



[Other Topics](#)

# Scattered Dreams

The Independence Referendum, the Fall of Kirkuk  
and the Effect on Kurdish and Iraqi Politics

Nils Wörmer / Lucas Lamberty

Even before the official defeat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, the Kurdish independence referendum has brought the country on the brink of yet another civil war and has fundamentally changed the political situation in the country. Iraq's new reality necessitates a shift in German Iraq policy, including an adjustment of the Federal Republic's military contribution to the country.

---

In October 2017, before the official end of the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS), Iraq almost slipped into a new civil war over the disputed oil capital of Kirkuk. The escalation of tensions was a direct result of the controversial Kurdish independence referendum of 25 September and a sign that internal Iraqi conflicts have begun to overshadow the joint struggle against IS sooner than expected. The situation remains explosive, as Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga are now facing regular Iraqi armed forces and primarily Shiite militias along the former IS front in northern Iraq. The destruction of an Iraqi battle tank of American production on 20 October 2017 by the Peshmerga underlined that the present parameters of Western engagement in Iraq no longer enjoy much validity.

For various reasons, including a serious misinterpretation of Western military support against IS as long-term political support for independence, Kurdish President Masoud Barzani's independence referendum placed the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in a precarious position in the summer of 2017. What followed that October not only pushed the Kurdish dream of an independent state into the distant future, but also raised the question of whether Kurdish politicians will be able to lead the KRI back onto the democratic path it followed between 2003 and 2013. Today, the conflict between Erbil and Baghdad undermines stabilisation efforts of the international community, which focus on rebuilding areas liberated from IS rule and allowing displaced Iraqis to return to their homes. The aftermath of the referendum and Barzani's resignation have given rise to

the threat of a power struggle within Kurdistan, which not only weakens the Kurdish position vis-à-vis Baghdad, but also calls into question the reliability of Iraqi Kurdistan as an important partner in the fight against terrorism.

### **1. The Kurdish State Project and the Referendum**

#### *The Kurdish Pseudo-State*

Even before the 25 September 2017 referendum, Iraqi Kurdistan exhibited many characteristics of an independent state. The Iraqi constitution of 2005 recognises the KRI as an autonomous region with far-reaching executive and legislative rights.<sup>1</sup> Iraqi Kurdistan has its own regional parliament, its own regional government, and its own armed forces, the Peshmerga. In the last twelve years, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has further extended this autonomy from the Iraqi state beyond its constitutional authority.

With its 14 foreign missions, Erbil has thus far pursued a largely independent foreign policy and monitored its external borders independently. In the course of its disputes with the Iraqi central government in 2014, the region began unilaterally exporting oil from the Kurdish territories directly to Turkey instead of through Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, since the beginning of the fight against IS in 2014, the Kurds have succeeded in occupying about a third of the disputed territories in Iraq,<sup>3</sup> including the city of Kirkuk. Kirkuk plays a crucial role in the Kurdish quest for independence, not least because of its economic power. Until October

2017, about half of the Kurdish oil production stemmed from the province's oil fields,<sup>4</sup> financing up to 80 per cent of the Kurdish budget.

## The oil-rich province of Kirkuk is of critical importance to Kurdish efforts at independence.

During the referendum on 25 September, voters decided whether the “Kurdistan region and the Kurdish territories outside the administration of the Kurdistan region” should become independent. According to official figures, 72 per cent of the electorate took part in the vote, which, controversially, also included the disputed areas controlled by the Kurdish Peshmerga. Returns showed 93 per cent voted for independence.<sup>5</sup>

### *President Barzani's Motives and Goals*

From the outset, the referendum represented an almost unilateral initiative by President Barzani and served three objectives: First, it was intended to increase the pressure on Baghdad and the international community to gain guarantees for a Kurdish succession before parliamentary and presidential elections in the KRI, which were scheduled (but never seriously planned) for November 2017. As per the Kurdish constitution, Barzani would not have been allowed to run in the elections again.<sup>6</sup> Second, Barzani aimed to divert attention away from the political and economic problems in the KRI that would have dominated the Kurdish domestic agenda after IS would have ceased to constitute an imminent threat. Since 2015, President Barzani had *de jure* governed without a valid mandate, and had effectively frozen parliament by expelling its speaker, a member of the opposition *Gorran* party. The Kurdish economy, meanwhile, suffered from a lack of reform and the toll of the fight against IS.<sup>7</sup> Third, the referendum was intended to cement and legitimise Kurdish control over the disputed areas, especially Kirkuk.

### *The Barzani Camp Miscalculates*

During the run-up to the referendum, the Iraqi central government, the most important neighbours, Iran and Turkey, and large parts of the international community, including the US and Germany, had clearly positioned themselves against the referendum. Among the Kurds themselves, the resistance was considerable, although muted in public. Politicians in Barzani's own Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), as well as elements of the second-largest party, former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), spoke against the referendum behind closed doors. The opposition party, *Gorran*, publicly called for deferral.

