

Feeling betrayed by US, Iraqi Kurds extend hand to Iran for protection

by Wladimir van Wilgenburg - 02/02/2018 15:29



ERBIL – The Iraqi Kurds are increasingly disappointed in the West and accuse them of allowing an Iranian hegemony to be established in Iraq after the Kurdish independence referendum held on 25 September. Now senior Kurdish officials say they don't care about the supposedly anti-Iranian agenda of the United States government just ahead of the Iraqi elections scheduled in May 2018.

Some Kurds even wonder if the US is not really an enabler of Iranian influence, rather than an adversary of Iran.

Peshmerga Major General Sirwan Barzani who commands the Makhmour-Gwer sector 6 told The Region in an interview in December that the Iraqi Kurds do not care about any US agenda to contain Iran. It was, after all, the United States that, just like Iran, opposed a Kurdish independence referendum and allowed Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and the Iraqi army to take Kirkuk with American weapons and tanks in October last year.

CIA Director Mike Pompeo [confirmed](#) in October that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qassem Soleimani was in Kirkuk against the backdrop of Iraqi moves to restore Baghdad's authority over the city and surrounding disputed areas, but still the United States did nothing to stop it arguing that they warned the Kurds to not hold the referendum.

Moreover, the Iranian government imposed a fuel embargo on the Kurdistan region and closed its borders after a non-binding referendum took place in which over 92 percent voted for independence.

The US President Donald Trump [unveiled a new security strategy](#) in December, branding Iran as a major global threat. But Sirwan Barzani says the Kurds are not interested in this. While the Trump administration [puts](#) America first, the Iraqi Kurds says for them Kurdistan comes first.

“They want to stop Iran and they want a strong [Iraqi PM] Abadi (...). This is really not our business. We want to live in peace in Kurdistan in democracy and live together. We are fighting for more than 100 years with our family just for that,” the nephew of former Kurdish president Masoud Barzani said. “We want a stable Kurdistan and nothing else,” he added.

“We don’t care what will happen between Iran or Trump, or if they will be closer or not, or work with Syria, with Assad or not,” he said. “We want to live in peace and democracy and have our state,” he added. “But unfortunately nobody respects that,” he said.

On Sunday 21 January, a delegation led by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani [visited](#) Iran, in a first visit after the referendum after meeting the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi one day earlier in Baghdad. “We will not allow any threats from Kurdistan territory against Iran,” the KRG PM said according to the Iranian readout.

The visit is a sign of Kurdish disappointment in the West, and that the Iraqi Kurds are looking for better relations with Iran after the referendum.

Also last Thursday, Hemin Hawrami, a senior advisor to former president Masoud Barzani and senior Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) member [met](#) with the Iranian consulate to discuss ‘boosting bilateral relations’.

In a sign of improving relations, the Iranian consulate last Wednesday [announced](#)

that all roads linking the country to the Kurdistan region were opened.

According to Sirwan Barzani five million people voted for the referendum in a transparent and democratic manner, but the West did not support them despite talks about democracy and human rights.

“The problem in this region in the Middle East and these nations and countries is that because of our background and especially because Islam cannot match with democracy, we have difficulties. It’s not easy for us to have real democracy,” he said.

“Never you will see the democracy as you see in Western countries like in America and Europe. Including Kurdistan,” he said. But he said if you compared Kurdistan to the rest of the region, ‘we are the best.’

Therefore, he says the Kurds are disappointed now. “We just saw there is nothing real in democracy and human rights. It’s all lies and about benefits,” he said. “What happened. They used [American] tanks against our people because they want democracy. This is disappointing for the Kurds, and we will never forget that,” he said.

“It’s not seen as acceptable? Why? What’s the reason,” he angrily said. “Even if there are animals, there are many rules that you cannot kill animals. But for the Kurds, no, it’s ok. You can kill them by the American tanks and weapons you give them,” he said.

A KRG official told The Region that the recent Iran visit and the statements of Sirwan Barzani are related to the events after Kirkuk.

