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America Needs a Stable and Democratic KRG as a Partner

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Following the Arab uprisings at the end of 2010 and into 2011, Middle East masses criticised the US for legitimising non-democratic regimes, thereby implicating the US Government in their domestic troubles. The US prioritized military partnership over development of democratic institutions; as militaries became political actors, the US was not perceived as the neutral party it claimed to be in domestic affairs.

Perceptions of the US Role in the Kurdistan Region: Unbalanced engagement with KRG parties

In Kurdistan, where the democratisation process is fragile, the US risks making the same mistake by aligning too closely with one party over the others at this juncture. As the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani's extended term came to an end in August 2015, many in Kurdistan assumed he would continue to remain in power – with, as some of the parties demand, a revised power-sharing mechanism. Many of the KRG's international allies made the same assumption, and believing it to be an internal issue, remain unwilling to address it. As the parties in the KRG failed to reach an agreement, Barzani has continued to engage with foreign leaders on a number of issues, principally military matters in the fight against ISIS. Four months on, tension over the lack of a resolution may have a direct impact on the international coalition's goals in degrading and eventually defeating ISIS.

Perceptions here matter, particularly during this ongoing political stalemate. In October 2015, when the [KDP prevented the Speaker of Parliament](#) of the Gorran Party from reaching his post in Erbil, the party reported this to the US State Department without receiving what it deemed a satisfactory response. As the party's spokesman, Shorsch Haji, put it, "We have been talking about state-building and democracy with officials from the US. Despite these types of declarations, the US has not made any serious changes in its dealings with the KRG or the individual parties it has contacts with."

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This perceived lack of neutrality, whether intentional or not, reared its head again when last November US Secretary of Defense held an official visit with Barzani, addressing him as Mr. President, and when US Vice President Joe Biden recently called to congratulate him on recent military victories. With the Peshmerga forces divided along party lines, an additional direct message to the people of Kurdistan and the Peshmerga forces would have been more widely welcomed.

Crisis in the Kurdistan Regional Government

The lack of resolution to the presidential issue led to a state of parliamentary paralysis, and has given rise to an assumption of continued executive power. The five main parties – Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Gorran, Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) – met several times outside of parliament to negotiate the future of the office of the presidency without resolution. Since the final round of all-party talks – ending October 8, 2015 – parliament has not been in session, and representatives from the five parties have been in the same room together only once since then: at the [MERI Forum 2015](#), where an impartial organization provided the officials confidence to engage with each other. Continued outside engagement is essential as all parties blame failed negotiations on the others' inability to compromise.

US Positive Engagement with the KRG

That said, the US has made commendable efforts to urge major political change through proposed reforms within the Kurdish military. In 2009, the US Congress proposed to train and arm the Peshmerga, conditional upon unification of forces or establishment of non-party-affiliated brigades were created; this was [reaffirmed in the defense authorisation bill last year](#). This policy is one example of how Western military partners can use constructive engagement and conditional aid to help the KRG move past political impasses in a democratic way.

Welcome and Necessary Guidance

Given its position on the Kurdish military and as a superpower with numerous levers to pull, the US must take a more dynamic foreign policy stance, paying particular attention to its non-military engagement and prioritizing values in its relationships that encourage democratisation, liberty, and rule-of-law.

With nationalist aspirations, Kurdish parties seek the legitimacy of the international community. At the same time, all five main parties have recognized the KRG's shortcomings and inadequate institutions. Adnan Mufti, a PUK official and former Speaker of the Parliament, even went so far as to say that the KRG has "violated democracy" and that its representatives "do not know how to practice democracy." Such direct internal critique of, and admittance to, serious democratic deficiencies has yielded barely any response from international partners, including, critically the US. Past mistakes have landed the KRG in the position it is today, and make it clear that external guidance and critical engagement are indispensable. This is the exact message that was delivered to US government officials and think tanks in Washington, DC when a team of MERI researchers visited in October 2015. "Friends could do a lot to help the KRG become their best and most democratic partners in the Middle East," suggested Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI, in a meeting with the United States Institute of Peace. "Each day, each month that passes without a solution, the crisis deepens and Kurdistan becomes more unstable; this should be a terrifying prospect to allied countries that largely rely on Peshmerga ground troops to hold back ISIS" added Ala'Aldeen.

A Future for Kurdish – American Partnership

At the MERI Forum 2015, Ali Bapeer, leader of the KIG, [welcomed the idea of engaging](#) with a neutral third party, and Mohammed Faraj, of the KIU, even referred to the idea of American mediation as an opportunity for Kurdistan.

The United States needs to preserve its goodwill and reputation in Kurdistan by remaining neutral in its internal disputes, but also engaging constructively as a close ally. A local military partner with strong, democratic institutions would best serve America's military goals in the fight against ISIS. It risks losing that in the Peshmerga, a partner the US regards as affective and valuable, if it fails to ensure this. The US can also repair its image in the region as a partner for development and a defender of democracy and human rights by prioritizing its non-military engagement with developing countries, especially in the Middle East where this reputation has been eroded over the past decade.

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