

Between Ankara and Tehran: How the Scramble for Kurdistan Can Reshape Regional Relations

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On June 30, 2014, President Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) made the historic announcement that he would seek a formal referendum on Kurdish independence. Barzani's announcement came after the June 2014 advance into northern Iraq by the jihadist forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had effectively eliminated Iraqi government control over the provinces bordering the KRG. As Iraq's army abandoned its positions north of Baghdad, the KRG's Peshmerga advanced into the "disputed territories" beyond the KRG's formal boundaries and took control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, the jewel in the crown of Iraqi Kurdish territorial ambitions. Thus, the Barzani-led KRG calculated it had attained the necessary political and economic conditions to contemplate outright independence. Asserting Iraq had been effectively "partitioned" and that "conditions are right," the KRG President declared, "From now on, we will not hide that the goal of Kurdistan is independence."¹

The viability of an independent Kurdish state will ultimately depend on the Barzani government's ability to recalibrate its relations with its two powerful neighbors, Turkey and Iran. This, in turn, depends on the ability of Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) to preserve its hegemony over Iraqi Kurdistan in the face of challenges posed by its Iraqi political rival, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), and the Turkish-based PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Barzani's objective to preserve the KDP's authority from these threats forms one of the main drivers behind his

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independence bid. Since Barzani's announcement, ISIS (renamed the Islamic State, or IS) launched a war against the Kurds in Iraq's disputed territories. After several Kurdish defeats in July 2014, Kurdish forces, with Western military support, recaptured some of the lost territory the following month. Although IS momentum has been halted, the KDP's political position has been complicated by the battlefield successes of PKK-affiliated forces fighting on Iraqi soil and Iranian military support for the PUK. These developments have created opportunities for the formation of an alternative Kurdish political authority over parts of Iraqi Kurdistan.

This article will assess the impact of these developments on the KRG's independence bid. It analyzes whether and to what extent Turkey and Iran can leverage their relations with the KDP's rivals to prevent Kurdish independence or to constrain an independent Kurdish government from exercising autonomy in its foreign relations.

KRG Independence and the Challenge of the PKK's Pan-Kurdish Agenda

Through its management of the KRG's booming economy, the KDP has become Iraqi Kurdistan's predominant party. In the 2013 KRG parliamentary elections, President Barzani's KDP increased its plurality to 38 seats out of 100. The PUK managed to earn only 18 seats, placing third behind the KDP and the Movement for Change (Gorran), indicating the party's declining prospects in an independent KRG.² The PUK's poor electoral showing also reflected the fact that much of the PUK's Kurdish support lies in the disputed territories beyond the KRG's formal political boundaries: in Iraq's April 2014 parliamentary elections, the PUK earned the same number of seats as the KDP and twice as many as Gorran due to the PUK's electoral strength in the disputed territories, especially Kirkuk. Unless the PUK can ensure that its enclaves in the disputed territories are included in an independent Kurdistan, the PUK has little political incentive for independence. With the July 24, 2014 selection of PUK senior member Fouad Massoum to succeed PUK founder Jalal Talabani as Iraq's President, the PUK continues to hold the Iraqi presidency. Nonetheless, the PUK will find it difficult to oppose popular enthusiasm for independence. To avoid being outmaneuvered by a Barzani-sponsored referendum, the PUK may align more closely with the PKK to supplant the KDP through a pan-Kurdish agenda.

The PKK's pan-Kurdish strategy developed in response to Turkey's 1999 capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and the KRG's reemergence

