



**Middle East
Research Institute**

www.meri-k.org

Policy Brief

25 July, 2017. Vol. 4, No.07

Kurdistan: a potential strategic partner the US deserves

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Through constructive engagement and promotion of rule of law, the US should help the Kurdistan Region of Iraq become a strategic partner. The Kurds can be instrumental in helping the US mend fences across the region.

This year is the 25th anniversary of the election of the first Parliament and government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Thanks to the safe haven that the United States and its European allies created in 1991 to protect the displaced Kurdish population from Baghdad's brutal attacks, the Kurds turned a crisis into an opportunity to build a forward-looking nation with democratic aspirations. The journey was a tough one, with many successes and failures, but U.S.-KRI relations grew stronger and developed into a mutually rewarding partnership.

The United States continued to protect the Iraqi Kurds from Saddam Hussein's regime in 1990s and ensured that they would have their fair share in the post-Saddam Iraq. The U.S. once again came to the rescue of the KRI in the face of the Islamic State (ISIS) onslaught in 2014 and continued its support to date. The Kurds have reciprocated with unreserved loyalty and solid support for U.S. policies in Iraq. Peshmerga forces became indispensable partners in the U.S.-led global coalition and instrumental in the ultimate military defeat of ISIS in Iraq.

Some consider this KRI-U.S. partnership a tactical and temporary one, not only because ISIS is being defeated, but also because the United States will ultimately stop relying on the Kurds due to their inability, like the rest of [Iraq](#) and other Middle Eastern countries, to promote the rule of law and good governance, and to control corruption, which runs unacceptably deep. However, the U.S. and the KRI can prove otherwise.

For a start, the United States continues to need strategic partners in the ever-changing Middle East, where its vital interests will remain at stake. In a region that is in turmoil and where terrorism is on the rise, the U.S. and Europe face much-reduced space, presence and leverage for driving and shaping events. Regional state and sub-state actors (like the

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KRI) have grown in influence across borders. A multitude of nonstate actors, legitimized or not, have become increasingly influential in driving events.

The KRI, lying in the heart of the Middle East, is just what the United States needs, where it is most needed. The Kurds have proven themselves skillful and dynamic survivors in a conflict zone that is overwhelmed by powerful rivals. They have strong, collaborative, love-hate relations with the Shia political elite of Iraq. They share a long border with the previously ISIS-occupied Sunni Arab territories, where the challenge of stabilization is greatest. They accommodated the majority of the displaced Sunni Arabs and other ethnic and religious minorities during the ISIS war.

Internationally, despite the complexity and sensitive nature of the Middle East's politics, the political parties of the KRI have actively engaged and maintained relatively good neighborly relationships with both Iran and Turkey. Being a Muslim-majority country and having been part of Iraq, the KRI leaders have had unhindered access to most of the Arab countries.

On the issue of KRI's internal governance challenges, the United States can help a great deal via constructive engagement. The KRI, as a small, emerging nation, remains vulnerable in the world's toughest neighborhood. This gives the U.S. plenty of leverage that it has never used effectively. In fact, the U.S. has the same kind of leverage with all of its allies in the Middle East but was never willing to use it in fear of negative reactions. On the contrary, the previous U.S. administration chose to almost totally disengage with the region, particularly Iraq, and virtually abandoned its obligation to spread the values of liberty and the rule of law in the Middle East. The consequences were disastrous, forcing the U.S. to return and face a war against the most radical of terrorists.

It might be rare for politicians to request or accept conditional help, but the KRI leaders do when such requests come from trusted friends. They are, and have been, responsive to terms and conditions that are linked to good governance, designed to help their country become a better, stronger and more prosperous place. KRG leaders viewed these conditions as incentives and opportunities to reform. Many used them to convince their fellow leaders to endorse change. In short, tough love works with the Kurds and the United States should help the KRI become the partner it deserves, and the partner KRI deserves to be.

Article Citation: Ala'Aldeen, Daa. (2017) Kurdistan: a potential strategic partner the US deserves MERI Policy Brief. vol. 4, no. 07.

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