Barzani's insistence on the vote despite the clear opposition was widely considered a gamble that appears to have been based on two critical misconceptions. First, Barzani misinterpreted the international community's military support in the fight against IS as political consent to a Kurdish state project.<sup>8</sup> Barzani hoped that, despite general opposition, important international partners like the US would eventually end up supporting Kurdish secession. Second, Barzani felt strong enough in his own Kurdish camp; the resignation of PUK chairman Jalal Talabani from politics following his 2012 stroke and the death of Nawshirwan Mustafa, head of *Gorran* party, in May 2017, convinced Barzani he could push the referendum through even against opposition party resistance.

The consequences of Barzani's miscalculation were immediately apparent in the wake of the referendum. Contrary to what Barzani had anticipated, the government in Baghdad, with the support of Turkey and Iran, succeeded in politically and economically isolating the KRI within a few weeks. The Iraqi government blocked international air traffic to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, carried out joint military maneuvers with Turkey and Iran on the KRI's borders, and urged the two countries to partially close their borders.<sup>9</sup> While Tehran exerted considerable political and economic pressure on its traditional Kurdish partner, the PUK, Barzani did not receive the expected

support from Turkey, his most important foreign ally, to balance the Iranian pressure.

### *The Fall of Kirkuk*

The fall of Kirkuk on 16 October 2017 was the dramatic climax of the referendum's aftermath. Within 48 hours, regular Iraqi security forces and Shiite militias supported by Iranian military advisers gained control of much of the province, largely without fighting. The coup was preceded by breakdowns of both the political and military Kurdish fronts. A wing within the PUK, led by Hero Talabani, the widow of Jalal Talabani, reached an agreement with the Iraqi central government, after which large parts of the PUK Peshmerga gave up their positions in the Kirkuk area. Moreover and contrary to Barzani's expectations, the international community remained neutral on the matter of Kirkuk. In the aftermath of Kirkuk's fall, the Kurdish Peshmerga also withdrew from other disputed areas in the provinces of Ninawa and Diyala. By 20 October, Iraqi Kurds had lost about one-fifth of the territory they had controlled four days earlier.

The loss of Kirkuk has set the Kurdish state project back by years, if not decades. Today, the KRG controls an area which roughly falls within the Kurdish borders of 2003. The loss of the Avana Dome and Bai Hassan oil fields in Kirkuk province, which together generate about 280,000 barrels of oil a day, reduced Iraqi Kurdistan's production capacity by about half, leaving it scarcely in a position to achieve financial independence.<sup>10</sup>

## **The loss of Kirkuk set the Kurdish state project years back.**

On 29 October, Barzani accepted the consequences of the Kirkuk fiasco, announcing what was widely considered by the media as his resignation for the 1 November. In a meeting of the Kurdish parliament held the same day, his

executive powers were transferred *ad interim*<sup>11</sup> to the Kurdish Prime Minister, the Chairman of the Kurdish Security Council, the KRG Justice Council, and the parliament's "spokespeople" – including the two Deputy Speakers of Parliament appointed by the KDP and the PUK.

## **2. Referendum and the Fall of Kirkuk in the Context of Kurdish Domestic Politics**

### *The Intra-Kurdish Dimension of the Fiasco*

The fall of Kirkuk has clearly exposed the fundamental fault lines among Iraqi Kurds. Since 1975, Kurdish politics had been defined by the duality of the Barzani and Talabani families, who had divided political and economic power in the Kurdish Iraqi territories among themselves.<sup>12</sup> This balance of power, which had guaranteed stable political conditions in post-2003 KRI and a unified political stance vis-à-vis Baghdad, has tilted increasingly toward Masoud Barzani since 2012. The political withdrawal of Barzani's most important counterpart, Jalal Talabani, on health-related grounds led to an imbalance of power within the KRI that was further aggravated by the growing infighting within the PUK. The Talabani wing of the party, which traditionally strives to maintain the dominance of the PUK dynasty, was challenged by a reform-oriented camp concentrated around Kurdish Vice President, Kosrat Rasul Ali and former Kurdish Prime Minister, Barham Salih. The political successes of the opposition *Gorran* party also put the Talabanis under pressure in Sulaymaniyah, their traditional power base. *Gorran* had splintered away from the PUK in 2009 and had become the second-strongest political force in Kurdistan in the 2013 elections.

The power struggle over the succession of Jalal Talabani, which had smouldered since 2012, culminated at the worst conceivable time for Kurds – when Kosrat Rasul's camp supported Barzani in his Kirkuk gamble while the Talabani wing withdrew its forces following its side deal with Baghdad. The independence referendum was already regarded by much of the Talabani wing as an attempt by Barzani to cement his

power in Kurdistan at their expense. Three factors were decisive in the Talabani decision to withdraw from the political and military front against Baghdad:

1. The de facto defection of Najmaldin Karim, the governor of Kirkuk appointed by the PUK, to the Barzani camp further threatened the Talabanis' already dwindling political and economic access to Kirkuk. The city is regarded as the traditional sphere of the family's influence.<sup>13</sup>
2. The death of Jalal Talabani on 3 October 2017 threatened to intensify the power struggle within the PUK.
3. The closure of the Iranian-Kurdish border by Tehran and the Iranian embargo on Kurdish petroleum products following the referendum increased the economic pressure on the Talabanis.