after Barzani and Talabani signed the 1998 Washington Agreement, which ended a four year KDP-PUK civil war. To outflank the KDP-led KRG, the PKK established affiliated parties in the three other regions of greater Kurdistan – the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party in Iraq in 2002, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in 2003, and the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) in Iran in 2004. Öcalan then promulgated his 2005 “Declaration of a Democratic Confederalism,” envisioning a confederation of four autonomous Kurdish regions, each simultaneously in a federal relationship with the particular state in which it exists. While the PKK’s Iraqi affiliate has failed to generate any support, the PYD and PJAK have advanced the PKK’s greater Kurdistan agenda. PJAK is the only Kurdish organization with fighters operating in Iranian Kurdistan, while the PYD has established three autonomous cantons in Syrian Kurdistan. Reflecting the PKK’s confederalist agenda, the PYD refers to its cantons as Rojavayê Kurdistanê (“Western Kurdistan”) or more commonly Rojava (“the West”), undermining the KRG’s authority with the implication that Iraqi Kurdistan is simply Bashur (“the South”) and belongs in a pan-Kurdish confederation. In April 2014, the KRG dug a 17 km trench between the PYD’s cantons and Kurdish areas in Iraq, ostensibly to prevent ISIS fighters in Syria from crossing into Iraq. PKK-affiliated media denounced the trench as Barzani’s venal attempt to divide Rojava from Bashur, demonstrating the KRG’s betrayal of greater Kurdistan.³ With checkpoints manned by armed Peshmerga, the KRG’s border trench successfully deterred the PYD from expanding its political authority to the adjacent Kurdish areas inside Iraq.

The Kurdish populations of Syria and Iraq, respectively, constitute approximately 10 and 15 percent of greater Kurdistan, while Turkey’s Kurdish population constitutes 55 percent. In late August, Öcalan and the Turkish government reportedly agreed on several key points for a political roadmap leading to a peace agreement.⁴ If Öcalan’s negotiations with Turkey succeed in providing Turkish Kurdistan or Bakur (“the North”) with some semblance of autonomy, the PKK/PYD would dominate approximately two-thirds of the greater Kurdistan population. For Barzani, whose KDP holds a commanding electoral plurality in the KRG parliament, the prospect of PKK-governed Kurdish autonomous regions in Turkey and Syria allied with PUK-dominated Iraqi Kurdish enclaves would raise the unpalatable prospect that the KDP would be pressured to subsume the KRG under a greater Kurdistan confederation dominated by a PKK-PUK coalition.

Barzani faces a separate challenge from acting PKK leader Cemil Bayik, who remains hostile to Ankara and favors alignment with Tehran.⁵ In April 2014, speaking before the PKK's pan-Kurdish organization the Kurdistan National Congress, Bayik underlined his position that the PKK's all-Kurdistan agenda is best served by aligning with Iran's support for the Shiite government in Baghdad and the Alawite government in Damascus.⁶ Bayik's position enjoys widespread support, as PKK guerrillas and the PYD's People's Protection Units (YPG) have been defending Rojava from ISIS and al-Qaeda attacks abetted by Turkey. Bayik is now seeking to capitalize on the PKK/YPG battlefield successes in Iraq to extend PKK/PYD control to Kurdish areas in Iraq's disputed territories. With PKK and YPG fighters joining the Tehran-backed PUK in the key battle for Jalawla near the Iranian border, the KDP finds itself facing an additional Tehran-oriented, PKK pan-Kurdish threat to its hegemony in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Impact of the Islamic State's War against the Kurds

Kurdish exuberance over President Barzani's June 30 announcement dissipated when the KRG failed to defend its positions in the disputed territories from IS attacks. The IS militants overran Kurdish positions, using armored vehicles and heavy weapons abandoned by the Iraqi Army's 2nd Division, including 52 M198 howitzers and a number of American-made tanks.⁷ The KRG's Peshmerga, traditionally a light infantry force, could not resist IS superior firepower. Kurdish forces were subsequently able to retake Makhmur, Gwer, and the Mosul Dam because US airstrikes destroyed IS artillery pieces and other assets.⁸

The Peshmerga's initial setbacks constituted both a political blessing and curse for the KRG. Western powers initiated direct military cooperation with the KRG and military aid began arriving from Europe on August 15, 2014. France, Italy, Denmark, Hungary, and Albania sent weapons and advisors, while other NATO member states have promised to send military support. On September 1, Germany began sending Erbil a \$91 million military aid package consisting of enough weapons and equipment for a 4,000 soldier brigade, including 200 Panzerfaust 3 shoulder-fired, anti-tank weapons and 30 Milan anti-tank weapons.⁹ Western military aid to Erbil has been a political windfall for Barzani, who is now conducting his own defense relations with Western powers and is unlikely to relinquish this critical aspect of statehood to Baghdad.

