



KURDISTAN AFTER ISLAMIC STATE: SIX CRISES FACING THE KURDS IN IRAQ

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The defeat of the Islamic State coincides with the emergence of a series of crises for the Kurdistan region of Iraq that were postponed by the arrival of the fight against Islamic State extremists. These problems include territory disputes between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad, internal rivalries between Kurdish factions, internal controversies over independence, Iranian and Turkish pressures, an economic crisis, and the massive challenge posed by an influx of refugees. The war on IS united many factions, bringing in foreign military and economic assistance, however it also accelerated and highlighted problematic issues in Iraq, such as the ascendancy of Shi'i militias, which pose a challenge for the otherwise successful and stable Kurdish region. Can the KRG step up to these challenges amidst declining U.S. influence in the region?

INTRODUCTION

On November 24, 2016, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi travelled to Tal Afar airfield in northern Iraq, which had been liberated from Islamic State (IS) a week before. After a meeting with leaders of the Hashd al-Sha'abi (PMU) he was briefed on the situation at the front line facing IS in the key strategic town of Tal Afar, several kilometers away. Shortly after al-Abadi left the airbase, an explosion occurred near the location where the Prime Minister had been. A PMU statement claimed that they had been targeted by a laser-guided bomb or missile and the Iranian regime-run Press TV claimed a "U.S. missile strike" had hit the command tent.¹

The day before the missile strike PMU leader Hadi al-Amri (Amiri), head of the Badr organization (a Shia political party and militia that is part of the PMU), had linked up with Kurdish forces near Tal Afar to complete the encirclement of IS in Mosul and threaten the Turkmen-majority town of Tal Afar itself.² Amri was in good spirits surveying recent success; his men had just crossed more than 100 kilometers of open desert from Qayarah in just over three weeks. His elevated spirits were also due to the fact that the PMU, of which Badr is a central component, was about to receive official status as a national militia from the Iraqi parliament.³ Amri, who had played a key role in negotiations to end fighting with Kurds in Tuz Khurmatu in April 2016 between Shi'i and Kurdish forces, is a clear representation of Shi'i ascendancy in the region. "We have been an ally of Kurds for 40 years and we are the sons of this land," he told reporters in April, 2016.⁴ As the leader of Badr, a component of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a friend of Qassem Soleimani, and once considered for the position of Iraqi Defense Minister, Amri's relations with the Kurds in Tal Afar are symbolic of the new Iraq.⁵

These relations are also symbolic of the challenges facing the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The arrival of IS on the borders of the Kurdish region in June of 2014 postponed myriad problems that were bubbling to the surface and set back many advances in the region. The success of the "surge," the U.S. offensive in 2007 to root out insurgents, and the subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces had left the KRG on its own as a center of stability in a country lurching from crisis to crisis. The KRG, which had advertised itself as "the other Iraq," had a new airport which opened in 2010 with one of the longest runways in the world (4,800 meters). In 2013, it was predicted that the region would attract four million tourists a year by 2015, a prediction that failed to come to pass because the war against IS broke out in August 2014.⁶

When war came, elections were postponed. Hundreds of thousands of men were mobilized to fight IS, after a brief existential crisis that saw the extremists on the doorstep of Erbil and Duhok. The leading Kurdish factions of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Gorran set aside differences to fight the enemy. The KDP's antipathy toward the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was also set aside in places like Mount Sinjar to fight the common enemy. Millions of refugees flooded into the Kurdish region, including minority Christians and Yazidis. Foreign governments recognized the Kurdish success in fighting IS by providing clandestine and official military aid, including direct support for the Peshmerga from the U.S. Kurdistan became cut off from Baghdad, and thus its reliance on Turkey as an economic lifeline increased and it sought to sell its own oil. Exports had to flow north through Zakho on the Turkish border as IS threatened the highway from Kirkuk to Baghdad.