From the Talabani family's point of view, the agreement reached with the Iraqi central government under Iranian mediation thus appeared to be the lesser of two evils in comparison to being used in what they saw as a Barzani power grab.

#### *Implications for Kurdish Policy*

As a result of the events of October 2017, the political situation in the KRI remains volatile and marked by internal Kurdish power struggles. Relations between the Barzanis and Talabanis are the worst they have been since the 1990s, when the two factions were on opposite sides of a bloody civil war: The KDP and Kosrat Rasul wings of the PUK accuse the Talabanis of treason, and there are signs of an increasing division between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. Barzani ordered the withdrawal of all KDP Peshmerga from Sulaymaniyah and Halabja on 17 October, as well as all PUK Peshmerga from Dohuk and Erbil. For their part, the Talabanis aim to consolidate their power over the PUK and the eastern parts of Kurdistan.

The conflict between the two clans has also fueled conflict between moderates and hardliners within the KDP and PUK. The KDP is split between a camp of Kurdish nationalist hawks led by Masoud Barzani and his son Masrour, and a more consensus-oriented camp around Nechirvan Barzani, his nephew. While Masoud, who remains the most influential person within the party as Chairman of the KDP Politburo, and Masrour are pursuing a course that is irreconcilable with the PUK and the Iraqi



central government, Nechirvan, the Prime Minister, is attempting to negotiate with Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah. The conflict today takes the form of an implicit power struggle between Nechirvan and Masrour over the future succession of Masoud Barzani.

The death of Jalal Talabani and the loss of Kirkuk have sparked an intra-party division between the Talabani and Kosrat Rasul camps of the PUK that threatens to tear the party apart.

Even before the referendum in September 2017, Barham Salih had split away from PUK to found his own party. The *Gorran* Party, too, is in a transitional phase after the death of its charismatic leader, Nawshirwan Mustafa, in May 2017. However, it stands to benefit from the fragmentation of the PUK and the general dissatisfaction among the Kurdish public. Still, *Gorran* lacks the means to engage in the power politics<sup>14</sup> that would allow it to play a greater political role.



Fighting IS: Within a few years, the Iraqi central government and its allies have managed to defeat the so-called Islamic State militarily. Source: © Goran Tomasevic, Reuters.

Undeterred by the intra-party contention, Barzani continues to cling to power, complicating a much-needed consolidation of the political system and an end to the region's constitutional crisis. Despite the President's formal resignation, the region continues to suffer from a lack of democracy and weak political institutions. The Kurdish regional parliament has become a rump parliament. Long-overdue parliamentary elections were postponed from November 2017 to July 2018 in a plenary session on 24 October without the participation of the *Gorran* party.<sup>15</sup> The *Gorran*-appointed Speaker of Parliament, denied access to his own parliament since 2015, resigned on 26 December as a result of the lack of parliamentary progress.

### Intra-Kurdish power struggles characterise the political situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The transfer of Barzani's executive power was inadequately defined and leaves a great deal of room for interpretation. Command over the Kurdish armed forces was not transferred to Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, for example. Masoud Barzani's old cabinet, meanwhile, continues to "fulfil its duties and responsibilities".<sup>16</sup> Barzani also remains Chairman of the High Political Council (HPC), which was formerly created as the High Referendum Council to execute the vote. The HPC is composed primarily of KDP members and KDP-affiliated PUK leaders such as Kosrat Rasul and forms a democratically unjustified parallel government, through which Barzani can continue past the parliament to determine the fate of Kurdistan.

The region's political instability leaves the restoration of a united "Kurdish front" against Baghdad unlikely in the foreseeable future, reducing Kurdish influence in Iraq. At the same time, the Kurdish people's resistance to their government is growing in the wake of the political and economic crisis. The end of December saw the

region's largest protests in more than two years, with several demonstrators killed by Kurdish security forces.

### 3. Baghdad's Reaction and Implications for Iraqi Politics

Above all, Kirkuk's reclamation is a political success for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. The Iraqi state was on the verge of collapse when he took office following the IS conquest in September 2014. A moderate consensus candidate, Abadi has since succeeded in overcoming the difficult legacy of Shiite hard-liner Nouri al-Maliki, militarily defeating IS,<sup>17</sup> preventing a Kurdish secession, and placing much of the disputed territories back under central government control.

#### *Abadi and the Reclamation of Kirkuk*

Outside Kurdistan, the independence referendum was rejected by a broad front of Sunni Arab and Shiite leaders and politicians.<sup>18</sup> Their opposition stemmed primarily from the inclusion of the disputed areas, which are home to significant numbers of both sects.