To Barzani's political detriment, however, the Peshmerga's initial defeats against IS created the opportunity for PKK and YPG guerrillas to fight on Iraqi soil. The KDP-led KRG now faces a political threat from the expanded military presence of PKK/YPG forces in Iraq's disputed territories. The recapture of Makhmur is indicative of the KRG's dilemma. Strategically situated between Mosul and Kirkuk, Makhmur, home to over 10,000 Kurdish refugees who had fled Turkey in the 1990s as Turkish military operations attempted to clear Kurdish villages of PKK sympathizers, was under de facto Kurdish control until it was captured by IS. With the assistance of US airstrikes, a coalition of KDP and PUK special forces and PKK guerrillas retook the city. The PKK guerrillas' combat effectiveness played a significant role in the battle,¹⁰ and Kurdish media heralded the PKK fighters as the heroes of Makhmur and genuine patriots of greater Kurdistan. Reading popular sentiment, President Barzani visited the PKK's Makhmur camp to thank the PKK fighters personally,¹¹ yet Barzani's bonhomie belies a deep-seated fear of a PKK attempt to expand its influence in Makhmur and other parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. This fear has already materialized in Sinjar following the Kurdish recapture of the region.

YPG fighters created a corridor from Rojava to Mount Sinjar in northwestern Iraq to rescue 10,000 besieged Kurdish Yazidis. Kurdish social media images of PKK and YPG fighters rescuing terrified Yazidis from IS militants intent on genocide earned the PKK widespread appreciation and enhanced its pan-Kurdistan status. Exploiting its newfound prestige, the PKK is attempting to establish a permanent presence on Mount Sinjar. Outside the KRG's formal boundaries, Sinjar is located near the border with PYD-controlled Rojava. The KRG has accused the PKK/YPG of obstructing aid deliveries to the Yazidis and preventing them from returning to their homes in order to create a PKK-affiliated Yazidi enclave on Mount Sinjar.¹² Regardless of whether the claims of coercion are accurate, the KRG is potentially confronted with a fourth PYD-controlled canton in Sinjar.

PKK fighters are also assisting PUK efforts against IS in Jalawla, strategically situated between the Hamrin Mountains and the Kurdish town of Khanaqin on the Iranian border.¹³ PUK-PKK cooperation in Jalawla is a particularly worrisome development for the KDP-led KRG. By linking Khanaqin via Jalawla northwest to Makhmur and then further to the greater Sinjar region, the KDP's rivals could create a contiguous PUK-PKK controlled region in the disputed territories running parallel to the KRG's formal boundary. Such a de facto alternative Kurdish entity would extend from

the Iranian border to PYD-controlled Rojava, creating a corridor for PKK activity from Syria to Iran. The PUK-dominated Kirkuk would be at the center of this PUK-PKK corridor. Given Tehran's good relations with both the PUK and the PKK, Iranian support for a rival Kurdish entity in Iraq constitutes Tehran's only means of preventing the KDP-led KRG from creating a viable independent state.

Iran's Pan-Kurdish Power Play: A PKK-PUK Alliance

Iran's initial response to President Barzani's announcement came in the form of excoriating denouncements by Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, presiding board member of the Islamic Republic's Assembly of Experts, and a stern warning from Iran's deputy foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, not to jeopardize the Tehran-oriented, Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad.¹⁴ Yet when IS overran Kurdish positions in Iraq's disputed territories, Iran rushed weapons and advisors to the PUK to prevent IS militants from reaching the Iranian border. With Iran's initial attempt to position itself as the regional leader in the fight against IS obviated in mid-August by the arrival of Western military aid to Erbil, Tehran is supporting the PUK to meet three objectives: 1) preventing US airstrikes in the disputed territories along the Iranian border; 2) preventing combat participation by Iranian Kurdish fighters in those areas; and 3) preventing the KDP from supplanting the PUK.

