

Kurdistan Region in Iraq facing widespread protests amidst Iraqi military build-up on its border

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This week saw the most violent protests in Iraqi Kurdistan in years. In the eastern provinces of the autonomous region controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) people have already been killed and scores more wounded. The domestic upheaval comes as Iraqi military forces are conducting a build-up near the autonomous region's frontiers.

Iraqi Kurdistan's two eastern provinces of Sulaimani and Halabja were the scenes of large-scale demonstrations and subsequent security crackdowns. In the meantime, there were no protests in Erbil and Duhok provinces in the west – which is controlled by the other leading party in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

The protests are not exclusively against the PUK as evidenced by the fact that the offices of several political parties, including both the PUK and KDP, were targeted

and torched by the protesters.

Iraqi Kurdistan's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani responded to these developments by [acknowledging](#) the genuine discontent felt by the region's residents over sizeable salary cutbacks and lengthy delays, emphasizing that demonstrations should be peaceful. He also stressed that Kurds "are stronger when we are united."

The prime minister then alluded to the external threats the region is facing, which could prove harder to combat if the region is convulsed by internal instability. Islamic State (ISIS) is believed to have been [behind an attack on Peshmerga positions](#) in the Makhmour region this week as the protests were taking place, the first attack on Kurdish positions by ISIS in that area in quite some time.

"Of even more concern is that we are tracking movements by Iraqi forces in Makhmour," he went on to point out.

In Makhmour, situated southwest of Erbil Province, the Iraqis have been building up military forces for the last week. Concurrent to this is [another build-up](#) by the Baghdad-sanctioned Shiite-majority Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias near Kurdish-controlled Kifri south of Sulaimani Province. The intent of the Iraqi forces, according to Kurdish officials, is to attack the Peshmerga and take these areas by force.

Iraq [denied this on December 19](#). The following day the Kurdistan Region Security Council (KRSC) [released aerial photographs](#) which conclusively show that Iraqi forces have indeed mobilized in Makhmour. The KRSC were previously proven correct last October when the Iraqi Army denied that it was mobilizing forces to attack the Kurds in Kirkuk. Furthermore Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Organization militia, claimed in June that [his forces would never attack Kurds](#), only to do just that in Kirkuk mere months later.

With precedents like this the Kurds have reason for remaining on guard.

The last series of clashes between the Peshmerga and Iraqi forces took place in border areas of Nineveh and in the border crossing of Pirde (Altun Kupri) between Kirkuk and Erbil provinces following the Iraqi takeover of Kirkuk on October 16. The Peshmerga succeeded in afflicting casualties and damages on the attacking Iraqis in these areas. In the battle of Pirde, on October 20, they successfully destroyed one of Iraq's American-made M1 Abrams main battle tanks and several Humvees. Those clashes were concluded with a ceasefire on October 28, which is still in place.

With internal tumult affecting large swaths of Kurdistan Iraq may well feel more emboldened to launch another series of attacks to seize strategically-important areas

and routes from the Kurds. Already Baghdad has condemned the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for its reaction to the protests.

Furthermore, Kurdistan's former prime minister, the veteran politician Barham Salih, felt compelled to warn against anyone within Kurdistan calling upon Iraq to militarily intervene in the region's internal affairs.

"Talking about the use of military force from Baghdad to resolve the problems [in Kurdistan] brings destruction and adds to the list of recent catastrophes," [Salih said on Twitter](#). "It is in contrary to the interests of the people of Kurdistan and Iraq as well."

Baghdad has implemented punitive measures that the KRG dub "collective punishment" against the autonomous region, most notably its ban on international flights in and out of the region, in response for the Kurds holding a non-binding referendum on independence last September 25. In spite of the KRG making concessions – including offering to freeze the referendum results and supporting the Iraqi Supreme Court's [interpretation of the Iraqi Constitution's Article 1](#), which recognizes Iraq as a federal unified state – Baghdad has yet to enter into talks with Erbil to resolve the serious outstanding issues between them.

For some time after the referendum Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi himself was talking about tackling corruption in Kurdistan by taking complete control over revenue made from oil exports to Turkey, which [he claimed](#) is the only way to pay Kurdish "employee salaries in full and so that money will not go to the corrupt."

Given the Iraqi Government's failure to prevent large parts of its stupendous oil wealth from being squandered by corruption Abadi's comments will likely amount to little more than opportunistic posturing aimed at impugning the leadership in Kurdistan.

The Iraqi prime minister also wants to reduce the budget for Kurdistan from its constitutional 17 percent [to 12.6 percent](#), arguing that the population of Kurdistan isn't 17 percent of Iraq's total population – while flatly ignoring the fact that well over 1.5 million displaced Iraqi Arabs have taken shelter in Iraqi Kurdistan since the beginning of the war against ISIS.

Baghdad hasn't sent Kurdistan its part of the budget since cutting it off completely back in February 2014 – which sparked the present ongoing economic crisis that was subsequently worsened by the ISIS war, the influx of hundreds-of-thousands aforementioned displaced Iraqis and the fall of the world price of oil in December 2014.

Kurdistan's more recent loss of oil-rich Kirkuk in October has resulted in a much greater need for revenue from Baghdad. This coupled with the growing discontent shown by this week's protests along with the Iraqi military build-up on its doorstep shows just how precarious the situation Kurdistan is presently in.

If Baghdad does not negotiate and the KRG remains without any income from Baghdad then they [will implement a contingency plan](#) which, according to one of Prime Minister Barzani's senior advisors, will see the KRG "rely on its oil and non-oil revenues to cover the salaries and basic services" of the region's population.

Given the many challenges, both internal and external, it continues to face Kurdistan will need this and a series of other contingency plans to continually weather the various storms it has had to face in recent years.