The pressure on Abadi had risen sharply in the run-up to his push on Kirkuk. Shiite hard-liners in particular were sharpening their rhetoric, which threatened to significantly undermine the moderate Prime Minister. On 27 September, in a resolution boycotted by the Kurdish deputies, the Iraqi parliament called on Abadi to place Kirkuk back under the control of the central government using military force if necessary.<sup>19</sup> Kirkuk's reclamation thus became decisive for Abadi's political survival. By refusing to shy away from military confrontation and regaining control of Kirkuk, a moment of considerable risk for Abadi, the Shiite Prime Minister neutralised the hawks in his own camp.

#### *Strengthening Baghdad at the Expense of the Kurds*

After years of watching Erbil act as though it were a second Iraqi government and on equal footing, Baghdad has seen the balance of power

shift in its favour following the events of September and October 2017. The Kurdish coalition in the Iraqi parliament, the Kurdistan Alliance, was already severely damaged by the dismissal of KDP finance minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, in September 2016<sup>20</sup> and finally split with the fall of Kirkuk. The result has been a weakening of Kurdish voices in Iraqi politics and new leverage for Baghdad, which has sought to pit rival Kurdish factions against one another through bilateral agreements. The Talabani wing's cooperation during the Kirkuk crisis showed just how effective such pressure could be.

Erbil is now more economically dependent on Baghdad after the loss of oil fields in Kirkuk. Although the KRG is constitutionally entitled to a certain percentage of the Iraqi budget based on the Iraqi Kurdish population, those payments ended in 2014 following disputes between the two governments over the unilateral export of oil by the Kurds. The amount itself has become another tool for Baghdad to keep pressure on the region. Due to the fact that there has not been an official census in Iraq since 1987, the KRG and the Iraqi transitional government had agreed in 2004 on a transfer payment of 17 per cent of the budget. The 2018 budget only foresees 12.67 per cent for the KRI.<sup>21</sup>

## Renewed military confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil cannot be ruled out.

Baghdad's goal is to regain the full authority over the Kurdish territories outlined in the constitution. As a precondition for new talks, for example, the regional government has been asked to declare the referendum results invalid, hand over all border crossings to the Iraqi authorities, and end unilateral oil exports. An agreement between Baghdad and Erbil is unlikely to be reached before the end of the Iraqi provincial and parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2018. However, a renewed

military confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil cannot be ruled out if relations continue to deteriorate. The tense situation in northern Iraq, where skirmishes between the two sides continued for weeks after Kirkuk and where Iraqi security forces, Shia militias, and Kurdish Peshmerga are still facing each other, could trigger another escalation.

### *Iraq's Political System Remains Unstable*

Despite the success in the fight against IS and the – from Baghdad's point of view – positive developments in Kurdistan, fundamental problems continue to plague the Iraqi political system. After years of war, a democratic culture has slowly begun to develop in the country, with a functioning parliament and a democratically elected government. Yet, Shiites and Sunnis continue to quarrel among themselves. Sunni Arabs face a crisis of legitimacy and representation complicated by the fight against IS. The Shiite bloc is increasingly divided into Iran-friendly hawks led by Maliki and moderate, consensus-oriented players like Abadi. Iraq's political fragmentation means that Abadi's leadership will continue running the gauntlet.

The relative weakness of the political system means that Iran-friendly Shiite militias are more likely to succeed in establishing a "state within a state" along the lines of the Lebanese *Hezbollah*. These groups have done much of the fighting against IS, control large parts of the areas liberated from IS in central Iraq, and were able to further expand their influence in the course of the Kirkuk operation.<sup>22</sup> *Badr*, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, and *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, the three strongest groups with the closest links to Iran, were all involved in the retaking of Kirkuk.<sup>23</sup> They remain in the city today, long after the operation, further strengthening Iran's influence in Iraq.

### **4. The Role of the International Community**

#### *International Opposition to the Referendum*

The US and the regional powers of Turkey and Iran have typically been on different sides of