While Iran's interior minister has acknowledged the presence of Iranian advisors, Kurdish and Turkish media reports repeatedly allege the presence of Iranian soldiers in eastern Iraq.¹⁵ Whether advisors or a larger contingent of soldiers, the Iranian military presence may have deterred the expansion of US airstrikes near the Iranian border. When fighters from the Iranian Kurdish parties attempted to join frontline positions in Jalawla, Peshmerga commanders allegedly ordered the Iranian Kurdish fighters to return to their original positions to avoid encountering Iranian troops.¹⁶ The earlier Kurdish efforts to expel IS from Makhmur and Gwer, both located further away from the Iranian border, benefited from US airstrikes and the participation of KDP-I fighters.¹⁷ The participation of the KDP's Iranian affiliate alarmed Tehran, as the KDP-I's military wing had remained dormant ever since the KDP renounced military action in Iran to prevent reprisal attacks on the KRG. Unconfirmed Kurdish media reports describe armed clashes between KDP-I Peshmerga and Iranian soldiers in Iraqi locations near the Iranian border, with the Iranian army sustaining casualties from KDP-I fighters.¹⁸

Tehran, which has generally succeeded in containing the scale of PJAK operations, is eager to prevent PJAK – which claims to maintain approximately 3,000 militants¹⁹ – from expanding its operations in Iran. In 2011, Tehran deployed 5,000 soldiers on its border with Iraqi Kurdistan to suppress PJAK operations.²⁰ On June 23, 2014 Iran claimed to have wounded or killed several PJAK members transporting munitions across the border into Iranian Kurdistan.²¹ The PKK has publically directed PJAK to work through peaceful democratic means to secure Kurdish rights in Iran. This directive, issued by Öcalan and mirroring his engagement with Turkish authorities, is also congruent with Cemil Bayık's attempt to keep the PKK more aligned with Iran.

To offset Turkish influence over Iraqi Kurdistan through Ankara's close relationship with Barzani, Iran will support the PUK's deepening its relationship with Bayık's PKK and the PYD. Unless Barzani can mollify Tehran, Iran will accept pan-Kurdish cooperation from Khanaqin to Rojava to the extent that it undermines the KDP-led KRG and does not threaten the authority of Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi's new government. To this end, Iran may utilize its 81st Armored Division stationed directly across the border from Khanaqin.²² Experienced in counter-insurgency operations against Iranian Kurds, this division possesses a significant number of M60-A1 tanks that would tilt the balance of forces in Jalawla in favor of the PUK.

Tehran has no viable military option against a self-declared independent KRG, especially now that Erbil is receiving Western military aid. In contrast to Iran's intervention in Syria, intervention in an independent KRG would result in attacks on Iranian soil. Tehran's termination of Iran's \$4 billion cross-border trade with the KRG would impact negatively on Iran's economy and stimulate even deeper economic ties between Ankara and Erbil. Iran's only means to disrupt KRG efforts to create a viable independent state would be to encourage internecine conflict between the Kurdish parties by supporting an alternative Kurdish entity under PUK-PKK authority.

Turkey's Almost Grand Strategy for Kurdistan

Turkey's AKP government has cultivated its relationship with Barzani's KRG and prefers Erbil to remain closer to Ankara than to a Tehran-aligned government in Baghdad. The KRG's continued oil exports via Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan highlight the economic benefit to Turkey of an Iraqi Kurdish political entity sufficiently autonomous to market its energy independent of Iraqi central government control. Ankara's drive to

become an energy transportation hub incorporates plans for KRG oil and natural gas. Turkey's new \$5.6 billion STAR oil refinery is being constructed with the capability to refine Kirkuk grade crude oil. The manufacture of high value petroleum products at reduced cost using Kurdish oil is expected to help Turkey cut its dependence on imported diesel and jet fuel.²³ Most critically, the KRG has the potential to export 10 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas to Turkey as early as 2020.²⁴ Since Turkey's domestic natural gas consumption has already more than tripled, jumping from 15 bcm in 2000 to 46 bcm in 2010, Kurdish natural gas is of considerable importance for Turkey's energy security.

