



IRAQ'S KIRKUK CRISIS AS A PRIMER FOR POST-ISIL CONSTRUCT

Spearhead Issue Brief



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Overview

In a remarkable turnaround of fate, Iraqi military forces and the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) took less than 48 hours to completely outmaneuver the famed Peshmergha warriors, in Iraq's first internal clash over the disputed city of Kirkuk, since the ISIL stronghold had weakened in Iraq. In less than a week, the federal government of Iraq had built up a relentless momentum; Bashiqa, Khanaqin and Sinjar, were a few of the most strategic Kurdish populated cities under the Kurdistan Regional Government's control, that were seized back by the Iraqi forces in a mass capitulation of the Kurdish forces. The Kurds, still reeling from the sting of defeat and the loss of their autonomous reign, feel they had been deeply betrayed. Not as much by foreign interlocutors and alliances of Iraq with Iran and Turkey, a tri-partite opposition that has resisted the Kurdish cause for years, but by the fact that their strategic gains in the civil war against IS in the past decade have been reversed due to the miscalculations of their own political leadership.

The clash between the two factions over the oil-rich disputed territory, Kirkuk, with its oil revenues central to Iraqi proposition, comes barely a few months after the last bastion of ISIL forces were declared to have been eliminated from Iraqi territory. Barely a year ago, images of Kurdish led-YPG forces, the battle-hardened Peshmerga fighting alongside deployed Iraqi troops in Mosul made rounds in international media. A measured contrast to Syria's conflict at the time that was still largely divided in civil leadership on ethno-sectarian lines. More notably, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), an autonomous regional 'state within state' styled bloc, with little intrusion from Iraq's federal

government since 2003, was the epicenter of the Kurds - 30 million of them spread out across the Middle East.

It was in September, however, that the KRG spearheaded by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) under President Barzani decided to go through with a unilateral, nonbinding referendum to the growing condemnation and disbelief of the Iraqi federal government. In hindsight, what ultimately set the Iraq-Kurd conflict off was that the referendum, disputed as it may have been, had seen the Kurds overreach beyond their stated regional power bloc and had included the town of Kurdish populated strategic Sinjar and the oil-rich Kirkuk in the referendum that was set to decide a vote on Kurdistans unilateral secession from Iraq. The Kurd's claims to these cities was premised in the fact that Kurdish forces had liberated these areas from ISIL stronghold two years ago, when the Iraqi army was militarily incapable to fight back ISIS forces and had retreated.

Barzani going ahead with the independence referendum despite global disapproval of his measures, has not gone down well. A popular narrative to the development espouses that Barzani's move actually paved the way for the caveat the federal power had hoped for – a lawful excuse to intervene by Abadi. One that he desperately needed, to take back decisive control of the borders of the state and prepare him for the general elections of Spring 2018. An imminent civil war in tow, 48 anti-climatic hours later, the Iraqi army took over Kirkuk, and Baghdad immediately declared that the Kurdish independence is “a thing of the past” and the controversial referendum should be forgotten, calling for dialogue based on Iraq's national constitution.

The KRG's veiled efforts at incorporating within its political fold forcefully, and unilaterally, prompted Iraqi PM Al-Abadi to take a nationalist stance and assert his 'rightful' federal control. In Baghdad, Al-Abadi threatened military action if the results were not annulled, while the federal government cracked down on the Kurdish region's existing autonomy, halting international flights to its airports and demanding control over all oil flows

It was a shocking reversal of fortunes for Iraq's Kurds, who, buoyed by a controversial referendum that found overwhelming support for secession, have found that even their existing autonomy now stands endangered.

At present, the momentum is clearly with Abadi, although the elections are a long, volatile and unpredictable six months away. Masoud Barzani, the founder of KDP, has stepped down as President after 12 years in command, amidst suffocating international and national pressure

calling for his resignation, following the 25th September referendum – a vote that has since then escalated into a cause for magnanimous losses for the Kurds in the Iraqi framework. The referendum result has now been frozen. Barzani in a final televised speech announcing his resignation stated that “*three million votes for Kurdistan independence created history and cannot be erased*”. However, the Iraqi forces and Iran-backed PMU now effectively control territory ranging from Kirkuk, to yet more disputed areas that had been key to their hopes of an expanded, independent Kurdish region: Sinjar, Bashiqa, Makhmour and others - thousands of square kilometers of what had been Kurdish territory.