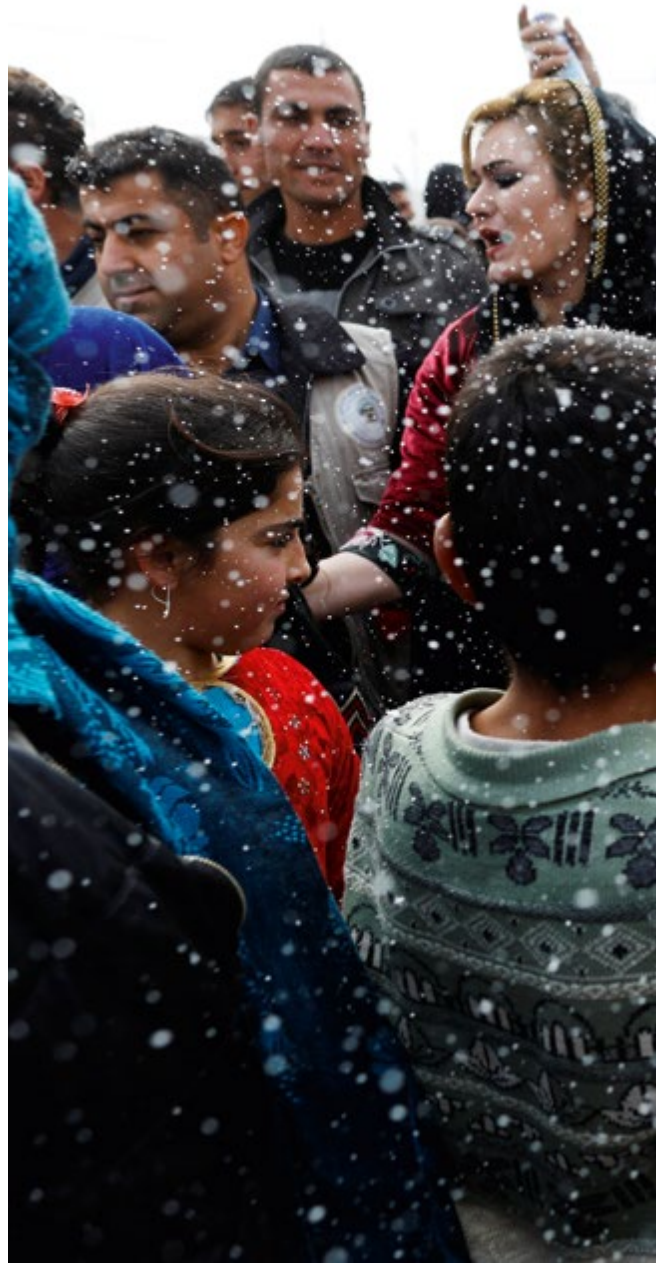
recent Middle Eastern conflicts, most notably in Syria and Iraq. Yet, in their opposition to the referendum, the three were surprisingly unanimous – albeit for different, and sometimes contradictory, reasons. A common concern was that Kurdistan’s secession would set a dangerous precedent and spur further destabilisation in the region. The opposition of Turkey and Iran was grounded largely in domestic concerns, since both countries are home to large Kurdish minorities.<sup>24</sup> All three countries are also reported to have agreed that a direct military confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil would pose an immediate threat to the fight against IS in Iraq.<sup>25</sup>

Ankara and Washington were also likely concerned that detaching Kurdistan from the Iraqi central state would have made Iraq susceptible to even greater Iranian influence. The Kurdish minority – along with the Sunni-Arab minority – has traditionally acted as a counterweight to the Shiite majority in Iraq. Leaving the KRI as a part of Iraq allows Kurds and Sunni Arabs to balance Iran’s strong influence on Baghdad.<sup>26</sup>

Individual interests also shaped the actions of these three important regional players. For Ankara, the inclusion of the disputed territories in the referendum posed a threat to the important minority of Sunni Turkmen in Kirkuk. Turkey sees itself as the Turkmen’s protector. For Iran, on the other hand, an independent Kurdistan would have meant a threat of Israeli influence in close proximity to its own borders. Israel has traditionally enjoyed very good relations with the KRG and was one of the few countries anywhere in the world to support Kurdish independence efforts. For the US, an Iraqi Kurdistan secession would have meant a definite failure of the state-building project after the 2003 intervention.

The common resistance of the three countries took shape according to these interests. On 4 October, the Turkish and Iraqi governments coordinated their actions on the margins of a meeting between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Hassan Rouhani in Tehran, isolating the KRI politically and

economically.<sup>27</sup> Cooperation between Turkey and Iran on the Kurdistan question reflects a general rapprochement between the two states, one that could already be observed in the Astana talks on the Syrian civil war since the beginning of 2017. As in the case of





A blessing in disguise: A couple that fled from Mosul gets married in a nearby refugee camp.  
Source: © Zohra Bensemra, Reuters.

Turkey, President Barzani overestimated support from the US in the conflict between Baghdad and Erbil. The US administration did not actively take sides in the Kirkuk confrontation. It seems quite likely that allowing Abadi, who is considered as an important ally by the US

administration, to defeat the Iranian hawks in his own camp played a role in Washington's considerations.

## *The Fall of Kirkuk in the Context of Iranian Influence in Iraq*

Despite Iraqi leader Abadi's gain in popularity following the recovery of Kirkuk, events in October once again highlighted the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq. For the first time since 2003, Tehran has actively intervened in Kurdish politics, using targeted economic and military pressure to divide Kurds and pit the PUK against the KDP. Iran, with the help of the Tehran-backed Shiite militia, succeeded in building a credible military threat that would make the loss of Kirkuk inevitable for the Kurds.<sup>28</sup> Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, played a decisive role in this, travelling to Sulaymaniyah several times in the run-up to the Kirkuk operation.<sup>29</sup>

The fall of Kirkuk may well have strengthened Iranian influence in Iraq. Even before October, Iran-backed Shiite militia groups controlled large parts of central Iraq liberated from IS. The Kirkuk operation added an oil-rich and strategically important province.<sup>30</sup> Kirkuk's seizure added to the popularity of militias across Iraq, a noteworthy trend as the country's parliamentary elections approach. Political wings of militias like the *Badr* Organisation are among those competing for votes. Tehran also succeeded in strengthening its ties to the PUK, while the referendum alienated the KDP from its traditional partner, Turkey.

