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State-building in a fragmented Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen*

The roadmap to independence starts from home and ends at home. A fragmented and unstable Kurdistan Region is neither good for the stability of the Kurdistan Region nor for Iraq or the rest of the Middle East. Institutionalisation of national unity and promotion of good governance are a key priority in every country of the Middle East, and even more so for an emerging one like the Kurdistan Region.

The recent shakeup of the Middle East has provided the Kurds with a historic opportunity to achieve their dream of ultimate sovereignty. Observers, be it friends or foes, are debating, in anticipation, the possibility of the imminent birth of an Independent South Kurdistan. This does not mean, however, that Kurdistan's statehood is a *fait accompli*, nor that it is considered the best move by all Kurds in the current climate. There are numerous threats and barriers, the biggest of which is the on-going internal Kurdish political rivalry and deep fragmentation which, if left unattended, may squander this opportunity – an all too familiar tale in Kurdish history.

Twenty years of division

In 1996 the infighting between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) two main parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), reached its climax and ended in splitting the newly established administration. The frontline between their Peshmerga forces became the dividing border that separated the KDP "Yellow" and the PUK "Green" (colour of flags) zones of influence, respectively. These zones failed to fully reintegrate, despite the major changes in Iraq after 2003 and the subsequent unification of the two administrations in 2006. In fact, after the regime change in Iraq, the Kurdish-controlled disputed territories were also divided between the Yellow and Green zones of influence. For example, the Kurdish controlled areas of Ninawa plain are now part of the Yellow zone and most of Kirkuk province is now squarely within the Green Zone.

* President, The Middle East Research Institute, Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Another layer of division was added when the Gorran (Change) movement broke away from the PUK before the 2009 elections, reducing the PUK to the third largest party in the KRI by 2013. However, power in the Green Zone remained with the PUK. These two parties became staunch rivals, never united except on the issue of the presidency and opposition to the KDP.

The Presidency crisis

The current political crisis over the term (second exceptional extension) and powers of the KRG President has polarised the KRI's major coalition parties, which had together formed the coalition government in 2014. Gorran effectively led the opposition to KDP's dominance of the KRG's decision-making process and demanded greater dilution and re-distribution of the president's powers, as well as changing the governing system from a presidential to a parliamentary one. However, negotiations for political change reached a deadlock, which resulted in a brief spell of violent demonstrations and the KDP expelling Gorran-affiliated KRG ministers and the Speaker of the Parliament from the Yellow Zone. This paralysed the parliament and undermined the institutions of governance. Importantly, this action limited Gorran to the Green Zone and forced them to change tactics, thus paving the way for closer collaboration between Gorran and PUK.

The PUK-Gorran strategic agreement

On 17 May, 2016, Gorran and PUK signed a strategic agreement – one that might be the start of a process leading to a total merger (or reunion) between the two parties. The content of this agreement includes plenty of emphasis on the same controversial issues that led to the political crisis over the issue of the presidency. Ironically, the PUK has clearly aligned itself with its staunch rival (Gorran) while still sharing power with the KDP. The KDP has declared its opposition to the agreement and rejected pre-conditions for re-activating the parliament. The political deadlock goes on.

The Deadlock and its consequences

Extending the deadlock between the political parties has inflicted the greatest damage to the governing system in the KRI since its inception. Internationally, the deadlock has in many ways tarnished the KRG's image within the international community and weakened its lobbying drive. More seriously, paralysing the parliament, has weakened the legal support to the governing institutions and is likely to undermine the legitimacy of future elections or referenda. Holding a snap general election has been considered a possible solution to the deadlock. However, this is not a viable option at this time and, even if conducted is unlikely to change the current political map, power dynamics or the way the parliament is viewed, as a power tool instead of power house. Left unresolved, the deadlock may allow the two zones to evolve in parallel and become more deeply and independently institutionalised, leading to their evolution as two separate regions.

Two Kurdish Regions evolving

The concept of creating two Kurdish regions in Iraq is not new. Many inside and outside of Iraq have supported the idea of converting Kirkuk into a region, to resolve disputes over its status. However, this idea has long been rejected by the Kurdish leadership because they believe it constitutes a fatal blow to the KRI's prospects for future independence. The history of the Middle East demonstrates that rivalry over land, natural resources and trade will not only prevent the reunion of split regions, but makes brother enemies prevent each other from becoming totally independent. This will be even more true, if the entirety of the Green Zone, including Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Garmian and part of Erbil provinces to the South, coalesce into a parallel region beside a KDP-controlled one (Dohuk and parts of current Erbil and Ninawa provinces).

Importantly, the creation of a large Green Region is likely to win support from Baghdad, Tehran and perhaps even Ankara. To them, this might be an ideal way of preserving the unity of Iraq, which is also in line with the policies of the international powers too. Tehran and Ankara are also concerned about their own Kurdish populations whom they believe would be encouraged by the Iraqi Kurds becoming independent.

Iran's policy has been well known for decades to favour preserving an equal balance of power between the KDP and PUK to prevent the emergence of a strong KRI. Iran is contemplating a process of extending a new oil pipeline from inside the Green Zone to its territories, similar to the one extended from the Yellow Zone to Turkey. There are also rumours that Iran is debating a possible strategic agreement with the Green Zone, similar to the strategic political, economic and security agreement between Turkey and the Yellow Zone.

Hence, the current political deadlock in the KRI may trigger a much faster divergence of the two zones, which may be facilitated by the Iran-backed, Shia-dominated government of Baghdad who are increasingly uncomfortable with the KDP-Turkish relations and with KDP's decreasing interest in Baghdad.

The only way forward: Compromise

The roadmap to independence starts from home and ends at home. A fragmented and unstable Kurdistan Region is neither good for the stability of the Kurdistan Region nor for Iraq or the rest of the Middle East. Institutionalisation of national unity and promotion of good governance are key priority in every country of the Middle East, and even more so for an emerging one like the Kurdistan Region. However, Institutionalisation of national unity and promotion of good governance require political will, and determination. It is in everyone's interest for the current political deadlock to end and a new round of negotiations to begin. The parties must engage in a series of confidence building practical steps. They must regain legitimacy and normality by reactivating the parliament, deal with outstanding issues, such as the presidency, the constitution and the system of governance through debates and constructive negotiations.

Baghdad and the Kurdish political leaders must re-engage for mutual support against common political, security and economic challenges. The international community, particularly the neighbouring powers and the United States will find it in their national security interest to constructively engage the Kurdish leaders and promote unity, good governance and democratisation in both the KRI and Iraq. Whether independence comes now, later, or never, it is clear that there needs to be political reengagement at a local, regional and national level in order to deal with the political issues that are crippling the KRI. Without this, we will face twenty more years of division, twenty years that may permanently damage the Kurds' dream for independence.

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