

# THE KURDS ARE RIGHT BACK WHERE THEY STARTED. BY JOOST HILTERMANN\*



FOR DECADES, WASHINGTON HAS BEEN CONTENT TO INDULGE KURDISH DREAMS OF INDEPENDENCE. WHY WAS ERBIL WILLING TO PLAY ALONG?

IN A TELEVISED ADDRESS ON OCTOBER 29, the president of the Iraqi Kurdish region, Masoud Barzani, declared that he would step down from his post. It remains unclear whether Barzani, son of the legendary founder of the Kurdish national movement, Mustafa Barzani, would reemerge as leader in a different guise, but clearly his announcement was not part of a well-laid plan.

To the contrary, it was the latest unintended consequence of his September 25 referendum on Kurdish independence—a long-sought aspiration—staged over the strenuous objections of not only the federal government in Baghdad and neighbors Turkey and Iran, but also the United States and the European Union. On October 16, Iraqi forces and Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias retook the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields from the Kurds. It was a relatively bloodless affair, thanks to [a deal](#) between Abadi and a faction of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the KDP's political rival, which had opposed the referendum and jumped on the chance to turn the tables on Barzani. Soon, these forces had retaken most of what the Iraqi constitution refers to as the disputed territories: a broad swath of land stretching from the Iranian to the Syrian border with Kirkuk at its center, which both Erbil and Baghdad claim. Kurdish peshmerga affiliated with the PUK and KDP either withdrew or fled.

Perhaps most shocking to the Kurds was Washington's opposition to the referendum and response to the Kirkuk takeover. The KRG has received massive military support from Western nations in the fight against ISIS, raising its expectations that they would support the bid for independence. Yet the Trump administration stood by as Iraqi forces and Iran-backed militias advanced.

Why, the Kurds asked, would Washington oppose their inalienable right to self-determination, one that Americans themselves once exercised, after they proved

themselves to be Washington's steadfast allies in Iraq after 2003, especially in the fight against ISIS? And why had America led them to believe they were on the path to independence, only to chastise them when they expressed this deepest aspiration?

THE KURDS HAVE A LONG HISTORY of misreading America's intentions. A succession of U.S. presidents have reiterated U.S. opposition to changing the Middle East's existing borders. At the same time, Washington has long needed the Kurds to remain firm allies in wider power struggles against the Soviet Union, Iran, Saddam Hussein, or ISIS. This built a certain ambiguity into the signals Kurdish leaders received, or thought they received. Moreover, after 2003, powerful voices in Washington, including [John McCain](#) and [Joe Biden](#), backed the KRG in its relationship with Baghdad and hinted at a certain flexibility on Kurdish independence. And the Kurds, one of the largest non-state nations, *wanted* to believe.

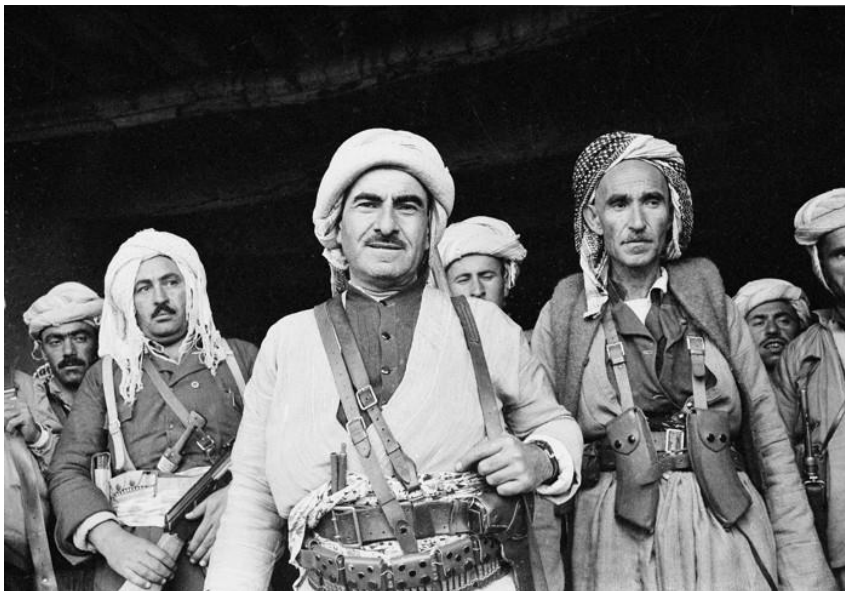
The Kurds' quest for independence is 100 years old. So is their sense of grievance. They feel as if they have grown up with a non-state nation's defective gene on which injustice and betrayal are indelibly imprinted, and which is passed down through the generations without remedy. This is why they so despise the secret agreement struck in 1916 at the height of World War I between Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot, which delineated the future spheres of influence of Britain and France: Not because they produced an actual treaty parceling up the post-Ottoman world, but because the borders they drew represented the very intent to divvy up the spoils over the heads of the former empire's subjects. Their agreement was codified in the 1920 by the Treaty of Sèvres, which held out the possibility of a Kurdish state. But within three years, that half-promise was abandoned in the Treaty of Lausanne.