### *Threat to International Stabilisation Efforts*

The dispute between the Iraqi central government and the KRG has considerably delayed and even jeopardised the efforts of the international community to stabilise territory liberated from IS. There are nearly three million internally displaced persons in Iraq at the end of 2017 that remain unable to return to their homes.<sup>31</sup> Iraq's future stability will depend on their return and on the rapid reconstruction of liberated areas, most of which are located in disputed territories. Further military confrontations between Baghdad and Erbil threaten

to overshadow the fight against IS, which has shifted into a classic underground terrorist organisation. Despite its military defeat in Iraq, the organisation still has the ability to destabilise the country with terrorist attacks, particularly in liberated areas like West Mosul and Ramadi. Ending the IS threat for good will require close cooperation between Iraqi and Kurdish Iraqi forces in the future.

## **5. Conclusion and Significance to Germany**

Kurdish President Barzani has done a disservice to the Kurdish Iraqi state project with his misguided referendum. By clinging to power, he now continues to endanger the democratic achievements of the Iraqi Kurds over the past decade and a half. KRI politics have been significantly damaged through the referendum, and the region's future is uncertain. The restoration of the political balance lost in 2012, overdue generational change in leadership, and the capacity of Kurdish politicians to recover from the referendum debacle could be hindered by Barzani's lingering presence outside of democratic structures.

**From a German and European point of view, the most important thing now is to prevent Iraq from being destabilised again.**

---

Recent policies enacted by the region are poised to rob it of the very attributes that attracted the international community's attention and support in recent years. Today's KRI does not resemble an anchor of stability in the fight against international terrorism, much less a potential engine of reconstruction and economic development in Iraq. As such, it is hardly a model of democracy for the region.

From a German point of view, the referendum was a breach of trust, since the Kurds had

repeatedly assured the Federal Government and the Bundestag that the independence issue was on hold until the end of operations against IS and the revival of the region's democratic structures. In view of the clear position of European governments prior to the referendum, accusations by Iraqi Kurdistan that it has been abandoned by its Western allies are entirely unfounded.

Germany's Iraq policy since 2014 has been based on supporting Baghdad and Erbil in the fight against IS and assisting with the resulting humanitarian disaster. With the military defeat of IS and the failed Kurdish referendum, these conditions have now changed, necessitating a shift in the focus of German Iraq policy. From a German and European perspective, the most important task now is to strike a balance between Baghdad and Erbil and to prevent Iraq from further destabilisation. The timely holding of elections for the Iraqi parliament and the Kurdistan regional parliament in 2018 is an essential prerequisite for overcoming the internal crises.

An adjustment of the German military contribution to the Kurdish parts of Iraq should be considered as the Bundestag debates a mandate extension this spring. At the same time, consideration should be given to strengthening security cooperation with Baghdad.

Factors favouring continued military engagement in the KRI include the following:

1. the importance of the Kurdish government as a partner in the fight against IS (especially in the area of intelligence cooperation),
2. the continued support for the reform of the Kurdish security sector (with the aim of strengthening the Peshmerga Ministry and separating Kurdish security forces from party structures),
3. the existing training needs in individual military capabilities and partial capabilities of the Kurdish security forces (logistics, medical services, and military engineering), and

4. the opportunity to ensure, through international engagement in the Kurdish territories, that the newly strengthened central government will not overreach in the coming negotiations.

Increased involvement in central Iraq offers opportunities to do the following:

1. support Iraqi security forces in their fight against remaining IS structures, which operate primarily on central Iraqi territory, by providing advice and training (in the areas of logistics, medical care, and military engineering),
2. contribute to the necessary empowerment and reform of the Iraqi security sector (also with the regard to the containment of Shiite militias),
3. dispel the common impression in Baghdad that a German/European bias for Kurdistan exists in the dispute between the central and the regional government, and
4. contribute to the long-term stabilisation of a united Iraqi nation state.

Despite the political crises and the undeniable influence of external players, Baghdad and Erbil will remain central partners for Germany and Europe in stabilisation efforts for the entire region. Nevertheless, an escalation of the conflict between the central and regional governments must be understood as a clear red line for German military engagement in Iraq.