By the fall of 2016 with IS on the ropes, the Kurdish Peshmerga had conquered tens of thousands of square kilometers outside of the official borders of the KRG in areas previously described as "disputed" between the KRG and the Iraqi central government. For more than a decade after 2003 the Kurdish region had argued with Baghdad over which areas each would administer in various regions bordering the KRG. Turkey and Iraq also threatened war with each other, with the Kurds in the middle. This has made the future uncertain for the region. President Masoud Barzani has served as president of the KRG since 2005. It was long expected, due to numerous speeches and claims by local Kurdish politicians and foreign political commentators, that he would eventually attempt to guide his region to independence.⁷ But the post-IS period presents such a laundry list of challenges that the issue of the Kurdish region in Iraq moving toward independence, which seemed to be within grasp in 2014, may have taken a back seat. The following is a list of the central post-IS problems facing the Kurdish region.

IRAN AND SHI'A ASCENDENCY

On September 16, 2008, Barzani met with U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and in a wide-ranging discussion, laid out numerous problems facing the Kurdish region.⁸ First among them was Iran. "Iran wants Iraq to be in a state of constant chaos," Barzani reportedly said.⁹ At the time, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was replacing Kurdish commanders of the Iraqi army in the disputed areas, especially around Khanaqin, a city in Diyala.¹⁰ "For how long do you expect us not to fight back?" Barzani asked, according to a diplomatic cable describing the meeting. During that discussion, Barzani told Crocker that "Turkey is the counterbalance to Iran,"¹¹ and Crocker told Barzani that a military confrontation would lead to Kurds "losing everything," they had achieved.

In the eight years since that meeting, concerns about Iranian involvement in Iraq have grown. Privately, many Kurdish Peshmerga describe the PMU and other Shi'i militias as only a slightly lesser evil than IS. The Erbil-based Kurdish press, reflecting wider public opinion, and especially the views of the KDP, ran stories in early 2016 highlighting the role and danger of Shi'i militias.¹² Barzani pressured the U.S. administration and the U.S.-led coalition's Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF:OIR) to assure the Kurds that Shi'i militias would not play a role in the battle for Mosul city which was launched on October 17, 2016.¹³ Nevertheless the worst fears of some seemed to be realized when Iraqi army units of the 16th division which were being transported to the front lines near Telskuf were greeted by Shi'i Shabaks and the Iraqis fired in the air. The Iraqi army troops were Shi'a and they wanted to express solidarity with their coreligionists. At Makhmour, where the Iraqi army and Peshmerga bases abut one another, an Iraqi unit was temporarily prevented from traversing Kurdish lines to Qayarah because it was flying Shi'i flags.¹⁴ Now, instead of the Sunni Arab chauvinism of Saddam Hussein's era, it is Shi'i power that is close to Erbil.¹⁵

By the end of November 2016, the facts on the ground in the battle for Mosul forced Kurdish and Shi'i militias to coordinate around Tal Afar.¹⁶ For many, this brought back reminders of the end of the Gulf War in 1991, when fragile post-conflict peace in the Kurdish region did not result in

independence.¹⁷ In 2016, the Shi'i ascendancy and the proximity of Iran on the eastern border have hemmed in the Kurdish region. Iran opposes Kurdish independence. Forces such as the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) operate bases and forces in the KRG.¹⁸ Relations between the KRG, Iran and its Shi'i allies and proxies will dominate the future of Iraq and will likely frustrate Kurdish plans for independence.

Turkey and Iran

Professor Abdulkhakeem Khasro of Salahaddin University and the Institute for Research and Development (IRDK) in Kurdistan argues that Turkey has become the key counter-balance to Iran: "The strategy is that the whole Middle East wants a new counter-balance. What's happening in Mosul and Raqqa is all related to this. It is part of the counter-balance of Turkey against Iran. These places must be under the influence of Turkey to prevent Iranian influence in this region."¹⁹ Shortly after the war with IS began, Turkey increased its military presence in northern Iraq to include a military base near Bashiqa. That base came to include several thousand mostly Sunni Arabs from Mosul, commanded by Atheel Nujaifi and Turkish advisors under the banner of a unit called Hashd al-Watani.²⁰ Iraq's government has threatened Turkey, but Turkey's response has been to up the ante, threatening to involve itself in Tal Afar and Sinjar. As the *Daily Sabah* noted on November 26, 2016, "Turkey is located some 80 kilometers from the town...Turkish troops are currently stationed in a training camp near the village of Bashiqa...Turkey also has significant military presence elsewhere in KRG territory."²¹

