

Kurdish region rebuffs US appeals for unity with Iraqi government

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Talks yesterday between US Secretary of State John Kerry and the leadership of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region, ended with another fiasco for the Obama administration.

Just two weeks have passed since four entire divisions of the US-trained Iraqi Army, along with thousands of police, abandoned their positions and equipment and allowed the Sunni extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to take control of the western reaches of the city of Mosul, in the northern province of Nineveh. ISIS fighters, reinforced by Sunni insurgent organisations that had fought the US occupation, faced virtually no resistance from the Iraqi military as they proceeded to drive south through Salah ad Din province, capturing the city of Tikrit and threatening the city of Samarra, the site of a revered Shiite shrine.

Most of the north-western city of Tal Afar, close to the Syrian border, has fallen to ISIS. Its fighters and other Sunni militants are laying siege to Iraq's main northern oil refinery near Baiji and trying to capture Baqubah, in Diyala province, just 60 kilometres from Baghdad. Other Sunni fighters, operating from the western Anbar province cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, have taken major border crossings with both Syria and Jordan and threaten the city of Haditha and a crucial dam and hydro-electricity plant.

On Monday, Kerry met with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, under conditions in which the entire American foreign policy establishment is attempting to blame the sectarian policies of his Shiite-dominated government for the Sunni uprising and ensuing military debacle. He would have undoubtedly insisted, behind closed doors, that Maliki resign. The Obama White House appears to have deluded itself into believing that

changing the faces at the top of its puppet state in Baghdad will offset the immense social antagonisms and political divisions that were produced by the US invasion and occupation and which lie behind the collapse of Iraqi government control over much of the country's west and north.

Maliki, however, gave no indication following the talks that he would step aside. His party and other Shiite political factions control close to half the seats in the parliament and, whatever their differences, are united in their opposition to any compromise with the Sunni rebellion. Tens of thousands of heavily armed Shiite militias, allegedly accompanied by Iranian military advisors, have mobilised since last Friday to assist loyal army units in defending Baghdad, Samarra and the majority Shiite provinces in Iraq's south, as well as launching counter-attacks toward Baqubah and Fallujah.

Kerry was also rebuffed by the Kurdish elite yesterday. After speaking with Kerry, KRG President Masoud Barzani poured cold water on the plans for a national unity government. Instead, he declared that "we are facing a new reality and a new Iraq," indicating that the Kurdish establishment intends to push for even greater autonomy from Baghdad or potentially even declare an independent state.

The KRG is already a separate state in all but name. Under the protection of the US-enforced "no fly" zone imposed in 1991, the two main Iraqi Kurdish nationalist parties ended fighting among themselves and established a unified authority over the three majority Kurdish-populated provinces. After the 2003 US invasion, Iraq's new constitution granted sweeping powers to the Kurdish region, including the maintenance of its own armed forces and international diplomatic relations.

Since June 10, the KRG has exploited the Sunni uprising to substantially expand the territory under its control. The suburbs of Mosul to the east of the Tigris River—more than half the city—did not fall to ISIS but were occupied by the KRG's *peshmerga* military forces. To the extent that *peshmerga* have engaged ISIS and Sunni fighters, it has been to consolidate the grip of the KRG over strategic areas. Kurdish units have taken the border crossing that links Iraq with the majority Kurdish region of north eastern Syria, and attacked ISIS in the nearby city of Tal Afar. They have taken Kurdish-populated areas of Diyala province along the Iranian border. Most significantly, they have occupied the entire city of Kirkuk and nearby oilfields, which Kurdish nationalists insist must be incorporated into the KRG and any independent Kurdish nation.

On Monday, Barzani told CNN's Christiane Amanpour: "Iraq is obviously falling apart... After the recent events... it has been proven that the Kurdish people should seize the opportunity now, the Kurdish people should now determine their future." He insisted that Kirkuk was part of "Kurdistan" and indicated that Kurdish forces would be held back from attacking ISIS at this point. The Sunni extremists, Barzani declared, had been able to lead a "revolt" due to "public anger" toward the Baghdad government. He added that Maliki had rejected Kurdish offers of assistance.

The confidence of the KRG in pursuing an independent agenda stems from the weakness of the position of both the United States and Maliki, and from the close relations it has developed with Turkey. The attitude of the Turkish state toward the Iraqi Kurdish region has been transformed since 2003, when it threatened military action to prevent any declaration of Kurdish independence out of fears it would exacerbate Kurdish nationalist agitation inside its own borders. Over the past decade, however, the Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has repudiated its calls for a separate state, while trade with the KRG has burgeoned.

Turkey is the largest investor in the KRG and has played the major role in facilitating the development of its oil industry. A pipeline from the Iraqi Kurdish oilfields to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan was opened last year. In defiance of the Baghdad government and Washington, which have both insisted all oil exports must be centrally organised, shipments

are now leaving Ceyhan for sale. In the past week, a tanker allegedly unloaded Kurdish oil in the Israeli port of Ashkelon, for re-export to unspecified buyers. Engineers have reportedly linked the Kirkuk oilfields to the pipeline to Ceyhan as well, following the signing of a 50-year oil export agreement between Turkey and the KRG on June 4.

Amid the collapse of the Iraqi state and the reality on the ground of de-facto Kurdish independence, Turkish government spokesman Huseyin Celik stated on June 13: "The Kurds of Iraq can decide for themselves the name and type of entity they are living in. The Kurds, like any other nation, will have the right to decide their fate." At the least, the Turkish government is indicating that it would not seek to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq.

The separation of the KRG has no lack of advocates in the American ruling class as well, including, at one point, Vice President Joe Biden. Peter Galbraith, the former US ambassador to Croatia, who played a role in the machinations to break up the former Yugoslavia, wrote in *Politico Magazine* on June 17 that "senior [State Department] officials are, more and more, acknowledging privately that the independence of Kurdistan is inevitable."

Spelling out the type of sordid deals that are being considered, Galbraith stated: "So here is the basis of a bargain—US recognition of an independent Kurdistan in exchange for *peshmerga* troops joining a US air campaign against ISIS and helping to stabilise what used to be Iraq." His comment excluded any reference to the longer term prospect of open conflict between Kurdish and Iraqi Shiite forces, and an ever worsening catastrophe for the peoples of the Middle East caused by US imperialist intrigue.

Ending his brief and furtive visit to Iraq empty-handed, Kerry headed for a NATO foreign minister's meeting in Brussels. The meeting had been set to coordinate the US-NATO offensive against Russia over Ukraine, but is now overshadowed by the debacle created by US imperialism in Iraq.



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