Turkey-KRG energy relations have already altered Ankara's strategic posture toward the KRG. Kirkuk is home to a sizable Turkmen population and the expansion of Kurdish control over the city had been an important red line for Turkish foreign policy. To the dismay of Turkish nationalists, the AKP government has quietly acceded to KRG control of Kirkuk. On June 28, 2014, two days prior to President Barzani's referendum announcement, then-deputy chairman of Turkey's ruling AKP Hüseyin Çelik indicated to the *Financial Times* that Turkey would not oppose KRG independence. With then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the midst of a campaign to become Turkey's first directly elected president, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç disavowed Çelik's remarks, assuaging right wing nationalist voters that Turkey supports Iraq's territorial integrity and expects the status of Kirkuk to remain unchanged.²⁵

Prior to the elections, Erdoğan sought to expand his voter base among Turkey's Kurds, who account for approximately 20 percent of Turkey's population. The centerpiece of Erdoğan's "Kurdish opening" was the ongoing peace negotiations with the imprisoned Abdullah Öcalan. Halting a thirty year insurgency that has cost over 40,000 lives, the peace talks have enjoyed broad public support. Given Öcalan's confederalist agenda, the AKP government's negotiations with the PKK could result in a Turkish grand strategy for Kurdistan whereby the KRG remains sufficiently autonomous to continue energy exports to Turkey but is constrained from outright independence by being subsumed into a pan-Kurdish confederation. The KRG and Rojava would become part of a de facto greater Kurdistan client state serving as a buffer between Turkey's southern border and the remaining portions of Syria and Iraq. However, the AKP's top priority is gaining a sufficient majority in Turkey's June 2015 parliamentary elections to alter Turkey's constitution to transform Erdoğan's largely ceremonial office

into a presidential position with strong executive powers. Erdoğan secured his margin of victory in Turkey's August 10, 2014 presidential elections through a successful eleventh hour appeal to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) voter base.²⁶ Given the presidential voting patterns, the AKP cannot meet Kurdish expectations for some form of local autonomy and full language rights without jeopardizing its support among nationalist voters.

Short of rehabilitating Öcalan as a rival to Barzani through an AKP-PKK peace agreement, Ankara's only genuine lever over Erbil is that Turkey constitutes the only export outlet for the KRG's oil. However Ankara's actual ability to use this lever is quite limited. Turkish companies have been profiting from Erbil's economic boom, with approximately 1,200 Turkish firms operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. After Germany, Iraq constitutes Turkey's largest export market, with a significant portion of the \$12 billion in Turkish exports sold to the KRG.²⁷ Turkey can ill afford to sacrifice its current economic relations with the KRG or future imports of KRG natural gas by closing its oil pipeline to Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, as Turkey's Islamist-oriented AKP government enjoys relations only with Barzani's conservative KDP and none of the other Kurdish parties, geopolitically it cannot afford pushing the KDP closer to Iran.

Conclusion: Kurdistan's Azerbaijani Outcome

In late August 2014, President Barzani issued his terms for joining the Iraqi government. Refusing to return to the status quo ante, Barzani insisted on the KRG's right to sell its own oil and gas, to conduct its own arms purchases, and to organize referendums in the disputed territories on joining the Kurdistan Region.²⁸ The KRG is already exercising the first two powers. Baghdad's accession to Barzani's demands would enshrine the KRG's de facto semi-independence within the legal framework of an Iraqi confederation. The third demand on organizing referendums is designed to assist the KRG to retain control over Kirkuk and other sensitive areas. If the al-Abadi government refuses this demand, the PUK will find it difficult to remain in the Iraqi federal government without risking its support in the disputed territories.