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he will not allow Sinjar (Shingal) mountain to become a "new Qandil," a reference to the area of PKK presence along the Turkish-Iraqi border.²² The larger context of this is that the PKK carved out a significant presence in Sinjar when it played a key role in saving Yazidis in August 2014. It constructed a large martyrs' cemetery on the mountain and its flags fly from forts at the summit.²³ The KDP and Turkish views of PKK involvement on Sinjar dovetail on this issue. Meanwhile, there are accusations in local media that the PKK is allying itself with the Hashd al-Shaabi.²⁴ Khasro and others assert that the Shi'i militia, backed by Iran, are carving out a line of Shi'i towns with designs on Bashiqa, Tal Afar, Rashadiya in Mosul, eventually advancing through Sinjar towards Syria.²⁵

The Hashd al-Shaabi and its minority allies

Just as Khanaqin became a flashpoint in 2011, according to local reports and interviews, the new flashpoint will likely be along this Shi'i line involving both Shi'i militias and their associated groups.²⁶ These affiliated groups include the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) and Gozarto Protection Force, two Assyrian units which were recruited to fight IS, and which played a role in Bakhdida and Bartella after they were liberated by Iraq ICTF forces on October 23, 2016. The NPU receives funding from the PMU and the PMU released a video in December 2015 promising to restore Christian churches in Mosul and Nineveh.²⁷

The PMU's policy is to co-opt minority groups in Nineveh and Sinjar and to encourage their loyalty to both the PMU and Baghdad. This plays on Yazidi suspicions towards the KRG regarding the disaster in August of 2014 when IS overran Yazidis communities around Sinjar and claims on local and social media that they were abandoned by the Peshmerga and saved by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and PKK, which are closely affiliated.²⁸ The same division between pro-Baghdad and pro-Erbil Yazidis, affects Shabak communities, who are both Sunni and Shi'a with loyalties to both Baghdad and Erbil.²⁹ Assyrian exile groups speak of "KRG repression" and encourage alignment with Baghdad and the PMU as opposed to the KRG.³⁰ The chairman of the Assyrian Federation in Sweden, Afram Yakous, has said he supports a "unified Iraq," as opposed to Kurdistan moving toward independence.³¹ Prior to 2014 the Assyrian Association Union in

partnership with the Australian Assyrian Universal Alliance sought support for rights to self-determination and autonomy.³² It is difficult to judge on the ground the degree to which Assyrians prefer the Iraqi army and central government to Kurdish administration.

The KRG seeks to highlight its role in hosting Christian refugees and helping to liberate Sinjar and parts of Nineveh.³³ It works with its own affiliated minority units, including Shabak, Kakei and Yazidi Peshmerga, and Christian groups such as the Nineveh Plains Forces, which are aligned with their own KDP affiliates or their own parties in Iraq.³⁴ An Assyrian Peshmerga battalion named ‘the Leopards’ in late November 2016, as did a brigade of Arab Peshmerga from Rabiah.³⁵ In the post-IS period, competition for minority loyalties in Sinjar and Nineveh will likely continue to increase.

THE DISPUTED AREAS

The complexity facing the KRG in its relations with the Shi’i militias, Baghdad, Iran, and Turkey is exacerbated by continuing tensions over the disputed territories. In 2011, Sean Kane at the United States Institute of Peace concluded that “among U.S. government officials the greatest potential threat to Iraq’s stability is not extremist groups but the prospect of Arab-Kurdish conflict over oil-rich Kirkuk and other disputed territories.”³⁶