What if the colonial powers had allowed the Kurds to establish a state in the early 1920s? The ensuing hypothetical Kurdish frustrations would have remained high, just as Arab frustrations have been over the past century due to the carving up of the Arab world. This is because what France and Britain envisioned for an independent Kurdistan was an expanse encompassing much less than the region's Kurdish-populated areas. A Kurdish nation would have been torn asunder and, just like the Arabs, have experienced a generations-long yearning for unification. Even if the Kurds were to gain statehood today, that sentiment would remain acute. So would their struggle to break free of these constraints. Instead, the Kurds, divided across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, for decades have been forced to fight for their rights as a minority group, in an effort to parlay this struggle into a bid for their own state.

While the Kurds' common ethnic identity unites them, as a people, they are as divided as any other ethnic group—by dialect, political ideology, and the personalities and strategic priorities of their leaders. Moreover, their forced immersion into four distinct cultures shaped both their outlook and the form their separate struggles have taken in each environment. For example: The average Kurd from Suleimaniya, speaking the Surani dialect of Kurdish, can barely understand a Kurd from Dohuk speaking the Badinani dialect. And that's just inside Iraq. Such factors account for the range of Kurdish parties working at cross-purposes rather than in lockstep in pursuit of the dream of statehood they share. Politicized Kurds in Turkey follow the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), whose founder, Abdullah Öcalan, competes with Barzani for leadership of the overall movement. The two sides have clashed violently in the past

and could do so again, as PKK fighters have expanded their bases in northern Iraq in recent years. Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria have successfully exploited these divisions. The only hope the Kurds have is that these states become so fatally weakened—as Iraq and Syria already have, in their view—that they will no longer be able to stymie their progress toward statehood, however limited, in some part of Kurdistan.

For a century, Iraqi Kurds have repeatedly invested a disproportionate confidence in the United States to deliver them of the shackles of central control. The relationship dates back to the 1970s, when Mustafa Barzani sought Washington's help against Iraq's Baathist regime, after its strongman, Saddam Hussein, violated the Kurds' understanding of an autonomy agreement signed in 1970. As Barzani returned to insurgency, the Kurds received support from the CIA, which found use in a proxy willing to counter the Soviet-backed Iraqi government. That support never included a promise to support anything beyond Kurdish autonomy inside Iraq, even when Barzani offered Washington access to the Kirkuk oil fields in case of victory.



*Mullah Mustafa Barzani in Northern Iraq in February 1963 (AP)*

The United States had other factors to consider: When the Shah of Iran brokered a [deal](#) with Iraq in 1975 over control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, he promptly cut off his military support for Barzani. Washington followed suit, and the Kurdish insurgency collapsed. Surviving Kurdish fighters fled into exile in Iran, and Mustafa Barzani sought safety in America, where he died soon after. His personal physician during his brief American exile, Najmaldin Karim, was governor of Kirkuk for six years until Abadi's military operation in October of this year put an end to his tenure.

Masoud Barzani assumed his father's mantle, hoping to finish what he started. But conditions were tough. The KDP suffered debilitating splits. Jalal Talabani, who [died](#) in early October, founded the rival PUK. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, both parties sided with Tehran, while the United States backed Saddam Hussein against the mullahs' Islamist fervor and suspected expansionist designs. The result was retaliation and revenge by Saddam's military, which received satellite

intelligence and other forms of U.S. support, as well as the benefit of a blind eye turned toward its use of chemical weapons to defeat both Iran and the Kurdish rebels. The poison gas [attack](#) on the town of Halabja in 1988, in which thousands died, was the culmination of this cynical tolerance of its tactical ally's conspicuous war crimes. Saddam also stamped out the Kurdish insurgency in what is known as the [Anfal](#), in which his security forces systematically rounded up and murdered tens of thousands of Kurds.



