

The Fragile Future of the Kurdish Regions in Iraq and Syria

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April 18, 2023

For decades in northern Iraq, the two Kurdish parties of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of the Talabani family and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzani family have reflected antagonistic relationship towards each other. This unhealthy relationship between the two groups turned into a civil war in early 1994 and continued into 1995. At that point, Barzani's party [controlled Dohuk](#) and the less developed western part of the region which made around one third of Iraqi Kurdish territory and population. The Talabani's party, on the other hand, controlled two thirds of the region including the two major cities of Arbil and Sulaimaniya. In mid 1996, Jala Talabani, who had established an alliance with Iran, allowed the Iranians to conduct a military incursion into northern Iraq against the Iranian Kurdish group the KDP. In response, Masoud Barzani asked for assistance from Saddam Hussein. On August 31, some 30,000 Iraqi troops along with an armored division of the Iraqi Republican Guard and the KDP peshmerga attacked the PUK-held city of Arbil. Thousands were killed, including innocent people. This is one of the reasons that many consider Masoud Barzani a war criminal for allowing the army of Saddam Hussein to enter Arbil.

Thus, since 1996, the Barzani (KDP) has controlled the governorates of Arbil and Dohuk while the Talabani (PUK) has controlled the Sulaimaniya governorate. But both parties have their share of controlling the borders outlets with Turkey and Iran respectively. These outlets generate millions of dollars of customs revenues to both parties. The conflict between the KDP and PUK has been woven in modern Kurdish society since the creation of the no-fly zone in March 1991 and the announcement of the Kurdish region autonomy in 1992. According to many analysts, including Kurdish leader Sarwa Abdul Wahid, the reasons are related to power struggle between the two families, but are mostly [economical and self interest](#). The Talabani realized that the KDP and the Barzanis in Arbil were making a fortune from the sale of oil and not sharing it fairly with Sulaimaniya. H.E. Dan Brouillette, President, Sempra Infrastructure; Former US Secretary of Energy said while addressing Prime Minister of the KRG, Masroor Barzani, you are [exporting more oil than Libya](#). In the Mar 2022 [World Government Summit](#) in Dubai and under the title statement "Energy Development, Exports, and the Future of Kurdistan Region of Iraq", Masroor Barzani said, very soon, Kurdistan will be an important center of energy in the world.

The tension between the two parties has gotten yet deeper and [more dangerous lately](#). During the 2022 efforts to elect a new president and prime minister of Iraq, the Barzani and the KDP opposed the re-election of Barham Salih of the PUK to a second term as the president of Iraq as the PUK insisted on Salih. The Iraqi people watched with anger as the drama played for months. Recently, media sources have revealed the reason why Pavel Talabani and other leaders of the PUK, including Salih, have increased their discussions of the constitutional rights to separate Sulaimaniya from the current territory of the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRI). Abdul Wahid had shown her support for the efforts to [change the Kurdish regime and administrative system in the KRI](#).

The Iraqi constitution allows any single or more governorate to become a territory (Iqleem) under specific conditions.

Article (119) of the Iraqi constitution states: *"One or more governorates shall have the right to organize into a region based on a request to be voted on in a referendum submitted in one of the following two methods:*

*First. A request by one-third of the council members of each governorate intending to form a region.
Second. A request by one-tenth of the voters in each of the governorates intending to form a region.”*

These conditions can be met by the PUK-administered Sulaimaniya Governorate. The separation of Sulaimaniya from Arbil and Dohuk, and the formation of a separate region from the KRI is awaiting the issuance of a decision to declare the city of Halabja (within the current Sulaimaniya governorate) an Iraqi province (governorate). Pavel Talabani had traveled to Baghdad several times to win the support of the central government and ensure the support of the Iranian-backed leaders and forces. The Kurdish region has been in the center of the historical conflict between the heir of the Persian Empire, represented by Iran, and the heir of the Ottoman Empire, represented by Turkey. Many see the latest differences between the two main Kurdish parties of the PUK of Talabani and the KDP of Barzani very dangerous, not only for the future of the KRI, but for Iraq and the Iraqi people in general.

