



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
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Report

Baghdad and Erbil: Possible Avenues Of Struggle for Areas of Influence



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08 January 2013

Conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over areas of influence has escalated into armed clashes. This is fuelled by the policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki which incline towards autocracy, and the divisions that impact on the establishment of a coherent Iraqi force that might provide stability to Iraq and ensure its unity.

The crisis that erupted between the Kurdistan region and the central government in Iraq has deeper roots than simply an attempt by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to escape a troubling political reality, as it is often interpreted. Indeed, the current crisis does not lie with al-Maliki alone but is part of the conflict between Arab and Kurdish nationalisms which have deep historical roots in the era of the post-Ottoman Empire and the subsequent division of the Kurdish region between four countries: Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Kurdish nationalist tendencies began to develop concurrently with the emergence of the 'nation-state' after the First World War. Kurds faced great difficulty, including chauvinism, under the rule of various authoritarian regimes. The more these regimes cracked down on the Kurds, the stronger was the sense of Kurdish nationalism, and the greater was the desire for secession and the dream of an independent Kurdish state. Today, the Kurds are looking for an opportunity to take advantage of their position as marginalised victims of previous unjust governments, especially since the spectre of the return of a dictatorship looms large over the nation in light of the current political situation in Iraq.

The Kurds, being the first beneficiaries of the changes after 2003, are currently experiencing unprecedented economic progress and political autonomy since the founding of the Iraqi state in 1921. While they continue to entertain aspirations of secession, Iraqi Kurds are reluctant to push for a Kurdish state for the time being, partly because of the economic stability they have enjoyed since 2003, and partly to appease Turkey, which has allied with the Iraqi Kurdistan region in light of the current dynamics in the region – particularly the Syrian crisis and the Maliki government's position towards it.

Although Kurdish leaders contributed to Maliki's ascension to power by rejecting former prime minister Ibrahim al-Jafari, they now view him as a dictator. But will a change of prime minister be enough to solve the dispute or is this a much deeper problem?

The conflict between Arabs and Kurds today is the result of a number of disputes throughout history that have gone unresolved and have involved various regimes. Some believe that these disputes may soon culminate in a military confrontation.

Al-Maliki: A Zigzag Path

The Kurds took advantage of Maliki's fragile domestic and foreign policies to drag him into confrontation. Everyone agrees that he had followed the correct path in his first tenure when he cracked down on the militias in the so-called Operation 'Charge of Knights' and his support for the awakenings in Sunni areas to fight al-Qaeda. The elimination of Shi'a and Sunni insurgents granted him legitimacy even within the Sunni community. But he soon deviated from this path to adopt a completely different policy during his second tenure – both internally and externally, thereby isolating himself from the majority of political blocs, including his own. Therefore, the positions of the blocs opposing the prime minister with regards to the crisis with the Kurdistan region today are based on internal politics first and on Maliki's regional alliances second. Moreover, politicians were alarmed by Maliki's attempts to monopolise power by subjugating independent bodies such as the Independent Electoral Commission, the Central Bank, the Integrity Commission and the media.

On the external front, his alliance with Iran – particularly with regard to the Syrian crisis and support for the regime of Bashar al-Asad, the suspicious arms' deal with Russia and the breach of a security treaty with the United States have all outraged most of his

political partners. His policies during his second tenure have disappointed the Iraqi people and have led to his unpopularity.

As for the relationship with the Kurdistan Region, the tension has been the result of Maliki's objection to oil contracts concluded between the Kurds and international companies, as well as the region's burgeoning relationship with Turkey, especially after the visit of Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu to Kirkuk without first notifying the central government. This was followed by deploying Tigris troops and the incident of Tuz Khurmatu which led to a confrontation between the Peshmerga and elements of the Iraqi federal police and ended with a number of casualties among the region's population. Furthermore, the president of the Kurdistan region, Massoud Barzani, deployed Peshmerga forces in Kirkuk and also inspected the troops.

To make things worse, the prime minister referred to the contested areas 'mixed areas'. In other words, they were like any other Iraqi city, characterised by a mixture of ethnicities and religions, thus depriving the Kurds of the right to claim such areas. These escalating statements pushed both sides towards converting the conflict from political rhetoric into threats of military action. However, given Maliki's weakness within his party, the government of the Kurdish region has not yet taken the threat of military action seriously. Instead, demanded the nationalist and economic rights of Kurds and the defence of Kirkuk. Thus, Massoud Barzani regained his role as a spokesperson and defender of the Kurdish issue, enabling him to block the liberal and non-liberal pro-democracy movements and to put an end to the dominance of the two major parties in the region. While the Iraqi president and leading Kurdish politician Jalal Talabani, who is in dispute with Barzani, tried to play a mediation role, the recent deterioration of his health has weakened his position.