*Massud Barzani and Jalal Talabani pose in front of the painting of Mustafa Barzani (Rabih Moghrabi / Getty)*

The Kurds' fortunes turned when Saddam invaded Kuwait. They took their fate into their own hands, shaking off Iraqi control throughout the Kurdish region. But once the international coalition had expelled Iraq from Kuwait, the administration of George H.W. Bush appeared content to leave a weakened Saddam in place as a buffer against Iran, threatening Kurdish lives and aspirations. Yet Kurdish flight in the face of Saddam's returning army prompted an American rescue: a safe haven and a no-fly zone in the north. The Kurds' affection for the United States soared, along with their utter dependence on Washington for their protection.

They never quite understood, though, why Bush failed to finish the job by removing Saddam. They didn't understand why the United States would keep a tyrant in place, while they had shown a readiness, even if not quite the capability, to rid themselves of his brutality. Did Washington not stand on the side of democracy and human rights? The Kurds, who had suffered the most horrendous violations of their human rights at the regime's hands, proposed to become a Western ally in the north—

democratic and open for business. There was no talk of independence yet, merely of self-government within existing borders. Yet the furthest Washington would go was to protect the Kurds from further atrocities. Out of deference for its NATO ally Turkey and its pronounced support for the sanctity of the region's borders, it left it at that.

While the Kurds experienced de facto independence in the following decade, they also struggled under the combined economic chokehold of Turkey, Iran, Syria, and what strength remained in an Iraqi regime laboring under international sanctions. Elections in 1992 produced a power-sharing deal between the KDP and PUK that soon fell apart. Their political visions differed little, but they clashed over the personalities of their leaders (deriving from the post-1975 Barzani-Talabani split) and access to revenues from customs fees at the border crossing with Turkey. This triggered an [internecine conflict](#) in 1994-1998, during which, in August 1996, Barzani invited Saddam's troops to enter Kurdistan and pursue Talabani's fighters.

To Washington, such Kurdish squabbles were a minor annoyance, but Saddam's brief invasion of Kurdistan compelled it to extract U.S. nationals helping to [rehabilitate](#) the region, along with their Kurdish partners. Kurdish leaders I spoke to at the time lamented the decision, as in doing so, Washington removed the stratum of promising young professionals whose energies they needed to build a future state. U.S. mediation eventually put an end to the Kurdish civil war. The two parties proceeded to rule the separate territories they controlled, establishing parallel governments and eyeing each other warily even as the specter of a return of Saddam's police state continued to hover.

THE U.S. INVASION OF IRAQ IN 2003 brought decisive change. The Kurds were Washington's staunchest allies, and U.S. military commanders (more than political leaders) are nothing if not loyal to, and protective of, their local partners. This boosted the Kurds' fortunes—and their hopes. If Washington was ready to back them in their rise, they were ready to overlook U.S. complicity in Halabja and Anfal. Not everyone was so forgiving, however. The late Nowshirwan Mustafa Amin, Talabani's long-time deputy, as well as a thinker with a deep historical understanding and strategic outlook, told me years ago he repeatedly warned against putting all Kurdish eggs in Washington's basket precisely because of the way it had treated the Kurds in the past.



*Iraqis take down a Saddam Hussein statue with help from U.S. Marines in April 2003 in Baghdad, Iraq (Robert Nickelsberg / Getty)*

But the administration of George W. Bush grew closer to the Kurds than any of its predecessors. In Iraq's increasingly hostile environment, Bush found them friendly, open, dependable, and a useful counterweight against the perpetually bickering Shia leaders, with their loyalties divided between Washington and Tehran. The United States treasured the calm of the Kurdish region, as well as its economic potential. But it made clear its intent to rebuild the Iraqi state, including its military, and preserve its external borders. All they ever promised the Kurds was business and protection.

Yet the new order offered the Kurds the hope of far more. It allowed them to play mediator in Baghdad, with Talabani as Iraqi president, while expanding their autonomy in what became a federal region under Barzani. Moreover, the Iraqi constitution they helped draft dangled the prospect of incorporating territories into the Kurdish region in which the Saddam regime had tried to replace Kurds with Arabs—the disputed territories—to consolidate control of the oil-rich strata underneath.