“Iran has leverage over everyone, including Turkey. We must work with Iraq and Turkey, and that’s where Iran has most leverage. America doesn’t. It’s not an either/or. We must balance ties with Iran and the US,” he said on the condition of anonymity.

“It’s a rebalancing of ties. Events after the referendum changed the terms of the political debate in Erbil; it’s rooted in Iran’s ability to shape political and military developments in the Middle East. In Iraq, Iran can influence decision-makers -- and policies, in ways America can’t. Iran will remain a formidable player in the Middle East; too often U.S. engagement is temporary and transactional. They always leave,” he said.

“Erbil recognizes that without a modus vivendi with Iran, dependence on U.S. is a vulnerability,” the official concluded.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Kurdish journalist Arif Qurbany in a [column](#) published by the KDP-affiliated news outlet Rudaw last Sunday.

“Can Erbil not be friends with Tehran too? This is important because the survival of Erbil now and in the future depends on at least Iran not regarding it as a danger,” Arif Qurbany said.

“The events of October 16, the invasion of Kirkuk and genocide of Khurmatu require the Kurdistan Region to examine the stance and kind of treatment by friends from the US and EU, especially now that it is clear to Erbil that even if the US and EU do not help with Iranian expansionism, they are indirectly the reason behind the imposition of Iranian hegemony on the entire region,” he said.

“The KRG still feels that they have a luxury to choose,” Bilal Wahab, an analyst at the Washington Institute think-tank, told the Region. “I don’t think Barzani can afford that and needs to play both sides. Abadi met with Barzani as a courtesy to the US. The delivery is another matter,” he said. “This is election-related. That is where Iran comes in. The KDP can’t shrug off the US and still needs a US military base in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” he said.

However, according to US-based Kurdish analyst Mohammed Salih, it’s important that the KRG ‘conducts a radical review of its foreign relations and does away with the previous policy of alienating Iran.’

“In light of the events following last September's independence referendum in Kurdistan and also the broader region, it's clear that Iran is not only the main party that calls the shots in Iraq, but its influence and role in the broader Middle East region has considerably grown. The Kurds need to directly and constructively engage with Iran as this would likely have positive repercussions for Kurds' relations with Baghdad and their position within Iraq, he said.

“The KRG needs to restructure its relations with Tehran, Washington and Baghdad in a balanced way and starts looking after its own interests rather than the short-term games of other powers with Iran,” he added.

“From the standpoint of Kurdish interests, it's important to understand that saving Abadi is not in Kurds' interests even though that might be US's priority. Abadi has been very bellicose and hostile toward the Kurds and as things stand now he does not appear to be the best choice in Baghdad for the Kurds. If possible, Kurds need to retain their king-maker position in Iraqi politics and ensure a prime minister with a

friendlier attitude will come to office in Baghdad. Abadi has so far distinguished himself by his highly hostile measures,” he concluded.

But Ceng Sagnic, Co-editor of Turkey Scope and Coordinator of the Kurdish Studies Program at the Moshe Dayan Center told The Region, says there is no US demand for an anti-Iranian agenda yet. They just want Kurdish support for Abadi in the upcoming Iraqi elections, in order to prevent other pro-Iranian actors from winning.

“There is no indicator that the US has ever forced KRG to pursue an anti-Iran agenda in Iraq. The US government's focus has been on countering ISIS and winning a new term for Al-Abadi, and the demand from KRG has been to serve these purposes rather than anti-Iran agenda yet,” he said.

“Nechirvan Barzani has been pursuing a policy of rebuilding KRG's stable relations with the US, Iraq and the neighbouring countries in accordance with the pre-2014 status quo. His initial visits were to strong European nations, and it was clear that he also had the US support. Therefore, in my opinion, Iran acted quickly to invite him to Tehran before the US and Turkey,” he concluded.

It's clear, however, that the Western response to the Kurdish referendum has partially changed the KRG's calculations and the Iraqi Kurds are now looking to restructuring their relation Tehran, Washington and Baghdad.