

# ORSAM REVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

No.58, JANUARY 2017



## IRAN AND BARZANI: WORSENING RELATIONS AND THE RISK OF AN INEVITABLE CLASH?

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The relations between Iran and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) have recently experienced a considerable amount of tension. Iranian officials have given Masud Barzani, the president of KRG, stern warnings that they would not tolerate any act which they view as a threat to their national security. In this analysis, it is argued that this escalation on the part of Iran is an important component of Iran's desire to accomplish a complete control on all Iraqi groups and to recruit Kurdish groups for its hegemonic and expansionist policies in the Middle East. Iran has also a major security concern regarding the region which results in a higher tendency to penetrate the KRG affairs politically, economically, and militarily. The goal of such policies is to prevent the KRG region from being used by its major adversaries, namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and the US and to gain a secure foothold in the KRG region that has a 400-mile border with Iran.

## Historical Dimension of the Conflict

Taking advantage of the economic interests, political ties and security needs, in the last two decades, Iran has consolidated its position as one of the key players in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Its relations with the Kurdish groups were based on a policy of balancing one against the other, and preventing the emergence of a unified and powerful party or a leader which might defy its influence.<sup>1</sup> Still, due to historic and geographic reasons, Iran has built a close relationship with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), centered in the Sulemaniyah region near the Iranian border. Iran has also cemented strong ties with PUK-breakaway party Gorran (Change). These strong ties enabled Iran to play a leading role in the power-sharing arrangement between the rival Kurdish factions in 2014. The growing ties with Gorran reinforced Iran's political influence at a time when the PUK's power seemed to be waning.<sup>2</sup> The KDP's antipathy toward Iran is decades old. During the Kurdish civil war of the 1990s, Iran sided with the PUK, while the KDP asked Turkey for support. In addition, KDP founder Mulla Mustafa Barzani fostered close ties with Israel in the 1960s and 1970s with which Iran was not pleased. The KDP under Barzani's son Masud has continues to maintain secret communications with Israel, which has caught the attention of the Islamic Republic of Iran. After the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, Iran's close ties with the Shi-ite-dominated central government in Baghdad have also put it at odds with the KRG under the rule of KDP.<sup>3</sup>

Although both KDP leadership and Iranian leadership do not trust each other, even at times of strained relations, they keep channels of communication open and give the appearance of being friendly with each other. For example,

in August 2015, when the crisis of presidential succession erupted in KRG, Iranian leaders, including Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, came out in support of President Barzani to help him remain in the office. However, once Barzani's term expired and violent anti-KDP protests erupted in PUK-areas, KDP media blamed Iran for instigating violence against the party, and for bringing together the PUK and Gorran against the KDP.<sup>4</sup>

### **Factors Straining Ties with Iran**

Masud Barzani's reluctance to be a part of the orbit that Iran has built for its domination of the Middle East is a major reason for the Iranian displeasure with the KRG. After US withdrawal from Iraq in August 2010 and Barack Obama's policy of informal withdrawal from the Middle East, Iran was ready to fill the power vacuum. Since then, Iran's influence is believed to have grown throughout the Middle East. Its armed proxies and different elements of its military and intelligence apparatus advance Iran's interests in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Iran's newly aggressive and activist policies in the Middle East are a great concern for the governments in the region and beyond. Several Sunni countries in the region, most notably Saudi Arabia, continue to rally the Sunni forces in the area to counter Tehran's ambitions for expansion.<sup>5</sup> Currently, Iran has a conviction that Masud Barzani is 'part of the Saudi-led axis of power' and being used as a tool to destabilize Iran and to damage its interests abroad.

There are several reasons which gave birth to this conviction among the Iranian leadership. Though Iran and Barzani have clear interests in the bilateral relationship, there are inherent complications that do not seem to disappear in

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the foreseeable future. The KRG is not about to turn its back on the United States, and will continue to have a close relationship with Turkey.<sup>6</sup> The same is true for the KDP's relationship with Israel, too. Ayub Nuri, a Kurdish writer from the KRG, was quoted saying "Kurds are deeply sympathetic to Israel and an independent Kurdistan will be beneficial to Israel...It will create a balance of power. Right now, Israel is one country against many. But with an independent Kurdish state, first of all, Israel will have a genuine friend in the region for the first time, and second, Kurdistan will be like a buffer zone in the face of Turkey, Iran and Iraq."<sup>7</sup> A Western-oriented Kurdistan could present a difficult challenge to Iranian ambitions in the region. Tehran's forces and allies continue to fight for control of Iraq and Syria, and Hezbollah has become the dominant political force in Lebanon. One Israeli scholar has argued that "The Kurdistan Region, and the *de facto* independent Kurds in Syria, sit at the heart of the Iranian/Shiite axis, and the last thing Tehran wants is

for a Western ally threatening its growing hegemony in the region.”<sup>8</sup>

In December 2015, Barzani visited the Gulf States and during the tour, he was given a warm and official welcome and treated as a state leader.<sup>9</sup> This was followed by many activities in the region which caught the attention of the Iranians. Thereafter, several Kurdish organizations, delegations, and religious personalities visited Saudi Arabia. The activities of Saudi Consul in Erbil were regarded too conspicuous by the Iranian government.<sup>10</sup>