The disputed territories are defined as areas outside of governorates of Duhok (Dahuk), Erbil (Hawler), and Sulaimaniya (Sulaimania). As a result of the 1991 Gulf War Kurdish forces were able to establish themselves along what was called the “green line” which included areas in Kirkuk, Diyala and Nineveh governorates. They solidified this control by 2003. The U.S. allowed Peshmerga to operate beyond these lines to help fight the insurgency.³⁷ By 2006, in a “tangled web of administrative and security arrangements,” Peshmerga had moved into areas in Sinjar, Kirkuk and Nineveh that look very similar to the 1,000 kilometers of front line as it stood on December 1, 2016 and which the KRG has claimed since 2006, including areas around Rabiah, on the Syrian border. The war against IS therefore allowed the Kurds to consolidate some territorial gains.³⁸ Kirkuk, where a referendum was supposed to take place in 2007 saw a final decision and referendum on this issue postponed. Overall, disputed areas account for up to 30 percent of the approximately 58,000 square kilometers administered by Kurds.

These borders were “drawn in blood,” as KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said in July 2016, and the KRG would not withdraw from them.³⁹ The agreement between Baghdad and the KRG in early October 2016 about the Mosul operation lays credence to the concept that Iraq will be permitted to take areas the Kurds no longer demand, such as the left bank (east) of Mosul city, an area where Kurds live. Kurdish Peshmerga agreed not to enter Mosul and Iraqi army units were transported north to launch their offensive from Kurdish frontlines at Gwer, Khazir and Teleskop. The Mosul operation that began in mid-October 2016 has seen good cooperation between the Iraqi army and Peshmerga, and Peshmerga had mostly ceased offensive military operations by late October.⁴⁰ The link-up between the PMU and Peshmerga near Tal Afar is also a result of this agreement. However there will be growing pressure on the KRG, including from organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, along with the international community, to allow Arabs to return to areas they fled during the war and allow Baghdad’s authority to grow.⁴¹

The concept of an autonomous Sunni province in Nineveh or Salahadin governorates has found support among influential KDP voices such as Kemal Kirkuki. Foreign experts such as former U.S. ambassador to the UN John Bolton and others support this plan, but it has no traction in Baghdad and demands to create Sunni autonomy before 2014 have foundered.⁴² The disputed territories will continue to be a problem between Baghdad and Erbil and the tangled web of administrative inconsistency and ad-hoc solutions imposed by the war will be similar to the flashpoints that have existed since 1991.

INTERNAL KURDISH CONFLICT

In October of 2015 Nechirvan Barzani reshuffled the KRG's coalition government cabinet and removed four Gorran party ministers from the ministries of Peshmerga, investment, finance and religion.⁴³ The re-shuffle put more power into the hands of the KDP. The KDP is the dominant party in the northern and western regions of the KRG, while the PUK controls Sulaimaniya in the east and south. In some regions such as Kirkuk, both have a presence. The KDP has played a leading role in the war, sending key political leaders such as Kemal Kirkuki to direct operations, and influential businessmen such as Sirwan Barzani, nephew of the president, to lead at the front. Political maneuvering for the post-IS period is essential to both parties' political fortunes.

With presidential elections postponed since 2015, the Kurdish region's unity post-IS must confront similar hurdles to those it faced in the mid-1990s when it descended into civil war. A referendum on independence tentatively scheduled for 2016 was never carried out for unclear reasons.⁴⁴ Former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki visited Sulaimaniya in July of 2016 and met with PUK leader Jalal Talabani before meeting with Gorran party members, clearly demonstrating the confidence of this former antagonist of Erbil in cultivating friends within the KRG.

Publicly, politicians such as Nechirvan Barzani and Qubad Talabani, pay support to unity, but post-IS, KRG may face a political crisis.⁴⁵ It will hold provincial elections, including in the disputed territories.⁴⁶ Jalal Talabani (age 83) and Masoud Barzani (age 70) are grooming successors in their two parties, in which their large and historical families play a central role. The next generation includes KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, Masrour Barzani, chancellor of the KRG security council, Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani, and others. The role of the Peshmerga, which remains divided into PUK- and KDP- affiliated units, including the elite Zerevani Peshmerga, who affiliate closely with the KDP, will also be important in these elections. During the war KDP and PUK Peshmerga units served side by side against a common enemy⁴⁷, just as Kurds fought the Saddam Hussein regime, but the post-IS period will bring politics back into the armed forces unless they can be fully unified.