Encouraged by the Bush administration, they put aside their internal strife to mount an effective common front against the new powers in Baghdad, whom they never quite trusted. They came to a strategic agreement that helped them divvy up oil revenues [drawn](#) from the Kurdish region. To the extent that the KDP and PUK have fostered prosperity, they have done so by creating a favorable investment climate for outside companies, and by building an extensive patronage network that rewards people for their loyalty more than their skills. They formed, in effect, a [duopoly](#) based on shared business interests, one of whose main features has been a bloated public sector headed by party loyalists.

Oil deals became more lucrative in 2007 once Turkey decided to work with both Baghdad and, separately, the KRG, rather than against them. The Turkish leadership proposed the complete [integration](#) of the Kurdish region into the Turkish economy, and developed strong relations with Kurdish leaders. Washington sponsored this move and benefited from it, as U.S. companies, along with Turkish and European

ones, moved in to take advantage of the oil wealth and associated investments in infrastructure and construction. The contracts to pump oil were particularly profitable, as they offered not just revenue but an equity share in oil—over Baghdad's strong objections. The Kurdish parties exploited the new opportunity to the maximum, leveraging minor oil finds by small companies to lure mid-size and eventually giant companies like Exxon. In September, the KRG signed a [contract](#) with the Russian giant Rosneft for a reported \$1 billion in investments in gas pipelines.

The exact size of that deal may never be known, however, because the KRG has been notoriously non-transparent in its oil dealings. Hence the high-level corruption that has destroyed people's hopes that these parties can actually govern and distribute the wealth. It explains why many young Kurds, who were educated abroad but filtered back in after 2003 to rebuild Kurdistan, have fled again, dismayed by corruption and nepotism. It also explains why the 2011 Arab Spring had a [Kurdish component](#). Young people moved into public squares of Kurdish towns just as their Arab peers in Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere did. Authorities suppressed their protests, but resentment over high-level corruption, limits on political rights, and poor governance, has only grown.

What saved the Kurdish leadership from more widespread unrest was the arrival of ISIS on their doorstep in 2014. There is no better way to make people put aside their concerns over abusive rule than by mobilizing them against a dangerous common enemy. The bitter fight has been costly; a coincidental drop in world oil prices did not help. Civil servants have gone without a salary, or a full salary, for months at a time. [Almost 2 million](#) displaced Iraqis in need of assistance have found shelter in the region. While this has been difficult, the KDP-controlled KRG received almost unconditional Western military support, and earned more sympathy for standing up to ISIS's brutal practices. Western support, in turn, enabled Barzani to extend his presidential term twice without a vote.

But the Kurdish leadership realized that ISIS's approaching defeat might not significantly alter the situation in the Kurdish region. Barzani understood that it was now or never in the Kurds' push for statehood. With the fight against ISIS over, the bill had come due in the KRG's view: The United States and its Western allies may have supported the Kurds to fight ISIS, but for the Kurds it was always about using the opportunity to advance their national cause. And they saw signals from Washington that suggested that perhaps the time had arrived, and that it would throw its weight behind their quest.

WHENCE THIS INTERPRETATION? Western advocates for Kurdish self-determination have been very vocal, and have exerted inordinate influence on the thinking of Kurdish leaders. They have also shaped public opinion in both the Kurdish region and the West, boosted by a strong Kurdish public-relations effort in Washington. These advocates are of four main types, which may overlap.

The first are profit seekers. One day they are diplomats in Iraq engaged in sensitive talks, the next they show up in the Kurdish region as representatives of oil companies or consultants with high-level connections in government and industry, intent on profiting from the advice they provide and the gratitude they incur. The second group are romantics taken in by the Kurds' plight and convinced that the only way to protect