Besides, during 2015, the fighters of Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), who ceased their armed resistance against Iran for 20 years, have suddenly begun a new wave of military attacks on the Iranian revolutionary guard positions on the border region adjacent to the KRG. This infuriated the Iranians and the government contends that Iranian Kurdish militants have been receiving Saudi money. Mohsen Rezai, the former head of the Revolutionary Guards, argued that “[Saudi Arabia] gives money to any anti-revolutionary who comes near the border and says ‘Go carry out operations,’”<sup>11</sup> Iran believes that Masud Barzani’s forces are providing logistical support for the KDPI militants. IRGC Ground Forces Commander Brig. Gen. Mohammad Pakpour, in this respect, argued that “KDP and Masud Barzani are responsible for those hostile acts against Iran.” He stated, “I warn officials in northern Iraq to abide by their commitments... We will destroy any threat against the Islamic Republic’s [political] system without any hesitation.”<sup>12</sup>

It appears that the Iranians have already inaugurated a forward engaging policy line in the KRG to target Barzani and his allies in KDPI. On December 20, 2016, 7 people

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were killed and 4 were injured in a twin bomb attack targeting KDPI, in Koya, a small town to the east of Erbil city. Observers believe that Iran is behind such developments in the region, in an effort to force Barzani to follow its policy line in Iraq. Khalid Azizi, secretary general of KDPI, and Hosyar Zebari, an influential Kurdish politician and Iraq's former Foreign Minister pointed at Iran as the culprit behind the attack, too.<sup>13</sup>

Others have attributed this latest escalation on the part of Iran against Barzani to the latter's reluctance to sign the pipeline deal to transfer KRG oil via Iran to the Persian Gulf to be exported from there to the international markets. The KRG representative in Tehran, Nazim Dabagh, described the plans for a pipeline as part of Iran's overall policy to create economic interdependence between Iran and the KRG. Dabagh told Rudaw that "probably this ...is within the context of efforts being made by Iran to connect Kirkuk, Kurdistan Region, and all Iraq to Iran."<sup>14</sup>

Iran is also pursuing an intensive activist policy in reaching all segments of the KRG society in what is known in the KRG as the green zone –the area of KRG under the military and political control of the PUK and Gorran. During the last two years, Iranian universities began to sponsor joint programs with the KRG universities in the green zone. High level educational delegations have exchanged views on how to increase KRG students studying in Iran. Besides, in December 2016, Iranian consulate, in coordination with several Kurdish religious scholars and with the support of PUK officials, held a gathering named “Shafi Conference” in Sulaymaniyah. This was attended by Ayotollah Khamanei’s personal envoy. The conference was condemned by the KRG Foreign Relation Office, which was not informed about it and viewed it as a violation of its jurisdiction in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Iranian trade delegations have been making frequent trips to Sulaymaniyah. The value of the bilateral trade between Iran and KRG was worth only \$100 million in 2000. On the eve of the DAESH offensive on KRG in 2014, it approached \$4 billion annually. This is expected to be doubled in few years.<sup>16</sup> In August 2014, the two sides agreed to improve trade and energy ties during a meeting between the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and a visiting Iranian trade delegation. Economic interactions between Iran and the KRG considerably increased in this new stage, and Iran became the second largest trade partner of the KRG after Turkey. Iran has pursued many traditional and untraditional policies to increase KRG’s economic dependence on it. While Iran has been unable to dislodge its historic rival Turkey as the KRG’s leading trading partner, Iranian goods dominate the PUK areas close to the Iran-Iraq border.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Turkey, which has only two gateways to the KRG, Iran

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has three customs gates, namely Bashmakh, Parviz Khan, and Haji Omran. Iranian provincial administrations, specifically those adjacent to the border, are delegated power to establish direct contacts with their Iraqi Kurdish counterparts in order to boost bilateral trade transactions, and cultural and political relations. Hence, economic and cultural bonds between the local authorities are improved.