The Assyrians have asked that the Nineveh Plain region, which is part of the Nineveh governorate, to become a governorate and part of Iraq. A tentative agreement was secured from the Iraqi officials. It was not coincident that ISIS invaded the region in 2014, committed a genocide, forced the Assyrian population to flee, destroyed homes, churches, monasteries, cemeteries and the regions infrastructure. It was the region's powers that allowed ISIS to commit the genocide against the Assyrians (and the Yezidis) and delay the efforts of turning Nineveh Plain in to a governorate (Aprim, 2021). ISIS committed another genocide against the Yezidis who have requested Sinjar to be converted to a governorate as well. Both the Assyrians and Yezidis have asked that their future governorates be linked to Baghdad; however, the KDP leadership have planned to annex both Nineveh Plain and Sinjar into the KRI.

Meanwhile in Syria, Turkey and its allies attacked the US backed Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF قوات سوريا الديمقراطية (shortly known as Qasd قسد) on Oct 10, 2019. The Kurdish militias made the majority of the SDF. The US supported the SDF as it was planning to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. With the latest Turkish attacks against the SDF, the Kurds are stuck between Ankara's hammer and Damascus' anvil. The SDF needs to change tactics.



Credit PUKNOW Website

In Dec 2022, Pavel Talabani visited Roj Afa in northeastern Syria and met with the leader of the SDF Gen. Madhloom 'Abdi, co-chairs of the Democratic Union Party Asia Abdullah, Saleh Muslim, and with the Commander of the International Alliance Forces in Syria and Iraq. Talabani intended to show support for the Rojava Revolution and the Kurdish autonomous administration in northeastern Syria.

Then on 12/26/2022, Talabani visited Baghdad, where he met with Iraqi officials and the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad.

On April 7, 2023, a Turkish drone strike hit Sulaimaniya Airport while Gen 'Abdi, accompanied by three American officers were reported to be present. The attack will influence the coalitions and stands between the conflicting sides on the Iraq and Syria scenes. The disputes between Turkey and the US are escalating to the point where the US is considering [imposing unprecedented sanctions](#) on Turkey and on Turkish officials, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his defense minister Hulusi Akar. Turkey was handed US sanctions in December 2020 over its \$2.5 billion purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems. Ankara has said it was forced to opt for the Russian weapons because its [NATO allies did not provide weapons](#) on satisfactory terms. Turkey has been in talks to procure a second batch of the S-400s from Russia, but Ankara has said discussions were still ongoing. Washington has warned Turkey against purchasing new weapons from Russia.

The anticipated May 14, 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey has a lot in the balance. Erdoğan seems to be making alliances with Russia and Syria to end the Kurdish presence along the southern Turkish borders. The situation is very critical for the Kurds. However, Erdoğan's 20 years rule of Turkey is at risk. [The opposition has united behind Kemal Kilicdaroglu](#), the leader of the second-biggest party in parliament, the Republican People's Party (CHP). It is expected that the leftists and the six million Kurdish voters that are behind the Kurdish Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) [will support Kilicdaroglu](#). The US is supporting Kilicdaroglu from behind the scenes as well. Thus, the Kurdish situation in Syria is in the balance as well pending the Turkish elections.

The future of Assyrians as the indigenous people of northern Iraq and northeast Syria is bleak under the US empowered KDP in Iraq and SDF in Syria. Both parties generalize the scheme of [Assyrians being strictly a fairly treated Christian minority](#), which is a false and misleading narrative. The instability of the KRI and its precarious relations with the neighboring states will continue to damage the Assyrians' chances of living in peace as the indigenous people of northern Iraq.

***Note: This article was published originally on Modern Diplomacy web site on April 21, 2023.**
<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/04/22/the-fragile-future-of-the-kurdish-regions-in-iraq-and-syria/>