*-translated from German-*

---

**Nils Wörmer** is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Syria/Iraq office.

**Lucas Lamberty** is Research Associate at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Syria/Iraq office.

- 1 The corresponding competences are set out in Articles 116 to 121 of the Iraqi constitution. Article 121 stipulates that autonomous regions in Iraq have legislative authority in all areas outside the exclusive authority of the Iraqi central government. This exclusive authority for example encompasses monetary and foreign policy.
- 2 The Constitution is unclear on the exploitation of Iraqi oil resources. While Article 111 stipulates that natural resources are “the property of all Iraqis”, Article 112 mentions that they are to be administered jointly by the central government and the provinces or autonomous regions. The Kurdish regional government invokes Article 112 to legitimise its export of oil. The dispute between Baghdad and Erbil escalated in 2014 over outstanding transfer payments from the Iraqi central government to the KRI. As a result, the KRI unilaterally began exporting oil through Turkey, predominately from the Peshmerga-occupied province of Kirkuk.
- 3 The disputed territories traverse Iraq in a 500-kilometre-long swath of land stretching from the north-west to the south-east. The areas form a transition zone between the Arab and Kurdish parts of Iraq and are claimed by both the KRG and the Iraqi central government. In addition to Kurds, Shiite and Sunni Arabs, a large number of minorities such as Turkmen, Yezidis, and Christians live in these areas. Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution stipulates that a referendum by local populations on association with Baghdad or Erbil was to be held by 31 December 2007. Because the vote has never been taken, the areas are still disputed.
- 4 Cf. Rivin, Paul / Friedman, Brandon 2017: Kurdistan’s Economic Woes, *Iqtisadi: Middle East Economy* 7: 8, 30 Oct 2017, pp.1-2, in: <http://bit.ly/2FNcRiv> [20 Feb 2018]. Other sources indicate as much as three quarters. Cf. Shavit, Eldad / Lindenstrauss, Gallia 2017: Baghdad Regains Control of Kirkuk: Strategic Implications, *INSS Insight* 984, 23 Oct 2017, p.1, in: <http://bit.ly/2yNcP9y> [20 Feb 2018].
- 5 Cf. Chulov, Martin 2017: More than 92% of voters in Iraqi Kurdistan back independence, *The Guardian*, 28 Sep 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2xLGXC7> [20 Feb 2018].
- 6 Barzani is said to be personally motivated to win Kurdistan independence, both to burnish his own role in history and as an obligation to his family. He is said to have promised independence to his father, Mustafa, the founder of the KDP and once the most important Kurdish leader in Iraq, as the elder Barzani lay on his deathbed.
- 7 The president’s term of office expired in 2013 following two legislative periods and was extended by two years solely on the basis of a cross-partisan compromise. In 2015, Barzani refused to leave office. Demonstrations have been increasing ever since, resulting in several deaths. The KDP began stepped up measures to counter critical media and citizens, in response. Because it suspected *Gorran* in particular of backing the protests, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani dismissed the four *Gorran* ministers that October and replaced them with KDP officials. The former *Gorran* member and speaker of parliament Yusuf Mohammed Sadiq has since been denied entry to parliament.
- 8 Talks with Iraqi government officials, Baghdad, 22 and 24 Nov 2017; talks with Kurdish members of the Iraqi parliament, 25 Nov 2017.
- 9 Since the KRI is landlocked, it is directly dependent on neighbouring countries. More than 75 per cent of all KRI products are imported, including 90 per cent of foodstuffs. Cf. Badawi, Tamer 2017: The Dilemma of KRG Trade, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 18 Oct 2017, in: <http://ceip.org/2gQ89q6> [20 Feb 2018].
- 10 Even before the fall of Kirkuk, from 2014 onwards, the KRG was scarcely in a position to pay out full salaries in the region without regular transfers from Baghdad. Without the oil fields and a resumption of monthly payments from Baghdad, this goal has become even less attainable.
- 11 The transfer of powers is valid until the next parliamentary and presidential elections in Kurdistan. Cf. Connelly, Megan 2017: Is Barzani Stepping Down or Stepping Up?, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 9 Nov 2017, in: <http://ceip.org/2zqeh2D> [20 Feb 2018].
- 12 In the wake of the Washington Agreement, which ended several years of civil war in 1998, and a “strategic agreement” in 2007, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani agreed on the division of political and economic power within the KRI. The Peshmerga, for example, do not form a homogeneous entity, but are largely subdivided into KDP and PUK units, each under the direct command of the parties. The KRI is also divided geographically. The KDP dominates the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil, while the PUK’s sphere of influence encompasses Sulaymaniyah and Halabja.
- 13 A special focus of the conflict between the KDP and the PUK is the question of oil revenues from the province of Kirkuk. The KDP gained control of the Bai Hassan oil field in 2014 and concluded an agreement with Baghdad in 2016. This agreement stipulated a division of income from oil exports from the Kirkuk region between the Iraqi central government and the KRG, which is dominated by the KDP. The PUK therefore received scarcely any economic benefit from Kirkuk. The conflict nearly escalated in March 2017, when PUK security forces occupied the Northern Oil Company headquarters in Kirkuk. Cf. Reuters 2017: Kirkuk oil flows in jeopardy again as Kurdish tensions grow, 3 Mar 2017, in: <http://reut.rs/2mSWYxg> [20 Feb 2018].