Political pundits have cited this as a first. The Baghdad-Erbil rift has seen two crucial camps of the US anti-ISIL coalition turn their guns on each other even before the ISIL threat has been eliminated from Iraq. The US provided both Iraqi and Peshmerga forces with arms and training, but Washington has come across as indifferent to the escalation in tensions. A subsequent pre-referendum offer to mediate between the rival governments was too late to make a difference.

The referendum is now universally regarded to have been premised on a colossal miscalculation, and political analysts find Barzani to have vastly overestimated the KRG's political and military heft which in turn undermined his own legitimacy.

An introspective analysis of the politics:

Around 92 percent of voters chose secession, thus making the will of the Kurdish civilians clear for the world to take note. Abadi's declaration of the referendum being ‘illegal’ after the announcement of the result posits little weight when Abadi later changed his demand to the referendum result not being completely disregarded, but ‘frozen’ for peace talks to resume.

Secondly, it was a tarnishing of Barzani's legacy. But this assertion may be too over simplistic and Academics remain divided. Those of the pro-KDP camp point to the throngs of demonstrators that appeared to reject Barzani's resignation point to the 92% voter base as a measure of success of the referendum's objective and assert that Barzani, despite his misplaced idealism, managed to effectively pit the Kurdish cause as a major stakeholder on the international scene, in the emergence of a ‘new’, post-ISIL construct of Iraq.

Those opposed to Barzani's leadership, like the PUK and Gorran opposition parties, rejoice at his stepdown. A key concern of the civilian Kurd is now overlooked; Barzani's resignation has left an alarming security vacuum at a time where Kurd leadership is too divided to unanimously elect a new constitutional arrangement and lead a politically disheveled Kurdish region, when all eyes are on the Kurds.

Thirdly, Baghdad's conditions-based approach to negotiations with Erbil, evident in the recent agreement between the two camps to freeze the referendum result posits the Iraqi government in a compromised standing. One: freezing the result creates an effective "time bomb" that the Kurdistan Region could use with the central government as a bargaining chip whenever it wishes. Two: the legality of the referendum is no longer in question, paving the way for a hope that Barzani's plan may not have completely backfired. The referendum card may now be played by the Kurdish authority at any point in time, as Iraqi politics attempts to transition from a politically unclear clout to a more stable federal framework.

Following from this, Al-Abadi's continuous 'call for dialogue based on Iraq's national constitution' presents a major caveat to the wider Iraqi populace that stands marginalized in the wake of such rhetoric. The constitution, in reference, is a 2005 agreement that came into existence post-US withdrawal from the region following the Iraq invasion, and was co-authored predominantly by the then US government with Iraq and Kurdish leadership as key architects with little to no representation of the Sunni Arab majority prevalent in modern-day Iraq or of the disenfranchised minorities such as the Turkmens, Armenians and Baluchis. Abadi's highly centralized development strategy may thus result in a wide socio-economic and representative gap between the center and the peripheries, and an uneven distribution of power, socio-economic resources, and socio-cultural status. In the absence of a representative and accountable government and state institutions, attempts to forge a strong Iraqi nation are doomed to fail.

[How the Kurds lost Kirkuk](#)

As global headlines have aimed their attention to singularly focusing on Tehran's intervention in Kirkuk as a pre-amble to what is to come in the future, it is poignant to note that a counter-narrative shows that Iranian role may have been overstated and that it primarily took advantage of Kurdish political divisions. The KDP devoted much of its time to loudly blaming Iran for the situation in Kirkuk, a position that will likely appeal

to Washington - but with independence now no longer a bargaining chip between them, Iraq's Kurdish region's ruling party have suffered from existentialist crisis of their own. It may be argued that the recent sharp increase in the Iranian influence narrative has effected most dominantly, intra-Kurdish politics.

