

# Can Russia be a better ally to Iraqi Kurdistan than the United States?

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For years, Iraqi Kurdistan's autonomous enclave has retained very close relations with the United States, with which it fought together in the Iraq War and the more recent war against Islamic State (ISIS). But is this changing?

Washington's opposition to the Kurdish independence referendum last September 25, coupled with its lack of any support to Iraq's seizure of Kirkuk from them, has left a sour taste in the mouths of Kurds, leading many to speak of betrayal from the US and Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani to even consider reevaluating relations with Washington.

“You know, I can say we have – we are going to have a very serious revising of the relationship,” [Barzani told NPR](#) on November 6.

Barzani went on to suggest that Russia might get even closer to the Kurdistan region than the US, and it's not difficult to see why.

Russia did not unequivocally denounce the Kurdish referendum like the United States and most of the rest of the world did. While Russian President Vladimir Putin has stressed that Iraq's territorial integrity should not be violated, his government never came out against the referendum and even said it understood the Kurd's independence aspirations.

Russia's biggest oil company, Rosneft are even investing heavily in the region's oil and gas reserves. Since the Kirkuk crisis, Rosneft has taken control over 60 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan's primary oil pipeline, bringing its total investment in the region to \$3.5 billion in a short space of time.

As a [Reuters report pointed out](#), “with Rosneft effectively becoming a controlling stakeholder in Kurdish oil infrastructure, the move should help shield Erbil from pressure from Baghdad and its neighbours.”

This may not come without consequences for Moscow though. Writing for [Al-Monitor](#), Sergey Balmasov has argued that such a deal could compromise the relationship between Russia and Baghdad, be it economic, or in regards to national defence.

Iraq has already begun buying Russian weapons more frequently in recent years. It notably purchased Russian-built Mi-28 Nighthunter and Mi-35 Hind attack helicopters from Russia rather than the American-built AH-64 Apaches. During the war with ISIS, Russia [according to the state-run Sputnik news agency](#), provided Iraqi Kurdistan with five ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft cannons and 20,000 rounds of ammunition. Such weapons give the Kurdish forces an, albeit extremely limited, short-range anti-aircraft capability which they've never been able to acquire before. If Russia proves more willing to provide the Kurds with more heavy weapons for their Peshmerga forces Erbil-Moscow relations may strengthen as a result.

Balmasov also notes that Washington will also, only “half-heartedly”, welcome the Russian investment noting that: “Although American energy companies have significantly scaled down their presence in Iraqi Kurdistan, the United States understands the stronger economic ties between Moscow and Erbil will inevitably lead to Russia's proportionally reinforced presence on the ground.”

In light of these developments, it's understandable why Barzani suggested his region could forge closer relations with Russia, especially in light of the widespread discontent felt among Kurds in recent weeks towards the United States.

After they lost Kirkuk, Kurds were outraged at the Iraqi Army and Shiite Popular Mobilization Force's (PMF) usage of American-made weapons against the Peshmerga on the frontiers of the autonomous region. After Peshmerga forces successfully destroyed an American-made Iraqi M1A1 Abrams tank in Pirde, on

Kirkuk Province's border with Erbil Province on October 20, angry Kurds [demonstrated in front of the American consulate](#) in the Kurdish capital city Erbil, denouncing Washington's acquiescence to the usage of these heavy weapons against them.

More recently [signs were displayed across Erbil saying things like](#): “America is not our friend anymore”, “American betrayed us” and “US armed PMF to kill civilians”. While they were promptly removed, and it's unclear who put them across the city, their public display constituted a rare expression of disapproval of the US in the region. “The love, the hope and the trust that the people have in the US has declined and is decreasing day after day,” Barzani added in his NPR interview.

In many ways, Barzani has always harboured [mistrust toward the United States](#). He remembers his father Mullah Mustafa Barzani's revolt against Baghdad in the 1970s and the way the US cynically used the Kurds as cannon fodder to keep the Iraqi Army confined within Iraq killing them. Mustafa placed all of his trust in the US to manage and guarantee that covert support, managed by the Shah's Iran and also supported by Israel, since he believed Washington was a trustworthy guarantor. He even spoke of Kurdistan becoming the 51st US state.

Despite this, the US did little when the Shah sold out the Kurds to do a deal with the then Vice President of Iraq Saddam Hussein. Mustafa later died in exile in Washington in 1979 a broken man, feeling betrayed having seen his people being used and sacrificed as pawns in such a cruel and cynical manner.

Masoud Barzani never trusted the US throughout his lengthy career as a Kurdish leader. In [a Brookings Institute analysis](#) Bruce Riedel points out Masoud's mistrust in the United State's intentions toward's Kurdistan was always evident and, regarding the recent events in Kirkuk, concludes by stating: “Once again Barzani blames Washington for not standing by the Kurds. American-made and -provided weapons were used by Iranian-backed Iraqis to crush Kurdish forces. He has a good case. The Kurds have been a central ally in the fight against ISIS, just as they fought Hussein in 2003 and al-Qaida in the years after. But the Americans have been consistent for decades. Masoud was right.”

While Barzani is no longer the President of Kurdistan he remains a very influential figure in the region. It remains unclear how the Kurdish leadership will ultimately forge closer ties with the Russians, and if these ties will directly diverge with US interests in the region.

What is clear is that any fundamental revision on Erbil's part could, especially in light of recent events, put a serious dent in Washington's relationship with its Kurdish ally

and friend.