



**Middle East
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Ending Wars – Winning Peace in the Middle East

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Panel Four: Navigating Kurdistan Region Through Evolving Global and Regional Power Dynamics

- Nechirvan Barzani, President of Kurdistan Region of Iraq
- Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI (Moderator)



This timely session was dedicated to a debate with the President of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to discuss central geo-political and domestic developments, including the protests and the crisis of governance in Baghdad; the Turkish invasion of Northern Syria (particularly Rojava); and finally, the effects of internal political fissures within the KRI.

Government Crisis in Baghdad

President Nechirvan Barzani characterized the October developments in Baghdad as a defining milestone in the history of Iraq and predicted that it will affect everyone in the nation, including those in the Kurdistan Region. He therefore urged the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) not to act ‘aloof’ from these events. The demonstrations across Iraq are made up of 15-25 year olds without any recollection of the advent of Baathism or the US invasion; these youth are tired of empty slogans and promises, and are demanding the reform of Iraqi governance. President Barzani warned against placing the blame solely on the current Cabinet and argued that a series of events have led to inefficiency in the governance system. Having had a mere year to prove his capacity as Prime Minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi needs to be ‘given a chance’ despite his meager parliamentary support. While the KRG used to say that “*Baghdad is Baghdad’s business,*” Barzani stressed that its political parties are committed to supporting Baghdad in the search for solutions. These include: optimising the economic model of Iraq, particularly with regard to oil, gas and water resources (with international technical support); and presenting new mechanisms to enhance the transparency and efficacy of governance. Barzani hopes the KRG will learn from current developments in the federal government and troubleshoot potential faultiness ‘at home.’

Echoing previous panel discussions, President Barzani warned that a year-long ‘freeze’ of the Constitution for the purpose of amendment (as proposed by some), will not bridge the gaps identified by protesters. Additionally, this motion could effectively open the door for re-evaluating the scope of the KRI enshrined within it. Instead, the current Baghdad uprisings call for improvement in the implementation of the Iraqi constitution. The President is actively seeking opportunities for the KRG to promote shared ownership of the power in Iraq and to participate, as a partner, in its governance.

“We need to build an alliance to serve the Iraqi population and safeguard the different components of the KRI. Hope to announce such an alliance in the near future.” (Nechirvan Barzani)

Barzani is taking steps to form a Kurdistan faction within the Iraqi Council of Representatives to support ongoing alliance building - not with the intention to threaten power, but to serve the Iraqi population, ensure the implementation of the constitution, and safeguard the rights of the KRI within it. President Nechirvan Barzani emphasised that the Kurds played a big role in reforming Iraq; he urged the KRG to support Baghdad in order to ensure a common understanding on the future of Iraqi governance, stating that he sees an increased role for the KRG within it.

The Syrian Crisis

On the issue of instability in Rojava, the President reflected on the importance of lessons learned from the history of the region to effectively and realistically plan for the future. Currently, Syrian Kurds are facing major risks due to the US withdrawal.

This dispute was catalysed by unclear US policy towards the region, despite its previous efforts and interests in Iraq. With the current risk of repeating the Afrin tragedy in Rojava, particularly in the hands of Syrian extremists that accompany the Turkish Army, the Kurds in Iraq are concerned. Another concern is the wave of new refugees stemming from their invasion of the Syrian-Kurdish territories. The KRG is currently absorbing the estimated \$1.5 billion expense of hosting IDPs and refugees within the KRI, and believes this number will increase as IS ideology and radicalisation continue to flourish in the region. *“We need serious work to avoid IS resurrection.”* The KRG remains committed to mediating with Turkey and advocating stability for the Kurds living in Rojava, but the President emphasised that the KRG is only *responsible* for Kurds within the KRI. Mediation is needed to ensure a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and to avoid militarisation within the framework of Turkey.

President Barzani acknowledged the additional difficulties arising from strained Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) relations. The KRG had previously warned Syrian Kurdish authorities to distance themselves from the PKK, and President Barzani observed that the PKK's struggle for legitimacy in the area led to the Turkish invasion. "We have always tried to make our friends in Syria understand that [Turkey's concerns] are a grave danger," he noted, emphasising that they should work more closely with the other Kurdish political parties.

Nonetheless, during his meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, on October 9th in Erbil, President Barzani asked for Russian mediation. He also stated that he had been in constant communication with General Mazloom Abdi of the Syrian Democratic Forces, and had offered his advice for achieving peace and alleviating the suffering of the displaced population. This is the first time he revealed that he has spoken with General Mazloum.

Internal KRG Dynamics

"We don't need to communicate with each other via press conferences ... We have meetings where we criticise each other, and we address these fragmentations, making our relationships much better." (Nechirvan Barzani)

President Barzani spoke of the long history of KDP and PUK negotiations and the internal fragmentations which today are addressed more openly. Barzani assured the audience that current fractures are not of serious concern and will be addressed with all parties involved.

Acknowledging existing internal gaps in administration, President Barzani emphasized that serious steps have been taken to ensure transparency and oil reform in Kurdistan, developments the KRG will continue to enhance. The last 4-5 years in the KRG have largely focused on bolstering the economy against collapse. The crisis of the IS invasion took a hard toll on public administration and the KRI in general, taking the lives of over 2,000 people while sending a wave of refugees and IDPs into Kurdistan, which effectively increased the population by 23%.

Meanwhile, the establishment of a constitution for Kurdistan has become a high priority and practical steps toward its development are currently being undertaken. In addition, reorganising and institutionalising the Peshmerga forces is part and parcel of this reformation. The Netherlands, UK, Germany, and the US will assist the KRG in reorganising the Peshmerga forces, which President Barzani calls a priority of the government. President Barzani sees an opportunity within all the crises to sit down together and 'stop pointing fingers.'