Currently, the Kurds in Kirkuk and other disputed areas are disillusioned with the Kurdish parties more than ever, including the leadership of both the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the KDP. No Kurdish leader has come forward to apologize to their constituents for what went wrong, let alone attempt to explain what really happened on Oct. 15-16, when thousands of Peshmerga retreated and left the people of Kirkuk to their own devices.

Meanwhile, the Turkmen in Kirkuk and nearby Tuz Khormato have become united through their opposition to the September 25 Kurdish independence referendum and other perceived Kurdish excesses.

Reports by Amnesty International allege rampant destruction & forced displacement of Kurds in Iraq's Tuz Khurmatu at hands of members of the PMU, ethnic Turkmen fighters, Baghdad forces & militias after the Iraqi forces took-over of the area.

So far, (168,372) civilians have been displaced from Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Khurmatu, Zummar and Rabea to Kurdistan Region; (84,000 arrived in Erbil, 78,372 arrived in Slemani and 6000 arrived in Duhok and Zakho).

For the Kurds, the loss of property, legitimacy as a governing entity in the KRG and the embarrassing retreat of their famed Peshmerga forces has reiterated itself as a humiliating Deja-vu moment for the nation, in a long list of historic betrayals

In a largely public face-off between the two dominating parties within KRG, the Barzani led KDP accused the opposition - PUK led by the Talabani family - of selling out the Kurds to Iran. Barzani supporters blame the recent disastrous KRG territorial losses not on the referendum setting forth the recent turn of events but on the PUK, whose fighters overtly allowed the advance of Iraqi forces after Baghdad ordered the advance and capture of Kirkuk city. A withdrawal deal, which was rumoured to have been struck between Iran's Quds Force head Qassem Suleimani and senior PUK figure Bafel Talabani. The PUK, in turn, blamed Barzani for his role in forcing through the referendum despite their misgivings. The PUK has since then admitted that it reached agreement with the Iraqi military even as fighters representing Barzani's KDP continued to battle. For this reason, the KDP Peshmerga

accused PUK factions, which refused to fight, of “plotting” against the Kurds and committing “a great and historic treason.”

Of greater significance, is that it was Soleimani who “exploited divisions inside of Iraqi Kurdistan, used the Kurds as war bait and then put Washington’s words to the test.” President Donald Trump, on October 13, stated that he would not certify Iran’s compliance with the nuclear deal, and announcing that the United States would counter Iran’s aggression throughout the Middle East, including sanctioning the entire Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization. In hindsight the rhetoric didn’t do much. The US failed its test and allowed Iran at the forefront to take decisive action.

The biggest betrayal, thus has come from the international alliances that Kurds have placed their trust in, even amidst the obvious political lapses by the Kurdish leadership. Even with regards to powers generally hostile to a resurging Kurdish cause, the referendum hoping to capitalize on the disagreements between Ankara and Baghdad seems to have brought the two capitals together to work against Kurdish dominance. Marred by insecurity of how this impacts developments in Syrian Kurdish areas across the Iraqi and Turkish borders, with further incentive for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose core battalion is the Iraqi Kurdish (YPG), to go to the negotiating table with Syria and Russia in the hope of retaining some kind of a federalized union with Damascus, the referendum was rebuked with threats and condemnations by all neighboring powers.

It was Washington, however that was to stand by its allies, when Kurdish forces backed by US-coalition continually proved to be the only reliable allies and the most effective fighters against ISIL at its peak, in both Syria and Iraq. By abandoning the Kurdish allies who relied heavily on US support, Washington by pitting itself on the side of the central government in Baghdad and calling for a ‘unified Iraq’ ended up legitimizing the maneuvering by Soleimani, and by extension Iran.

Suffice to say, Kurdistan and its leadership have been largely humbled.

Transition of Iraqi politics

Iran’s influence in Iraq’s domestic affairs established as an emerging reality following the increasing dominance of the Tehran backed Shiite PMU boots on Iraqi ground, while being a potent concern this cannot be the only issue for the Abadi administration. The more complex demographics of Iraqi population reflect multitudes of strong identities

and ethnicities that are now finding themselves pushed to identify not under the contours of their own identities but as 'Iraqi' first.

The current dynamics of Abadi's policies show a persistent call for imposing 'security enforcement duties' and imposing federal government authority, which presents the danger of a regime slowly beginning to tilt towards overtly nationalist politics, in a state which is far too diverse in its ethnic and religious sub-groups to comply.

