

## **Iraqi Kurdistan after the Raise of the Islamic State**

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Since Mosul fell to jihadi fighters in June ۲۰۱۴ and threatened Iraqi Kurdistan borders, the United States and a coalition of western countries have been providing military assistance to Iraqi Kurdish forces to fight back Islamic State (IS) militants. Meanwhile, Iraqi army retreats allowed Kurdish forces to extend military control over much of the territories disputed with Baghdad central government, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Western military support and Kurdish advances raised fears that Iraqi Kurds could seize this opportunity to break away from Iraq and declare independence. In July ۲۰۱۴, Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani called for an independence referendum that will decide whether Kurdistan will remain part of Iraq. While facile reading of these events suggests that the raise of IS has left Iraqi Kurds empowered, a closer look to Iraqi Kurdistan today reveals that during the past year Iraqi Kurdistan political class has been increasingly under strain. IS conflict and western military support is increasingly challenging Iraqi Kurdistan already fragile political balance, undermining Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) political and military institutions, turning political parties more divided and thus dependent on their neighbors, Iraq and Turkey, and thus challenging, rather than helping, any secessionist project to materialize in the short and medium term.

Once IS surged, the strategic agreement between the strongest Kurdish political parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party, (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was already strained. Relationship between the two parties deteriorated even more after the western weapons flowed in. The PUK internal divisions, the growing role of Iran, as well as the KDP growing ambition to dominate the political scene had re-sparked ancient divisions between the two parties, and undermined the ability to devise a common strategy vis-à-vis of the western military assistance and in the fight against IS. In addition to that, a new generation of party leaders struggled to emerge, challenging old leaders and exacerbating the fragmentation within each Kurdish party.

Western military assistance has paradoxically entrenched these divisions. It mostly focused on the technical development of Kurdish fighters regardless of resolving their affiliations with party leaders and thus undermining the unity and professionalism of the *peshmerga* military institution. Different Kurdish party-figures agenda are at work in the disputed territories. Intra-leadership competition spur Kurdish party figures to conduct unilateral operations with their affiliated forces in the disputed territories, attempting to amass control over portions of territory and resources. Kirkuk governorate is an enlightening case in this respect, as PUK and KDP affiliated forces have deployed in different part of the governorate and oil-fields and promote a different plan for the future of the city, which the KDP figures close to Massoud Barzani would like to see it part of Kurdistan, a proposal that PUK figures strongly reject.

Moreover, military assistance disproportionally benefitted the KDP factions leaving the PUK mostly dependent on Iran for weapons supplies. While the strategic agreement ensured a balance between the KDP partnership with Turkey and the West and the PUK partnership with Iran, the conflict with IS has drastically broken this equilibrium, making the PUK increasingly dependent on Iran, and the KDP on a number of players comprising Turkey, United States and Iran. The weakness of Kurdish institutions and the growing political parties dependency on their neighbors, Iran and Turkey, which outright oppose Kurdish independence—challenges the prospects that Kurdish independence could be easily achieved.

While much attention has been focused on the threat of Kurdish independence, IS conflict and the way the West provided military assistance to the Kurds risks to make more difficult the Iraqi communities within its current borders, and thus also jeopardizes Iraqi unity. Kurdish forces expansion in mixed area risks fueling tensions with the non-Kurdish communities living there. Moreover, unilateral operations of party-figures have often exacerbated their unruly behavior in these disputed areas, sparking feeling of revenge that encourage members of the Sunni Arab community to fight alongside IS as a way to push back Kurdish expansion. Intra-Kurdish divisions are increasingly affecting Iraqi Kurdistan domestic stability as well. On summer ٢٠١٤, political divisions on issue of the extension of Massoud Barzani as President of Iraqi Kurdistan revealed the extent to which petty interests and regional connections are challenging future prospects that KDP and PUK could find an agreement over the settlement of the Kurdish issue in Iraq. This is increasingly bringing the two parties towards different political tracks in their policy vis-à-vis of Baghdad: encouraging the PUK to strengthen its power in Baghdad and shifting KDP focus over pursuing a long-term trajectory towards Kurdistan independence.

For more information on the same topic see:

-International Crisis Group, *Arming Iraq's Kurds, Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict*, Middle East Report n. ١٥٨, ١٢ May ٢٠١٥.

-Foreign Affairs, *The Peshmerga Regression*, ١٤ June ٢٠١٥.