

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq's relationship with Baghdad, the US, Turkey, and Itself.

ASHRAF BINENDAH'S INTERVIEW WITH DR GINA LENNOX

With Kurdistan losing its oil income due to the closure of the pipeline to Ceyhan, how can KRG manage its financial affairs? Even if oil exports resume, according to the new budget bill, Baghdad now controls Kurdish oil and border gates. What are the effects of these on the KRG structure in the future?

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will find it difficult to manage its financial affairs without oil and gas exports, and custom duties, especially as Baghdad regularly cuts off the KRG's revenue distribution for weeks, months or years at a time. Having lived under a socialist system since the 1960s, in the last 18 years, the KRG, KDP and PUK-dominated provincial administrations, and people outside the government have failed to establish a diversified economy that could sufficiently withstand forgoing these revenue sources. Instead of prioritising private investment and entrepreneurship in diverse small to medium scale enterprises, the KRG has relied on imports of food and construction materials, and oil, gas, customs, and Baghdad to pay for all services, supporting an extremely bloated public service that employs half the workforce¹ compared to the whole of Iraq employing 37.9 percent² and Australia employing 16 percent of the work force in the public service. Meanwhile, large-scale private sector enterprises have been dominated by the Barzani and Talabani clans. This is because one needs wealth and connections to embark on medium to large scale enterprises given Iraq's extremely complicated system of approvals involving multiple ministries for big projects, government and foreign investment, and rights to export.

Since ISIS was defeated in 2017, and despite being under threat of military attack from Turkey, and Iran, and being variously threatened by the federal government in Baghdad, the KRG has been more active in encouraging entrepreneurship, but it takes time to build initiatives, skills and resources, and to establish a fair and transparent taxation system, a more streamlined public service and international standards for products, services, and the environment. It also takes time for people to accept the risks and responsibilities of becoming entrepreneurs. Yet all these changes, as well as greater coordination between political parties, are required for a sustainable, autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) given that the extent that the Iran-backed government and judiciary in Baghdad is politically, legally, and economically passing legislation and laws to undermine the KRI's constitutional autonomy, all the time playing a divide and rule game between the KDP and PUK administrations.

¹ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR293.html

² https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_850359.pdf

Recently Congress passed an amendment to the 2024 defence bill to send air defence systems to Peshmerga forces. Is it legal? What are the purposes?

It is too early to suggest that the USA will send air defence systems to the KRG Peshmerga to defend Iraqi Kurdistan from Iranian attacks, or more specifically, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp missile and artillery barrages. This is despite bipartisan support in the US House Armed Services Committee to pass an amendment to the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), to consider a fiscal component for supplying air defence systems to the Peshmerga. It is one thing to make an allowance in the Pentagon's budget – after all, the US already funds Peshmerga USD\$20 million a month, but it is quite another matter for air defence systems to be sent. For a start, the amendment must be approved by the Senate, and if passed, must overcome the fierce objections that will emanate from Baghdad, Turkey, and Iran. The notion of supplying air defence systems to defend the KRI opens Pandora's box. It arguably goes against Iraq and Iran's security defence pact, and recent agreements to jointly secure their shared border. Who is to say that a future KRG government might need to defend itself against military attacks by Turkey, or Baghdad? So, although the amendment is a sign that Washington continues to value its Kurdish allies - at the very least as pawns to be used against Washington's enemies - Iraqi Kurds are not as critical to international power plays when compared to Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria combined! Therefore, I cannot see how the US and the KRG will overtly actualise such a significant defence agreement at this time, given its enormous implications ... although I dearly hope I am proved wrong. Both Bashur and Rojava need them!

How do Turkey-PKK tension's impact the KRG?

Turkey's daily attacks using warplanes and drones, deploying MIT (Turkey's National Intelligence) and soldiers, and establishing tens of military bases for ground offensives, to target alleged PKK operatives, are killing civilians and livestock and devastating livelihoods and well-being in Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaimani and Nineveh, and in the disputed districts of Shingal and Kirkuk (e.g., Makhmour). These frequent, almost daily attacks dislocate whole villages and prevent people from returning home. The lack of appropriate responses to curb Turkey's military aggression is causing people to despair that the KRG, KDP and PUK do not have the capacity or willingness to protect the KRI. Some people allege that KDP is helping Turkey's intelligence and military operations. These suspicions, other allegations of corruption, and the huge amount of misinformation, propaganda, and unknowns, are eroding the trust people have in their political leaders and the KRG.

Some experts believe the intra-Kurdish difference, especially between PDK and PUK, makes Kurdistan Region weaker. What do you think?

The tensions occurring within all political parties in the Kurdistan Region, and between PDK and PUK weakens Iraqi Kurdistan and threatens the region's autonomy. These tensions are ongoing despite international efforts to mediate. Without international support there would be no

Kurdistan Region of Iraq - no no-fly zone established over northern Iraq in 1991, and no input from Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani into the federal constitution of Iraq (2005) that enshrines a semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region. Without US-led intervention Erbil would have been taken by ISIS in August 2014, and by General Qasem Soleimani's Iran-backed and US equipped forces in 2017. In the last decade the US has made a concerted effort for the Kurd-led administrations in Syria and Iraq to work together. But, despite all the support, real success has only been achieved when Kurdish political and military leaders have co-ordinated across party lines to take advantage of cataclysmic events and other opportunities.

Just as dangerous as what Baghdad, Turkey and Iran are doing to undermine the KRI, Kurdistan's leaders are losing the respect, trust, and loyalty of many people. KDP is accused of helping Turkey (to what extent is debatable) and PUK's current leaders fight each other and seek support from Baghdad, Iran, and Kurds from other regions rather than try to compromise with KDP. Many people have the view that these clan-based parties are too pre-occupied in their unresolved power struggles to act in the best interests of the KRI and its people. Instead, Kurdish political leaders are squandering international support and the achievements of their forebears by being obstructionist about elections, finalising a regional constitution, uniting peshmerga forces, and not coordinating to defend Kurdistan's constitutional rights that the ruling Iran-backed Coordination Framework-led government and its Courts are dismantling.

An increasing number of these disillusioned people say the KRI may as well be ruled by Turkey or Baghdad! To these kinds of statements, I say go and talk to people from Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq who live in the KRI. Travel from any part of Kurdistan to Kirkuk. Better still, go and live in Turkey or another part of Iraq to see the difference in living standards. For those who want to remain in the KRI, become active in creating a sustainable future. An election for the KRI parliament is due in 2023. If the current political leaders cannot put the well-being of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and its people first, they need to be replaced. The question is, who is willing to stand for election to provide people other options? Before and after, people need to become active in the society they want to create. Students can study for a profession that can make a difference. Everyone, doctors, lawyers, artists, politicians, public servants, academics, teachers, students, labourers, tradespeople, farmers, IT experts, sustainable energy experts, shop keepers, and other businesspeople, can form groups to work on social, cultural, economic, and environmental projects on any scale. People can organise discussions and debates face-to-face or via social media. People can decide what they want to contribute to ensure the first modern, internationally recognised, Kurd-majority-administered, and secured region is inclusive, democratic, and just. As JFK once said to Americans: 'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.' Heaven knows, replace 'country' with 'world' and we might be able to save the planet!