Its aim at reintroducing (Re: Saddam's populist regime in the late 80s) and advocating for a single-track, one-fits-all umbrella Iraqi identity, defined in the regime's own terms, threatens to pursue an outdated discourse of hard line nationalist agenda that will not be able to cater to Iraq's strong, multifarious ethno-sectarian factions.

"If we don't decentralize, the country will disintegrate," Haider al-Abadi bluntly declared in a speech to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "To me, there are no limitations to decentralization."

Thus, Abadi's transition from shaky premier of an ISIL-embattled state to his current positioning as a pro-democracy, anti-foreign interventionist gives weight to the fact that the Iraqi state is undergoing a cycle of physical and ideological rebuilding. Contrasting this with 2014, with the Iraqi military under his command's embarrassing retreat from a few-thousand IS fighters and the US-backed Peshmerga having to step in to ferociously fight off an ISIL force at its peak. Today, Abadi looks to claim legitimacy for his regime, much like Assad in Syria, for winning back 'lost' Iraqi territory from the very factions who liberated the territory in the first place.

Internationally, a closer look at Abadi's political evolution reveals him to be aligning and benefitting from Iran and its paramilitary proxies in an effort to bolster Iraq's state security apparatus. Indeed, Tehran's influence in Iraqi politics was a welcome presence – what is a startling, oft-overlooked fact is that after the 2014 collapse of Mosul and large areas of Iraqi territory to IS militancy, it was Iran's PMU - allied forces and not the United States, that stepped in to defend Iraq against Islamic State. Even the largely anti-Iran KRG led by Barzani, is recorded to have stated "Iran was the first state to help us ... it provided us with weapons and equipment."

However, Abadi in 2015 countered the Iranian influence by slowly starting to scale back on complete dependence on the PMU militias and inviting US forces on Iran. The turning point came in the spring of 2015, when he invited U.S. support to help fight the Islamic State in Tikrit, much to the objection of Iran and its PMU-allied groups. This bolstered

Washington and gave it much needed leverage in Iraqi politics, putting Abadi in a comfortable position of being supported by two allies, both of whom were willing to compete with one another for leverage with Baghdad.

As Iraq slowly begins to transition to a post-ISIL construct, its current policy revolves around regaining Iraqi territory from the Islamic State while attempting to curb and minimize Iranian and militia influence. However, the situation on ground as reflected in recent events in Kirkuk, tells another story – Baghdad to date continues to rely heavily on PMU support to aid its Iraqi forces, but Abadi has much to lose if he is unable to balance the one-sided relationship with Tehran and any continued Iranian and Shiite in Iraq must be dealt with stealth. One: to not add to the already dominant threat of identity and sectarian based politics of Iraq's own internal landscape. Two: to not completely isolate Washington's support that seems to have arisen more strongly for Iraq's federal government and sovereignty than ever before, as it forgoes its historic Kurdish allies in the KRG in Baghdad's favour. The U.S. is expecting to see its favour returned.

In this regard, Baghdad has begun to work towards necessary damage-control and image-rebuilding, as it vies to shift away from external influences. Al-Abadi's efforts to reach out to the US as well as Saudia Arabia, given his second recent visit to Riyadh in October, have worked in his favour to pit Iraq as a state independent of any long-term Shiite or Iranian influence, and begin to be seen as a strong regional player, in control of the federal government and committed to catalyzing Iraq's stability through issue-based and not sectarian-based politics.

The precarious US policy in Iraq has boosted Tehran's morale

For the general Kurdish public, Washington's acquiescence was a betrayal.

Political pundits cite Washington's tacit support for Baghdad's takeover of Kurdish governed areas as a hasty decision with serious repercussions for the other key players that it seems to have put on a backseat. The US still needs the KRG as an ally in Iraq and without Kurdish help, it risks losing its leverage in Iraq, allowing Iran to strengthen its grip on the country.