Energy issues constitute a remarkable part of the bilateral economic relations. Due to the disagreements between the KRG and Baghdad over the management and marketing of hydrocarbon resources, Kurdish officials have decided to link the region to Iran through twin pipelines; one for pumping crude to refineries in Iran, and another for the transfer of refined oil back to the KRG. “Yet, Iran’s economic ambitions in the region are still not fulfilled, as they wish to overtake Turkey as the prime beneficiary.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Feud with Baghdad**

In the past, Iran had benefited from the Kurdish rebellions in the Northern Iraq. Since the fall of the rule of Saddam

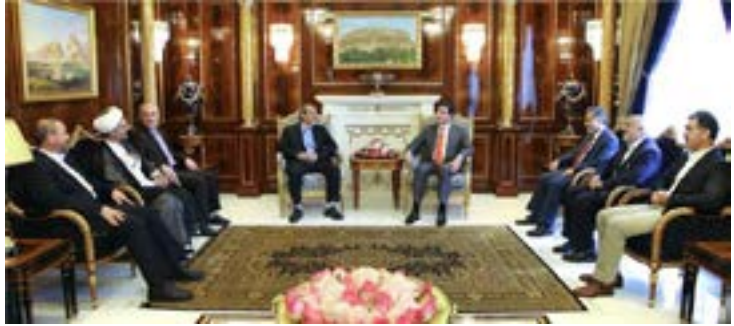


Hussein, the situation has changed. The current government in Baghdad is regarded by many as being pro-Tehran. Iran has been concerned about the growth of the pro-independence tendency in the KRG. Barzani is the main figure which is leading this movement. Iranian officials are not at pains to show their objection to Barzani's moves in this regard. Iranian government views the Iraqi Kurds' desire for independence with great concern, because of its possible effect on its own Kurdish population, speculated to be as high as 10 million. They warned Barzani that as far as they are concerned, an independent Kurdistan is a red line for Iran.<sup>19</sup>

According to some analysts, the recent escalation between Barzani and Iran is a part of a plan by the latter to have a regime in post-DAESH Iraq, which will be in line with Iran's policy for the creation of a Shiite crescent in the Middle East. According to the observers on the scene in Baghdad, Iran still wants to replace Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi, who is a liberal-minded leader and has close ties to the US, with Mr. al-Maliki, who is seen closer to Iran's circle. Barzani is bitterly opposed to this policy. Recently Barzani told London-based al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper, "Should Maliki return to power, I will declare independence."<sup>20</sup>

However, Shireen T. Hunter, a professor of international relations at Georgetown University, in an interview with Iran Wire, has shed some doubt about Barzani's independence rhetoric and she links it with the feud with Baghdad. She further claimed that "Masoud Barzani knows that his plan would not be realized but he is a good political player." According to Hunter, Barzani is using Iran's anxieties over Kurdish independence to extract concessions that he wants. Barzani is trying to pressure Iran to stop supporting "al-Maliki who is despised in Iraqi Kurdistan and allow a more nationalist and secular Shi'a to replace him."<sup>21</sup>

Some observers even speculate that there is risk Iran may resort to the campaign of frequent bombing of border towns and positions in the KRG, particularly considering the presence of the KDPI in those areas.



Iranian leaders believe that al-Maliki has more vigor and readiness to deal with the Sunni and Kurdish irredentism and to pursue policies which will be in line with Iran's policy objectives. In fact, al-Maliki has been involved in intensive efforts to assist Iran in isolating Barzani from other Kurdish groups in the KRG.<sup>22</sup>

### **An Inevitable Confrontation?**

For these reasons, the relationship between the KRG and Iran has been suffering from a quite high level of tension. If that tension is not managed, it could further accelerate. Some observers even speculate that there is risk Iran may resort to the campaign of frequent bombing of border towns and positions in the KRG, particularly considering the presence of the KDPI in those areas. Iran has many levers over Barzani, which it may not hesitate in near future to use in order to destabilize KRG. The KRG region is already politically fragmented and polarized, due to the presidential succession crisis, which Iran has meddled in to further complicate. Iran could also move to manipulate the economic crisis in the KRG for its own advantage. The economic dependence of green zone region of the KRG on Iran, combined with the latter's extensive intelligence network, makes the KRG very

vulnerable for the eruption of social instability. Moreover, the battle for Mosul is coming to an end, and there is a risk the militia from the predominantly Shiite groups in Iraq may engage Barzani forces, either in Kirkuk or Mosul under various pretexts. Should this to happen, the internally politically fragmented KRG will not be any match to this challenge. This may further exacerbate the internal conflict within the KRG to the point of explosion and this might engender a situation similar to the one in the 1990s: the PUK-led green zone versus Barzani-led yellow zone. Under such circumstances, Turkey might find itself once again dragged into the KRG to support Barzani against a possible alliance between the PUK and PKK. This may risk escalating into a possible confrontation with Iran, too.

To sum up, the tension between Barzani and Iran is escalating and the possibility of further confrontation between them is high. Nevertheless, even though Iran or the central government in Baghdad may try to destabilize the KRG, the Trump administration seems to oppose such an aggression. Only two weeks ago, the US authorities warned the combined PKK and Shiite militia in Sinjar that they would not tolerate any aggression on the KRG. The Trump administration is highly likely to stand behind its campaign-time promises and back the KRG in a possible confrontation.

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