

Iraqi counter-offensive roils Kurdish Regional Government

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With the backing of Turkey and Iran, Iraq's Shia-dominated central government is expanding its offensive against the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) based in Erbil. Iraqi security forces have already dramatically reduced the territory controlled by the KRG, forcing Kurdish Peshmerga militia to withdraw from Kirkuk and virtually all the other areas outside the KRG that the Peshmerga seized from the Islamic State (ISIS) beginning in 2014.

Now, Baghdad appears determined to take advantage of the crisis precipitated by the KRG's failed bid to create an independent Kurdish state to significantly reduce its autonomy within Iraq.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has vowed Baghdad will take control of the KRG's external borders, placing all international entry points, including airports, under control of forces loyal to the central government. Baghdad is especially anxious to gain control of the border at Faysh Khabur, which is an important conduit for oil exports and lies at the junction of the borders of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Al-Abadi has also called for the Peshmerga to be dramatically downsized or incorporated into the central government's security forces and says Baghdad should control all oil exports and be empowered to audit the KRG's budget.

As the result of last month's loss of oil fields near Kirkuk and smaller fields in Nineveh province, the KRG has already seen its oil-export revenue decline by more than half.

The Peshmerga have thus far retreated in the face of the advance by the larger, better-equipped Iraqi forces. But Peshmerga commanders are now vowing to "choose death" over any further retreat, raising the prospect of bloody clashes that could draw in outside powers, including the US.

Washington has long patronized the KRG, using it as a tool in its drive to assert unbridled domination over the world's most important oil-exporting region. However, it opposed Erbil's independence bid, as it cuts across its plans. The KRG has pushed Baghdad and Turkey into forging closer ties with Tehran at the very moment when Washington is preparing to dramatically intensify military-

strategic pressure on Iran, by intervening more aggressively in Syria and sabotaging the Iran nuclear accord.

In recent days, the US military, which has forces embedded with both the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army, has been trying to broker a truce. But the two sides agree on little, other than that Washington, which has enflamed sectarian tensions as part of a quarter-century of ruinous Middle East wars, is not to be trusted.

Yesterday, Prime Minister al-Abadi accused the KRG of going back on an accord reached last Sunday to pull Peshmerga back from several disputed areas, including a Turkish border post. "If they do not stick to [the agreement] we will do what we want," said al-Abadi, "and if our forces find themselves under fire, we will show them the strength of the law."

Meanwhile, a KRG government adviser accused Baghdad of having "no interest in dialogue," and warned of the mounting "drums of war in Kurdistan."

On September 25, the KRG held an independence referendum, making good on a plan announced last June. In an especially provocative move, it extended the referendum to the ethnically and religiously diverse areas it controlled outside the official KRG boundaries laid out in the constitution imposed on the Iraqi people under the US occupation. Baghdad denounced the referendum as illegal, and Turkey and Iran—both of which have substantial Kurdish minorities—warned the authorities in Erbil that they would not countenance the emergence of an independent Kurdish state on their borders.

Nevertheless, the KRG government plunged ahead, gambling that Washington, despite its public stance of opposition to the referendum, would push Baghdad into talks and use its influence over its NATO ally Turkey to shield Erbil. The ruling Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which has been led by the Barzani family since its creation seven decades ago, has long enjoyed close relations with Washington and Israel. Moreover, the Peshmerga forged close ties with the Pentagon during the campaign against ISIS in Iraq, with Washington and the US media lauding

them as shock troops, while covering up their role in ethnic cleansing along with the even greater war crimes committed by the US military.

The Iraqi counter-offensive against the KRG independence bid has roiled the KDP and the Kurdish elite as a whole.

On Sunday, the KDP's longtime leader, Masoud Barzani, gave an embittered televised speech from the KRG parliament in which he announced he was stepping down as president, after two elected four-year terms and several years of emergency extensions, the last carried out solely on his own authority.

Barzani said, "The Peshmerga and all the people of Kurdistan" had been "stabbed in the back by a poisonous dagger," but claimed the referendum's endorsement of independence "can never be erased."

Deploing the lack of international support for the ethnic partition of Iraq, he said, "The world once again showed that the people of Kurdistan have no friends but themselves and the mountains." He went on to lash out against a long list of reputed enemies of an independent Kurdistan, including Kurdish political rivals.

His denunciation of Washington was particularly pointed. "Our people," said Barzani, "should now question, whether the US was aware of Iraq's attack and why they did not prevent it." Even as he accused the US of betraying the Kurdish people, the outgoing KRG president signaled, with a denunciation of Iran's support for Shia militia allied with the Iraqi military, that he would be more than willing to enlist the KRG and Peshmerga in a US drive against Tehran. "We are befuddled," said Barzani, "that we are being attacked by certain people who are on America's list of terrorists and are using American weapons."

Barzani blamed the Peshmerga's peaceful withdrawal from Kirkuk on forces loyal to the KRG's second largest party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK. While he delivered his speech, some of his supporters were staging a violent demonstration in which they taunted and physically attacked opposition parliamentarians.

Pending long-promised elections, the leading role in KRG's government will now be played by the prime minister, Masoud Barzani's nephew, Nechirvan Barzani. Many, however, expect the former president will continue to pull the levers of power from behind the scenes. His son remains head of the KRG's intelligence apparatus.

The US State Department has called Masoud Barzani's resignation an "act of statesmanship" by an "historic" leader of the Kurdish people and has welcomed the elevation of his nephew. Clearly, Washington's hope is the withdrawal of the KRG leader most closely identified with the independence referendum will help defuse the crisis.

But Washington is increasingly alarmed that Baghdad

appears to be giving short shrift to its calls for a "strong KRG" within a "united Iraq." Such calls of course have nothing to do with securing the Kurdish people their democratic rights, but rather maintaining the KRG as a base for US operations inside Iraq and the broader region.

Lamenting the recent turn of events, John Hannah, a former top aide to US Vice-President Cheney—i.e., one of the war criminals responsible for the 2003 invasion of Iraq—described the KRG as "arguably, the greatest success of the entire US project in Iraq." Hannah told the KRG-based and KDP-aligned Kurdistan 24 television network that, while he thinks the referendum was "ill-timed," "there exists a widespread perception across the Middle East" that "America opted to stand on the sidelines and watch as one of its most loyal wartime allies" was "cowed into submission by forces beholden" to Iran.

Last week, the *New York Times* published an op-ed piece by US Senator John McCain headlined, "We need a new strategy for the Middle East," which deplored the decline in "American power" in the Middle East and attributed this to a US "withdrawal" from the region—i.e., a pulling back from direct US military intervention in Syria in 2013 and from confronting Iran's "malign influence" across the Middle East.

McCain declared it unacceptable that a US-supported and armed government in Baghdad is getting help from Tehran in rolling back the Peshmerga from Kirkuk and other areas they occupied in the name of countering ISIS. "If we keep sleepwalking on our current trajectory," said the Republican war-hawk, "we could wake up in the near future and find that American influence has been pushed out of one of the most important parts of the world. That is why Americans need to care about what is going on in the Middle East right now. That is why we need to stick with our true friends, like the Kurds."

In recent days, prominent congressional leaders, Democrats as well as Republicans, have implied the possibility of deploying US troops to prevent a "massacre" of the Kurds. "I think we need to intervene," the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Devin Nunes, told the *Washington Examiner*.

"We should make sure there is no massacre," said the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Eliot Engel, "and I think that if the last resort would be to send troops or safeguards, I think we should consider it."



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