever killed on KRG territory, a fact that reflects a situation politically removed from the one farther south in the country.

The fact is that choosing the KRG as a partner is probably a good decision. The point here is to refine the picture. Embracing Iraqi Kurdistan is wise, but so is keeping an eye on its political vulnerabilities and assisting it in overcoming them. Moreover, an unfounded view of the KRG as the perfect partner should not stand in the way of arming and supporting the more radical and politically inconvenient Syrian Kurds, who have demonstrated their ability to stand up to IS time and time again. This is the Middle East. There is no perfect partner. ■

#### For further reading

McDowall, D. (2009). *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Natali, D. (2010). *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

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#### THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return migration' (PREMIG), a large-scale research project that explores return migration from Norway and the United Kingdom. The project is led by Research Professor Jørgen Carling. For more information, see [www.prio.org/premig](http://www.prio.org/premig)

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