

Relations collapse between Iraqi government and Kurdish region

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A breakdown of relations between the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdish region in the north is heightening the danger that the crisis in Iraq will trigger a region-wide war.

In his weekly televised address to the nation on Wednesday, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki dramatically accused the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of secretly collaborating with the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is leading a rebellion against Baghdad in the majority Sunni provinces of northern and western Iraq.

The Kurdish leadership, Maliki alleged, were among the “internal and external parties who supported the conspiracy that took place in Iraq” and which had enabled ISIS to seize the city of Mosul and large swathes of the country’s north. The Kurdish region, he declared, was “a base for the operations of the Islamic State and Baathists and Al Qaeda and the terrorists.”

The Kurdish reaction was furious. On Thursday, Roz Nouri Shawez, a Kurdish politician who holds the position of deputy prime minister of Iraq, announced in a press conference that Kurdish ministers in Maliki’s government would boycott all future cabinet meetings. Maliki’s allegations, he stated, “are meant to hide the big security fiasco by blaming others.”

The official spokesman for KRG President Massoud Barzani told journalists: “Maliki has been afflicted by a true hysteria and lost his balance as he tries as hard as he can to justify his errors and failure and make others responsible for it.”

The Kurdish nationalist response to the ISIS-led insurrection, however, has provided no lack of reasons for hysteria in Baghdad.

Within days of ISIS taking Mosul, Barzani and other Kurdish leaders declared that Iraq had effectively ceased to exist and that the Kurdish region should be

recognised internationally as a separate nation-state. The Turkish government, which rules over a large Kurdish minority and has historically opposed any notion of a Kurdish state, issued statements that indicated, at the least, it would not seek to prevent a move toward separation. The Israeli government, which has forged significant relations with the Iraqi Kurdish region, issued explicit endorsements and is agitating in Washington and elsewhere on behalf of Kurdish independence.

Kurdish military forces, known as the peshmerga, hold the entire eastern sector of Mosul but have taken no steps to dislodge the ISIS fighters who took the western portions on June 10, after Iraqi army units deserted their positions. As government forces retreated south toward Baghdad, the peshmerga instead occupied the city of Kirkuk and Iraq’s northern oil fields under the banner of the KRG. Other units were sent to seize the main northern border crossing between Iraq and Syria, which is held on the other side by Syrian Kurdish forces fighting against the Iranian-backed government of President Bashar al-Assad, as well as against ISIS forces in Syria. Arms, supplies and fighters can now be easily provided to them from Iraqi Kurdistan. Peshmerga troops have also taken control of Kurdish-populated areas in the province of Diyala, which borders Kurdish-populated regions of Iran.

The Iraqi army, reinforced now by thousands of Shiite fundamentalist militia, has prevented ISIS forces from advancing any further toward Baghdad and has made some headway in driving Sunni rebels back from key locations such as the Baiji oil refinery and the cities of Baqubah and Tikrit. There are few signs, however, that it will be able to sustain the type of offensive that would be necessary to recapture the entire north. The KRG is exploiting that fact to cement its grip over the

territory it has seized.

On Friday, amid the exchange of accusations and insults between Maliki and the Kurdish leadership, Assam Jihad, a spokesperson of the Iraqi oil ministry, announced that Kurdish troops had expelled loyal government managers and workers from the Kirkuk and Bia Hassan oil fields. “These two are among the main wells producing oil in Iraq,” he said. “They are the spine of Iraq’s oil wealth and produce 400,000 barrels a day... We condemn this constitutional breach and violation of Iraq’s sovereignty.”

The KRG has already begun exporting oil extracted from fields inside its territory through a pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The sales are being made in defiance of the central government as well as the United States and the European Union. The main purchaser at this point is Israel, which is reportedly buying the oil at far below world prices, highlighting the motives behind its enthusiasm for a Kurdish state. The clear intent of the KRG is to link the Kirkuk fields to its pipelines and dramatically expand oil production and export.

Further antagonising Baghdad, the KRG has reportedly begun to supply electricity from its power grid to Mosul, raising the prospect that the Kurdish nationalists will seek to permanently partition the city and keep control of the suburbs to the east of the Tigris River.

Barzani has ordered the preparation of a referendum on independence in the areas under the control of the KRG and the peshmerga, including Kirkuk and the other territories they have seized over the past month. No date has been set for a ballot, however, in the face of continuing opposition in Washington to the dismemberment of Iraq.

In a dramatic escalation of tensions, Maliki’s government yesterday issued a directive cancelling all cargo flights in or out of the two main cities in the KRG, the capital Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The prospect looms of Iraqi jet fighters, which are allegedly being flown by Iranian and possibly Russian pilots, seeking to intercept aircraft that defy the order.

Several hours later, Maliki announced that he had removed the Kurdish foreign minister, Hoshyar Zebari, and replaced him with Hussain Shahrastani, one of the most prominent Shiite politicians, who has served in the various Iraqi governments that have been formed

since the US invasion in 2003.

The Iranian regime, which is providing military and political support to Baghdad in its war with the ISIS-led rebellion, has responded to the Kurdish moves with threats. According to *Al Hayat*, a British-based Arabic publication, Iran’s ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danie, met this week with representatives of the Kurdish nationalist parties that rule the KRG. He reportedly told them that Kurdish independence was an “Israeli project that threatens Iran’s national security” and, if it was declared, Tehran would “close all border crossing[s] with Kurdistan and help all Iraqi officials and parties stand against it.”

The aggressive moves against the KRG by Iran and Maliki’s government will inevitably provoke a reaction from Turkey and Israel, whose ruling elites have considerable material interests in the Kurdish region developing as a major oil producer.

There are also growing calls in the US media for the Obama administration to throw its support behind a Kurdish state in response to Iran’s clear influence over the Maliki government, but also to take forward the long-held US perspective of regime-change in Syria and Iran.

Journalist Jonathon Foreman wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on Thursday: “The time has come for America and the West to support Kurdish independence and, simultaneously, to set up US bases in Iraqi Kurdistan that would make it America’s military hub in the region... A new US Air Force base near the Kurdish cities such as Sulaymaniyah or Erbil—both of which already boast airports with suitably long runways—would radically increase American leverage over everyone in the region, in particular Iran and Syria. Both Sulaymaniyah and Erbil are within 600 miles of Tehran.”



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