PUK has better relations with Iran and Shi'i groups such as Maliki's allies, as evidenced by Maliki's visit to meet PUK officials in July.⁴⁸ However, Qubad Talabani has expressed support for closer economic relations with Turkey.⁴⁹ At the same time Aso Talabani, the KRG representative in Moscow, has heavily criticized harm done to civilians by Turkey's campaign against the PKK.⁵⁰ Lahur Talabani, who has been influential in encouraging a more open border with Rojava,⁵¹ and who heads the Kurdish intelligence group Zanyari, has said that "at times we have had a better working relationship with Baghdad than we have with our counterparts in Erbil."⁵²

Though tensions between the KDP and PUK and among Gorran, the PKK and the KDP, may not always appear on the surface, they can be expressed in more subtle ways. Some KDP members claim the PKK's fanaticism is little different from that of IS, or they see Gorran as connected closely to Iran. Memories of civil war in the 1990s remain strong, but twenty years of peace and external problems Kurds face from Syria and Turkey, as well as outside threats, all serve as unifying factors. The differences between Erbil and Sulaimaniya, however, remain stark. When the U.S.-led coalition's CJTF:OIR created a Kurdish training unit run by Kurdistan Training Coordination Center (KTCC), it opened bases near Erbil and Sulaimaniya in order to cater to the two power centers.⁵³ Peshmerga units are divided into PUK and KDP-aligned Peshmerga, and each frontline has headquarters that fly PUK or KDP flags in differing sectors along the line.⁵⁴ Erbil and Sulaimaniya maintain each have an international airport, a symbol of prestige for the two provinces and their political power structures. Even the PUK headquarters in Erbil is located outside the center of the city.

The divided party structure of the KRG allows outside parties to play different groups off against each other, but it also benefits the KRG by being able to speak with multiple faces to outside players. The status quo of divided unity will likely continue after 2017.

INDEPENDENCE

In November 2016, Kirkuk governor Najmaldin Karim told *PBS Newshour*, “The Kurds have proven they can govern themselves. We have proven that we can defend ourselves. We have every right, like any other nation, to be independent.”⁵⁵ In 2006, three months before Saddam Hussein was executed, a Kurdish witness showed up at trial wearing a Kurdish flag pin, causing a commotion. Around the same time Barzani, banned the flying of the Iraqi flag on public buildings in the KRG.⁵⁶ It appeared at that time as if the KRG was on a trajectory towards sovereignty.

In early 2016, when the KRG was still talking about an independence referendum, the feeling among some was that referendums in Sudan, Scotland, Quebec, along with situations such as East Timor or Kosovo, provided precedent for such a move. Qadir Sero of the IRDK thought Kurdish independence might receive support from Saudi Arabia, France, Turkey and Israel. “We estimate 40 others,” as well, he said at the time.⁵⁷

The reality of independence is that although it has widespread support in the KRG, the mechanics of how to achieve it, while continuing to receive international support, are unclear. Trade requires an open border with Turkey, and Baghdad has shown that it can intervene to shut down Kurdish airspace.⁵⁸ As of this writing, the referendum on independence has not been scheduled, and there is little chance that it would be supported or recognized by either Baghdad or the international community. A December 14, 2016 report in Rudaw asserted that the Gorran party leader Nawshiran Mustafa opposed independence.⁵⁹ A pre-emptive attempt to move toward independence, especially by the KDP, which has championed it more vocally in the last year, could lead to a split in the KRG and have international repercussions that would reduce the unique status the autonomous region enjoys.

REFUGEES

The KRG’s website still claims that there are 5.2 million people⁶⁰ living in its three official governorates. To that number must be added the residents of parts of Nineveh and Kirkuk and more than two million refugees and internally-displaced people from Syria and Iraq. This is thought to include 250,000 people from Syria, a few thousand refugees from Iran, and two million who fled from IS and from other areas in the rest of Iraq to the Kurdish region.⁶¹ It includes 300,000 Yazidis who fled IS, 100,000 Assyrians, and many Sunnis who have fled from areas of fighting and fear returning to Shi’i militia-administered areas.⁶² Since the start of the Mosul offensive, 74 percent of those displaced by the fighting, around 52,000 people, have moved into refugee camps set up for them in the KRG.⁶³

