

# The Battle for the Soul of Iraqi Kurdistan. BY MICHAEL RUBIN

Iraq's Kurds may be moving closer to statehood. But their progress towards democracy leaves much to be desired



In the photo, Iraqi Kurdish policemen stand guard outside the United Nations offices in Erbil during a pro-independence demonstration on August 23, 2014. Photo credit: SAFIN HAMED/AFP/Getty Images

“Independence and the right of self-determination is our supreme goal,” Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the north of Iraq, [declared](#) late last month. It was an uncharacteristically blunt statement, but the Kurdish aspiration for statehood is nothing new.

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The Kurds have long pointed out that they are the largest people without a nation. And much like their compatriots in Syria and Turkey, Iraq's Kurds spent much of the 20th

century battling a hostile central government — in this case Baghdad — for their independence.

Saddam Hussein repeatedly tried to crush their insurgency. In 1991, in the wake of the first Gulf War, he withdrew his forces and blockaded the region, gambling that Iraq's Kurds wouldn't be able to survive on their own. But he was wrong, and they have largely governed themselves ever since. After the United States toppled the Baghdad government in 2003, the country's new constitution guaranteed them continued autonomy, within a federal Iraq, for the foreseeable future. But today, they have never been closer to winning full independence.

Part of the reason is generational change. The Iraqi Kurds entering university this year were in kindergarten when Saddam's rule ended. The country's median age is 20, so more than half of the population has known only Kurdish self-government. Many struggle to speak Arabic, and few have been to Baghdad. They can also draw inspiration from their fellows across the region's porous borders: Syria's Kurds are running their own autonomous experiment, Turkish Kurds are again battling President Erdogan, and Kurdish insurgency is on the rise in Iran. International sympathy is also high. Businessmen and oil speculators have flocked to Iraqi Kurdistan; it is a region of luxury hotels and fancy restaurants rather than car bombs.

## **But what kind of state will Iraqi Kurdistan be if it becomes independent?**

But what kind of state will Iraqi Kurdistan be if it becomes independent? The KRG has lobbied hard in Washington — sometimes relying on its friends and business partners — to promote its reputation as an oasis of freedom and security in a hostile

land. “Iraq’s most stable and democratic region is Kurdistan,” [wrote](#) former U.S. diplomat Peter Galbraith in the *New York Times* (while neglecting to mention that he held a [claim](#) to Kurdish oil worth tens of millions of dollars). Indeed, the KRG has spent [\\$6 million](#) on lobbying since 2010, more than even Pakistan.

In reality, however, Kurdistan is anything but democratic. Just consider how few changes in leadership it has seen. In Baghdad, where authority lays primarily with the prime minister, four men have held the post since 2004, when Iraq regained its sovereignty after the U.S. invasion. In Iraqi Kurdistan, where authority lies with the president, there has only been one — Barzani. And not only did Barzani refuse to step down at the end of his term last year, but he has also [expelled](#) officials of a reformist opposition party from the government. He even [blocked](#) the speaker of parliament, who by law is the interim president, from entering Erbil, the regional capital.

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Rather than maturing as a democracy, Iraqi Kurdistan has begun to slip backwards. Political space has shrunk and political violence [has increased](#). Spurious [lawsuits and threats](#) have silenced some independent [outlets](#). Efforts to unify the government have [floundered](#). Elections are [delayed](#).

True, Masoud Barzani’s governing Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has always been a family affair — his nephew Nechirvan is prime minister, his oldest son Masrour heads not only the security council but also the intelligence services (which civil society activists say he has used to [target journalists](#) and other critics), and his second son is a general. Other close family members run the local cell phone company (a private concern purchased with public money), serve on the KDP’s leadership council, or represent its interests abroad.

The region's other major political player, Jalal Talabani's party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), once positioned itself as an antidote to KDP tribalism while trumpeting its meritocracy and commitment to progressivism. In recent years, however, it, too, has become a family enterprise. Talabani's wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, controls both the PUK's media and its business empire. His oldest son Bafil commands the group's anti-terrorist force and his younger son Qubad — an auto mechanic still in his 30s — has become deputy prime minister. Other family members lead the PUK's anti-terror force, which they use as much to intimidate political opponents as to fight terrorism, while yet another heads the PUK faction in parliament. Meanwhile, relative reformers like former Prime Minister Barham Salih and technocrats like Kirkuk governor Najmaldin Karim are marginalized within the party.