Since 2003, Erbil, the KRG capital, had done much to prove itself to Washington as an anti-Iranian, secular, pro-democratic force in Iraq. Developments in Iraq over the past few years challenge these realities. For in removing its presence in Baghdad, Erbil relatively underestimated the power of the federal government to assert itself belligerently, as seen in Kirkuk. Federal forces achieved a large portion of their stated objective, which was to 'reassert federal control' over areas in which they were present before ISIS in 2014.

The U.S. position is that Iraqi federal forces should have a presence in all areas that are constitutionally defined as part of federally controlled Iraq, including Kirkuk.

Barzani in his overestimation of the US's complete backing of the Kurdish cause as a payback for their services in war, rejected Washington's deal to establish a U.N.-mandated framework to negotiate the nature of the Erbil-Baghdad relationship — an unprecedented move that, had it failed would have led the US to understand the need for a referendum.

But the US itself may have also overlooked the emerging power dynamics in the Iraqi political landscape; most factions willing to work with the US are either too weak or yield too little power to make a difference in Iraq. The Kurds may have been a missed opportunity in this regard since having amassed their recent gains against IS and a functioning, regional government in tow, they could have continued to be Washington's answer to an ambitious Tehran in the Middle East. The other strongest parties in Iraq tend to be aligned with Iran and ironically the only strong anti-Iran front man, cleric Muqtada al-Sadr is a strong nationalist with anti-US narrative and is alleged to have been responsible for countless attacks on US soldiers in Iraq.

US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson's, rhetorical call on Iranian-backed militias and advisors to "go home and allow the Iraqi people to regain control" shows a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the US government about how the IRGC, Iran's elite guard Corps, operate in the region. Unlike the US, Iran often stays in any strategic region for the long haul, whether it be Lebanon, Syria or Iraq.

Washington, it appears has stuck to Al-Abadi, much like the Russians have to Bashar-al-Assad – both regime leaders lack a sufficiently popular, political base, with the hopes that their country's military gains, often on the shoulders of powerful international backing, will remedy their own shortcomings. But for Abadi, given the onslaught of challenges

he is continuing to face on his domestic front from inner sectarian political divides within Iraq, the upcoming elections may not prove an easy feat.

Thus, Abadi, in his awareness of Iran's heavy handed, focused approach in minting their presence off of the absence of a strong contender in Iraq, needs the KRG. Baghdad has suffered a credibility deficit because of Arab Sunni disenfranchisement at the hands of the ruling Shia political class and their low political representation. Abadi cannot afford to also lose the Kurds, who have generally enjoyed the role of being brokers – the largely secular bloc to diffuse the nature of power and politics under the current power-sharing arrangements.

The future of Baghdad and Erbil

If Washington is serious about ensuring an anti-Iran, independent and stable Iraq, it must repair its relations with the Kurds. Given that since 2003, no Iraqi government has been devoid of strong Kurdish participation, KRG must again be given its rightful seat at the table, with tangible rights and concessions and not mere assurances, given recent events. Kurdish engagement must be firmly sustained, for this does not only provide strategic depth to US but in case of Abadi's government no longer being able to sustain office till the elections next year, hardline Iran-aligned factions will not be able to consolidate their hold on state-institutions either.

If there is no Kurdish engagement to bolster al-Abadi's position, hardline Iran-aligned factions will almost certainly dominate the government and consolidate their hold on state institutions. To make such an arrangement work both in the short and long-term, equitable, just and sustained power-sharing arrangements must be firmly installed within Iraq's political system.

As it has done historically, the KRG provides the US with strategic depth in a country that is becoming increasingly dominated by actors hostile to its engagements and values. Abadi may not even be in office this time next year. The Kurds can bolster US influence in Iraq but only if Washington prevents continued advances from Baghdad aimed at putting the KRG under economic siege. If this happens, the situation could escalate into another civil war.

As it has done historically, any regime's effectiveness in the often politically turbulent cascade, Middle East, has been predicated on strong diplomatic relations. Despite the referendum having been based on a

colossal misreading of the Kurds of US policy, for Washington Iraq and its Kurdish factions still represents a rare chance for a success story in the Middle East. The current events may have challenged this notion of success but the Trump administration may salvage itself if it recalls that the Kurds with their historic resurgence after a century-long battle for legitimacy, are not easily discouraged or diminished.