Ultimately, the exact timing of a KRG referendum on independence is likely to be influenced by battlefield developments against the Islamic State. The Erbil government needs to use its present semi-independence to develop the necessary military doctrine, training, and leadership to transform the Peshmerga into a capable national army. The Western military

advisors sent to Erbil are already contributing to this task. Concurrent with his issuance of terms to the Iraqi government, President Barzani formally requested the KRG's Peshmerga minister to place all forces under a unified command structure.²⁹ Basing his request on a KRG parliamentary report on the Peshmerga's battlefield failures, President Barzani will also implement the report's recommendation to establish a security council under his supervision, thereby assuming the powers of commander-in-chief with KRG parliamentary authorization.³⁰ As commander-in-chief, Barzani can supervise the KRG's acquisition of heavy weapons and air defenses to counter Baghdad and Tehran. The anti-tank weapons Erbil is already receiving will also help the KRG defend itself from Iraq's M1-A1 tanks or Iran's 81st Armored Division's older M60-A1 tanks. The 96 US airstrikes conducted during August 8-26, 2014 that assisted Kurdish forces in halting IS advances required approximately 600 attack sorties.³¹ If taken as the benchmark for the KRG's air combat requirements against IS, the KRG could meet its needs with 72 UAVs. To counter an Iraqi or Iranian air threat, the KRG would need to acquire a medium range surface-to-air missile system. Such systems could be acquired through the KRG's developing relations with Western powers, or from Israel, or from Russia. With fighter pilots requiring approximately four years of training and helicopter pilots two and a half years, the KRG needs to acquire an advanced capability immediately while developing pilots for a future Kurdish air force.

Under such circumstances both Baghdad and Tehran would find the cost of military intervention to prevent Kurdish independence too prohibitive. If Erbil can demonstrate a sufficient deterrent capability, Tehran would likely accept Kurdish independence in the manner it has come to accept Azerbaijan. Although hostile to the secular government in Baku and suspicious of Azerbaijan's intentions toward Iran's large Azeri population, Tehran has come to an accommodation with Azerbaijan as Baku has succeeded in resisting Tehran's earlier destabilization attempts. KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's April 24, 2014 visit to Iran resulted in an agreement between Erbil and Tehran to construct twin oil and gas pipelines running from the KRG to Iran, indicating that Tehran may also be incentivized to accept a Kurdish state that does not threaten its immediate interests.

While continued battlefield successes of PKK/PYD forces and Iranian support for the PUK may drive the KDP-led KRG to hasten its independence bid, they will not deter the KRG from achieving independence. If the KRG succeeds in creating a unified military command structure, neither Turkey

nor Iran will be able to leverage other Kurdish actors to restrain Erbil's conduct of foreign policy. To avoid becoming a client state of Turkey while simultaneously ensuring its capabilities vis-à-vis Iran, an independent Kurdistan is likely to deepen its relations with Israel. Like Azerbaijan, an independent Kurdistan between Ankara and Tehran will find an enduring relationship with Israel to be vital to securing its national interests.

Disputed Areas in Iraq Prior to the 2014 Northern Iraq Offensive



- Non-disputed and part of the KRG since 1991.
- Disputed and part of the KRG since 1991.
- Disputed and under the control of central government.

Source: Disputed Areas in Iraq CC. By-SA 3.0, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_Kurdistan#mediaviewer/File:Disputed_areas_in_Iraq.svg.

Glossary

- KRG** – Kurdish Regional Government
KDP – Kurdish Democratic Party [Iraqi Kurdistan]
KDP-I – Kurdish Democratic Party-Iran [KDP's Iranian affiliate]
PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [Iraqi Kurdistan]
PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party [Turkish Kurdistan]
PYD – Democratic Union Party [PKK's Syrian affiliate]
YPG – People's Protection Units [PYD militia forces]
PJAK – Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan [PKK's Iranian affiliate]

Notes

This article was written before the Battle of Kobane.

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