To support any real democratic opposition in Kurdistan can be dangerous. In 2005, a KDP mob [burned](#) an opposition party's office in Duhok, killing its office director; the episode was [subsequently repeated](#). In 2011, young Iraqi Kurds began protesting corruption and authoritarianism much like their Arab brethren in Tunisia and Egypt. When an independent television station broadcast [footage](#) of "Kurdish spring" demonstrations in Sulaymani, government vigilantes [burned it down](#) as well. Both parties' security forces have reportedly [murdered](#) with [impunity](#) journalists who have reported on corruption and nepotism. Sometimes, vehicles belonging to the security forces were used in their kidnappings; other times, senior politicians threatened them directly before their murders.

Many in the KDP argue that, given the threat posed by the Islamic State, now is not the time to discuss democracy. "When the country is going through war and elections can't be held on time... the president will continue running his office with the full powers he currently possesses," Vala Farid, a KDP

lawmaker, [told Al Jazeera](#). Masrour Barzani said that having his father step down during the fight against the Islamic State could be destabilizing. “The last thing Kurdistan needs is another crisis,” he [said](#).

Special Envoy Brett McGurk, who remains the U.S. government’s *de facto* point man on the Iraqi Kurdish question, [continues to recognize](#) Barzani as president, despite the fact that he is now in his post extralegally. So does the [White House](#).

But to excuse his autocracy as a necessary evil in the fight against terrorism ignores the fact that

## **Barzani began consolidating power long before the rise of the Islamic State.**

Barzani began consolidating power long before the rise of the Islamic State. For him to rule beyond his term in the name of security is, in effect, to govern via emergency law, even if party members would not describe it that way. Emergency laws can be addictive: Dictators will always find an excuse to maintain them, but they never bring stability. Quite the contrary, they lead to regimes like that of the Assads’ in Syria or Muammar Gaddafi in Libya.

Others suggest that such problems would fall by the wayside, if only the Kurds had their independence. “The independence of Kurdistan is bigger than parliament and political parties,” Masoud Barzani [said](#) in a March 2016 interview. This is not only wishful thinking, but dangerous. Between 1994 and 1997, KDP and PUK militias fought a civil war over division of revenue and resources, and that was before the large-scale discovery of oil. Thousands died in the conflict, and hundreds more disappeared after arrest by both sides’ security forces. Both Barzani and Talabani also invited outside forces — Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps respectively — to come to their aid. So long as the Kurdish militias and

intelligence services remain subordinate to personalities and political parties rather than to the state, they will erode rather than promote stability.

Besides, the Kurds have yet to answer some very basic questions about the basis for citizenship in any new state. Would citizenship in an independent Iraqi Kurdistan be based on geography or ethnicity? If the former, does that mean it would exclude Kurds born in Baghdad or Diyarbakir? If the latter, will Arabs and Turkmen be second-class citizens? Would Kurdistan recognize dual citizenship? These questions might seem nitpicky, but their answers could foreshadow population transfers, ethnic cleansing, and potential seeds of conflict which could last generations.

Whether or not the new independent Kurdistan would tolerate real political competition — the foundation of democracy — is uncertain. Iraqi Kurdish political culture leans more toward power-sharing arrangements in which parties maintain local monopolies rather than true competition. If Iraqi Kurds seek a greater Kurdistan that includes their brethren in Turkey, Syria, and Iran, would their main political forces make room for new players?

Then there's the oil. Rather than propelling Kurdistan to peace and prosperity, its oil resources could lead to disputes over sharing arrangements that would undercut Kurdish unity.

## **Would Iraqi and Syrian Kurds be willing to share their oil wealth with their Turkish and Iranian brethren who live in energy-poor areas?**

Would Iraqi and Syrian Kurds be willing to share their oil wealth with their Turkish and Iranian brethren who live in energy-poor areas? If not, could that mean Kurds could seek four states instead of just one? There is a precedent of ethnic unity being

undercut by geopolitics and local political disputes. After all, there are two Romanias (one called Moldova) and two Albanias (one named Kosovo), two Palestinian administrations, and 22 Arab states. Either way, unwillingness to compromise on territorial claims could be a problem. Both in Iraq and Turkey, Kurdish leaders whip up nationalist rhetoric to distract from their domestic failings. This could set the stage for decades of war against Turks, Iraqis, Iranians, and Syrians over disputed territories. Kurds see precedents in [Czechoslovakia's peaceful divorce](#) or Britain's [move to withdraw from the European Union](#). Others compare themselves to Scotland or Catalonia. In reality, they have much more in common with the most recent secessionist states: South Sudan, Kosovo, Timor-Leste, and Eritrea. Each won independence after years of struggle, but then squandered liberty after descending into dictatorship or lawlessness because leaders fought over resources, resisted separation of powers, or refused to disentangle the security forces from parties or personalities.

Kurds have sought a state for almost a century. If they do not begin to clean their own house, however, they may find that independence, freedom, and democracy are not synonymous.

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