The refugee crisis has changed the demographics of the KRG, as refugees now make up as much as 35 percent of its population. For a region that was, prior to IS, attempting to recover from Saddam Hussein’s Arabization policies and the Anfal genocide of the 1980s which saw thousands of Kurdish villages destroyed, the demographic change and hosting of IDPs presents a new challenge. The same Shi’i forces that oppose greater Kurdish independence are also those that guarantee that some Sunni Arab IDPs will not return. The uncertainty in Sunni areas and threat of Sunni Islamist extremism have both led Yazidis to initially refuse to return to Sinjar.⁶⁴ A year after liberation, very few people have returned to Sinjar and infrastructure, reconstruction, and services are lacking.

The refugee crisis creates a catch-22 for the Kurdish region. While the region sells its stability as a main asset, refugees add to its instability. They also pose security challenges and drain the economy. The war with IS provided the KRG with more autonomy, but also caused the refugee crisis. These demographic changes damage the Kurdish character of the KRG, and may dilute that of the region itself as well, in a way that Saddam’s policies were unable to do.

ECONOMY

In February 2015, the World Bank concluded that the KRG required \$1.4 billion to stabilize its economy.⁶⁵ By January 2016, its monthly deficit had reached \$406 million and the KRG was several months in arrears in paying its employees' salaries.⁶⁶ Budgets from Baghdad were withheld due to the war (the KRG is supposed to receive 17 percent of the state budget), and the Kurdish region was struggling to export its own oil amidst low worldwide prices.⁶⁷ Since the KRG passed its Petroleum Law in 2007, it has been seeking to contract independently with oil companies on an equal basis with Baghdad.⁶⁸ The Americans opposed the law and attempted to persuade Talabani to intervene with Barzani.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, companies invested in the Kurdish region and signed contracts with the KRG.⁷⁰ Among those who pioneered investment in oil in the Kurdish region was Rex Tillerson, the Exxon CEO who was selected by Donald Trump on December 13, 2016 to become U.S. Secretary of State.

The problem will likely persist in 2017. Perhaps aware that OPEC was trying to raise oil prices, in November 2016, Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi sought to trade salaries in Kirkuk province for the KRG sending Kirkuk oil, which it has controlled since 2014, to Baghdad.⁷¹ Prime Minister Barzani has said the KRG would welcome a wider agreement to have Baghdad pay all KRG salaries in return for discussions in about KRG oil.⁷²

To fill the budget shortfall and support the war on IS, the U.S. has been helping pay Kurdish Peshmerga salaries since July 2016.⁷³ Although this and other direct foreign support is unprecedented, it is unclear how the financial crisis will be resolved when the war is over and whether foreign countries will continue to deal directly with Erbil or return to funding through Baghdad. Although the KRG has had some success exporting oil, these activities are not sufficient to fund its budget, 95 percent of which relies on hydrocarbon revenues.⁷⁴ Iraq will require its full budget to rebuild a country shattered by war, while at the same time, Mosul and the refugee issues will continue to be a drain on the Kurdish economy. The Kurdish region, which was economically stable before the war, faces uncertainty in its aftermath.

CONCLUSIONS: CHALLENGES WITHOUT OPPORTUNITY

Historically, Kurdish leaders enjoyed warm relations with Iran and Iraqi Shi'i parties and their leaders due to mutual interest in opposing Saddam's version of Arab nationalism. Ahmed Chalabi and other dissidents worked with Kurds and Shi'i leaders during the wars against Saddam.⁷⁵ Iran was a conduit for support for the KRG in August of 2014 when IS was at the gates of Erbil. But the general orientation of Erbil has shifted, becoming closer to that of the Sunni Arab minority to balance Shi'i power in Baghdad. This was clear when Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi fled via the KRG for Turkey in 2012. Many Kurdish members of parliament and Sunni Arabs voted against legalizing the PMU in November 2016.