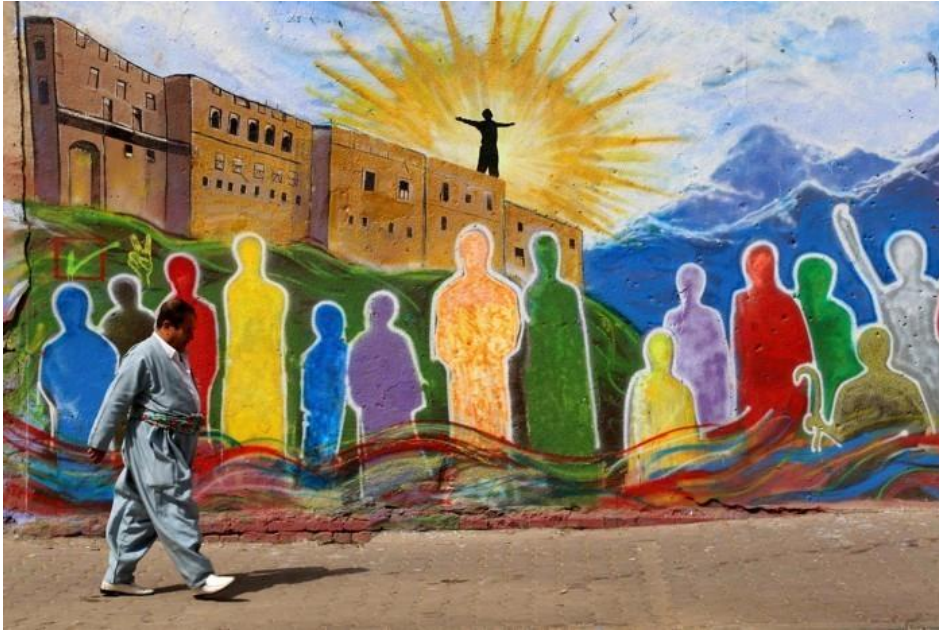
them from future harm is through statehood. They can be effective lobbyists, because they are loud. A [typical example](#) is the French provocateur Bernard-Henri Lévy.

The third group comprises those who see the Kurds' quest as aligned with Israel's interests. Israel's link to the Barzanis goes back to the 1960s, when Israeli operatives began supporting the Kurdish insurgency in an effort to divide and weaken a hostile Arab world by supporting non-Arab states and minorities. The KDP's affection for Israel, in turn, has remained undiminished, even though Kurds have more in common with stateless Palestinians. In the 1970s, Israel provided the Kurds with military support as a wedge against Arab unity. In supporting the independence referendum this past September, Benjamin Netanyahu perhaps saw utility in the Kurds as a forward defense against Iran.

Members of the fourth group support Iraqi Kurds because of an anti-Iran animus sparked by their experiences in Iraq a decade ago, when, as American soldiers, they faced attacks by Iranian proxies, or by a much older opposition to the Iranian revolution in general, and what followed in its aftermath. Taking heart from public pronouncements by all these constituencies, Barzani may have thought that now was a golden opportunity to ride the wave of America's shifting threat perception from ISIS to Iran. He wanted to show that he was a trustworthy ally in the new regional confrontation on the side of the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and thereby consolidate his own position in the Kurdish region and take another step forward in the drive toward independence.

This always was a risky gamble. If Barzani thought that the Trump administration had the Kurds' back through some combination of sympathy, gratitude, and strategic need, he was sorely mistaken. The U.S. has used the KRG (and, in northern Syria, PKK-affiliated Kurds) as virtual security contractors, and continues to insist on a nominally unified Iraq as the primary doorstop against Iranian dominance over an economically weakened and internally riven Kurdish region. Their mutual relationship is based on a voluntary misunderstanding: Washington deliberately refrains from making explicit the "terms of contract" of U.S. engagement with the Kurds; in turn, the Kurds believe that these terms will eventually lead to U.S. support for statehood. Recent events have shown, once again, that they are wrong.





*An Iraqi Kurdish man walks past a mural in the square in the citadel in Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq (Safin Hamed / Getty)*

Today the KRG is back to the lines drawn in 1991, when Saddam's forces withdrew from the Kurdish region in the wake of the Kuwait war and Kurdish rising in the north. It's a defeat on a par with the collapse of Mustafa Barzani's forces in 1975. In both cases, the Barzanis blamed the U.S., and in both cases Iran played a major role. The sad reality is that Iraq's Kurds remain landlocked, their status determined by the interests of their more powerful neighbors. Internally, they are more divided than they have been in two decades. The KDP shouts "treason" at the PUK for facilitating the federal forces' entry into Kirkuk, but the PUK can parry by reminding Barzani of his decision to invite Saddam's forces into the Kurdish region in 1996. And so another circle is completed.

Whether the Barzani dynasty, or the KDP-PUK duopoly, will survive this disastrous setback to the Kurdish drive for statehood is next up. A young Kurd has two aspirations: that the two parties will disappear, to be replaced by more unified, more competent, more democratic, and less corrupt government, and that deepening antagonism between the U.S., Iran, and Turkey will give the Kurds new breathing space and an opportunity to start building again. One thing is certain: their hope for independence will never die.

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[https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/history-of-the-kurds/544316/?utm\\_source=twb](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/history-of-the-kurds/544316/?utm_source=twb)