- 14 This primarily applies to the Peshmerga. Unlike the KDP and PUK, the *Gorran* Party controls no armed forces.
- 15 Cf. Reuters 2017: Iraqi Kurdistan parliament delays presidential elections by eight months, 24 Oct 2017, in: <https://reut.rs/2yNTBkn> [20 Feb 2018].
- 16 Connelly, n.11.
- 17 On 9 December 2017, five months after Mosul's recapture, Abadi officially declared that the military struggle against IS was over.
- 18 Sunni Arab opinion on the referendum was divided. The majority of Sunni Arab politicians, supported primarily by Turkey, opposed the referendum. For example, Iraqi Vice President Osama al-Nujaifi, a key ally of Turkey and of former President Barzani, took a clear stand against the referendum in the run-up to the vote. Only a small minority of Sunnis supported by Qatar backed Barzani's plans. Cf. Utica Risk Services 2017: Inside Iraqi Politics 164, p. 6.
- 19 Cf. Reuters 2017: Iraqi parliament asks leader Abadi to take back Kurd-held Kirkuk, 27 Sep 2017, in: <https://reut.rs/2fRcEjL> [20 Feb 2018].
- 20 At the time, the PUK and *Gorran* deputies broke with the KDP and voted for the dismissal of Zebari, a close ally of President Barzani. Cf. Utica Risk Services 2017: Inside Iraqi Politics 139, p. 5.
- 21 Cf. Rudaw 2017: KRG to prioritize salaries in 2018 budget, 11 Dec 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2sbVXrS> [20 Feb 2018].
- 22 Some of the groups have existed since the first Gulf War and dominate the so-called Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi, an umbrella organisation formed in 2014 during the fight against IS. The Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi encompasses between 40 and 60 non-state militia groups, the majority of them Shiite, totalling more than 100,000 fighters. Even though Prime Minister Abadi is the nominal supreme commander of the organisation, the militias operate autonomously to a great extent. Since the 2000s, Iran-friendly groups – Badr in particular – have been able to penetrate the Iraqi security sector, foremost among them the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior. Due to the relative weakness of the regular Iraqi security forces, the pro-Iranian groups also control large parts of the liberated areas in the provinces of Diyala and Salah ad-Din. They are therefore a significant power factor in Iraq, existing alongside state institutions and threatening to sideline them. On this see also Steinberg, Guido 2017: The Badr Organization – Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq, SWP Comment 26, in: <http://bit.ly/2xW9MJT> [20 Feb 2018].
- 23 Cf. Cafarella, Jennifer / Kassim, Omer 2017: Iran's Role in the Kirkuk Operation in Iraq, Institute for the Study of War, 8 Nov 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2nHokII> [20 Feb 2018].
- 24 In Turkey, the armed conflict with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) escalated after the failure of the peace process in 2015. In Iran, clashes between the Kurdish minority and the government have intensified since April 2017.
- 25 The two IS attacks in Tehran in June 2017 were the first of their kind in Iran and underscored the importance of the fight against IS to the Iranian administration. Five of the six June IS attackers were Iranian Kurds. Cf. Milani, Mohsen 2017: The Turbulent History Shaping Iran's Opposition to an Independent Iraqi Kurdistan, World Politics Review, 14 Nov 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2BXNiZI> [20 Feb 2018].
- 26 The argument occasionally put forward by Kurdish Iraqi politicians, that an independent Iraqi Kurdistan could be an effective bulwark against Iran for US interests in the region, is not particularly plausible. An independent Kurdish state would hardly have the potential to act as a counterbalance to Iranian influence in the region due to its limited size – geographically, in population, and in military and economic strength – and location.
- 27 Cf. Regencia, Ted 2017: Erdogan, Rouhani united in opposition to Kurdish state, Al-Jazeera, 4 Oct 2017, in: <http://aje.io/xnhjb> [20 Feb 2018].
- 28 Cf. Hawramy, Fazel 2017: How Iran helped Baghdad seize back Kirkuk, Al-Monitor, 17 Oct 2017, in: <http://almon.co/2xs9> [18 Dec 2017].
- 29 Cf. Georgy, Michael / Rasheed, Ahmed 2017: Iranian commander issued stark warning to Iraqi Kurds over Kirkuk, Reuters, 20 Oct 2017, in: <https://reut.rs/2iozP8W> [20 Feb 2018].
- 30 Cf. Kassim, Omer / Cafarella, Jennifer / Goulet, Zachary 2017: Iran Solidifies Influence in Kirkuk, Institute for the Study of War, 21 Nov 2017, in: <http://bit.ly/2Ei8Oh2> [20 Feb 2018].
- 31 Cf. International Organization for Migration 2017: Iraq Mission – Displacement Tracking Matrix, in: <http://iraqdtm.iom.int> [20 Feb 2017].