Acting as a counterbalance to Baghdad is a natural position for the KRG, but this role means the region is always in opposition and tangled in a web of intrigue, unable to break free or act independently. The policy of opposition and resistance to Baghdad led to autonomy in the 1990s. However it means that today, as Baghdad is more closely allied with Iran, that the Kurds are the center of a contest between Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The KRG's vision for the future is clouded by numerous factors, including the presence of refugees, an inability to resolve the disputed territories, an economic crisis, and the postponement of elections and referendum on independence. The war against IS may have provided a unique opportunity to grow Kurdish autonomy, solidify control over new areas, and show the international community its competence, yet this narrative is countered by the numerous crises presently facing the KRG. With 20 years of relative peace since the ceasefire in the its civil war, the region has enjoyed unique success in a Middle East beset by turmoil. Infrastructure such as roads, education and defense have been key to the KRG's success thus far. Tackling the six main crises outlined here

will be crucial if KRG intends to carry on with these goals, moving towards peace and increased independence in a post-IS region.

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NOTES

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² Vager Saadullah, photos on twitter of Amri meeting Kurdish forces, November 23, 2016. <https://twitter.com/VagerSaadulla/status/801492667687456770>

³ Mohamed Mustafa, “Iraq parliament votes to merge al-Hashd al-Shaabi with national army,” *Iraqinews.com*, November 26, 2016. <http://www.iraqinews.com/features/iraqi-parliament-votes-merge-al-hashd-al-shaabi-national-army/>; “Iraq’s parliament legalizes controversial Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi militia,” *Daily Sabah*, November 26, 2016. <http://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2016/11/26/iraqs-parliament-legalizes-controversial-shiite-hashd-al-shaabi-militias>; Also see Rudaw, “Iraq parliament recognizes Shiite militia,” November 26, 2016; <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/261120161>

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⁵ Arash Karami, “Iran news site profiles head of Iraq’s Badr Organization,” *Al-Monitor*, November 13, 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/iran-news-site-profiles-badr-org.html>

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⁷ Most recently Qubad Talabani made statements in the UK that the “process” of independence has begun. ‘Iraq has failed,’ *Rudaw*, December 9, 2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/091220162>

⁸ Ryan Crocker, “President Barzani – Nothing is as it should be,” September 23, 2008. US Diplomatic cable, *Wikileaks*. Accessed November 26, 2016; https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BAGHDAD3062_a.html

⁹ Crocker, *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Khanaquin, near the Iranian border, is a city that had been Arabized under Saddam Hussein and returned to Kurdish hands after 2003. Maliki unilaterally annexed it to Diyala province.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² “Abadi: Hashd al-Shaabi participates in Mosul liberation,” *Kurdistan24*, February 20, 2016.

¹³ “No Peshmerga or Shiite militia will enter Mosul city, US official says,” *Rudaw*, September 30, 2016.

¹⁴ “Peshmerga block Iraqi army convoy flying sectarian flags.” *Rudaw*, October 14, 2016. <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/141020165>

¹⁵ Kurdish Peshmerga feel worried about Iraqi army tanks and units with Shia flags traversing checkpoints. Interview with Peshmerga checkpoint commander in Gwer river crossing, October 23, 2016.

¹⁶ “Shiite and Kurdish forces to coordinate west of Mosul, reports,” November 24, 2016. <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/241120164>

¹⁷ Chris Hedges, “Kurds creating a country on the hostile soil of Iraq,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1992. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/12/world/kurds-creating-a-country-on-the-hostile-soil-of-iraq.html?pagewanted=all>; a similar situation replayed itself in 2003 in the struggle for Mosul

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¹⁸ Author meeting with Mustafa Hijri near base in Koya, July 20, 2016. Interviews with Hussein Yazdanpanah of the PAK, December 18, 2015.

¹⁹ Interview with Abdulhakeem Khasro, Erbil, IRDK office, October 23, 2016.

²⁰ Author visit to Bashiqa Turkish base and interview with officers, July 20, 2016.

²¹ “Iraq’s parliament legalizes controversial Shiite Hashd al-Shaabi militias,” *The Daily Sabah*, November 26, 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2016/11/26/iraqs-parliament-legalizes-controversial-shiite-hashd-al-shaabi-militias>

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