The two parties – the central government and the Kurdish region – resorted to dialogue. The Kurdish government sent a delegation of Peshmerga to meet with officials from the Iraqi Ministry of Defense but the negotiations ended in chaos due to the central government's insistence on the formation of joint forces, combining the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army under the command of the central government, a proposal which was rejected by the Kurdish delegation. The mediation by the parliamentary speaker, Osama al-Nujaifi, also did not lead to a solution since the Kurds conditioned the mediation on the withdrawal of Iraqi army divisions from disputed areas.

Kurdish Crisis and Political Conflicts

Iraqi political blocs saw in the Kurdistan crisis an opportunity to strike a blow at Maliki and isolate him politically for not being in favour of the Kurds with regards to Kirkuk and other outstanding issues, notably the issue of oil. After the Kurdish region gained selfrule in the early 1990s, the Ba'athist regime embarked on the 'Arabisation' of Kirkuk by distributing land and loans to Arabs until the proportion of Arabs in the city increased. However, the Kurds soon began changing Kirkuk into a Kurdish city by expelling large numbers of Arabs in anticipation of a referendum to decide the fate of this oil-rich city. Pending the application of Article 140 of the Constitution on the demarcation of the border with the provinces, Kirkuk is managed by the province. If applied, Article 140 will raise many problems because its application is not limited to Kirkuk but to all the provinces. The Kurdistan region has border tensions with all adjacent Arab provinces as it demands the annexation of parts of Mosul, Diyala and Salahuddin.

The positions of most politicians from Kirkuk may be harsher than Maliki's position, but they are not expressing their positions openly, other than criticizing Maliki's policy towards the Kurds. The Sadrist bloc within the prime minister's National Alliance organised demonstrations in Baghdad recently and denounced Maliki's statements against their leader, Moqtada al-Sadr. Maliki had attacked Sadr's comment regarding the arms deal and the Kurdish crisis. Sadr had said: 'Arming the Iraqi army is absolutely imperative but with the conditions that the weapons should not come from an occupying country, should not be rusted or old, nor be brought at double the price.' He stressed that 'The purchase of arms must be to defend Iraq and not for Tigris,' meaning the Tigris

Forces stationed on the outskirts of Kirkuk. After the demonstrations, graffiti on the walls of buildings condemned the prime minister, called him a dictator and compared him to Saddam Hussein.

Indeed, Maliki cannot take a step towards military action against the Kurds while he is this estranged from the largest and most popular group in the parliament and the government. Furthermore, the majority of those in the army, police and security agencies are supporters of the Sadrist movement. Therefore, it seems difficult for Maliki to move towards a military option against the Kurds without agreement from the Sadrist movement, despite rising tensions due to the prime minister's having beefed up the army in the provinces of Diyala, Salahuddin and Kirkuk, and the Kurdish preparations for a military confrontation.

These differences regarding the crisis with the Kurds could disrupt the National Alliance since the Sadrists have started threatening the possibility of secession should Maliki insist on his current approach and the members of the State of Law party monopolise decisionmaking. Additionally, other Shi'a parties are in the opposition. Sadr reiterated the commitment of supreme religious authorities in Najaf to a fatwa (religious ruling) by Grand Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani in the 1960s which referred to the prohibition of fighting against the Kurds.

In an attempt by the Kurds to strip Maliki of legitimacy among Shi'as, especially among the followers of Ayatullah Sistani, they highlighted this fatwa in the media. Indeed, the fatwa began to circulate in conservative Shi'a circles. The position of the Islamic Supreme Council, led by Ammar al-Hakim, in support of the Kurds is demonstrated by the Council's policies in Iraq after 2003. It was the first to demand the application of a federal system which was in line with Kurdish aspirations. A leading figure in the Islamic Supreme Council described the relationship between the Kurds and the Shi'as as sacred.

The Iraqi List party led by Iyad Allawi, the traditional opposition to Maliki, is divided because of the multiplicity of ideologies, nationalities and creeds within it. The mistakes this List has committed has led to the flight of many figures, some of whom are now supporters of Maliki's policy towards the Kurds, especially with regard to the issue of Kirkuk. Others have taken the path of appeasement, waiting to find out when the current crisis will be put to rest. Those close to Allawi see in this crisis an opportunity to put an end to the policy of the current government. Maliki has not many people to rely on except the Turkmen and some Arab tribes in Kirkuk who have expressed support for the Tigris forces because they are directly affected by the fate of Kirkuk. In this context, reports have circulated that Maliki is arming Arab tribes in Kirkuk. On the other side, the Kurds have rushed to militarise the Kurds of Kirkuk. These policies threaten to spark confrontation between the various nationalities, religious groups and sects in Kirkuk, which would be much worse than a military confrontation between the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga forces.

In light of what is happening in the domestic and foreign arenas, a new era of alliances with the Kurds is developing. However, the opposition to Maliki in the current crisis is not necessarily all in favour of the Kurdish position. Perhaps we can exclude the Islamic Supreme Council which calls for a resolution with the Region by calling for concessions from both sides. The Sadrists, as is the case with most of the people, believe that Kirkuk is an example of peaceful coexistence between different nationalities and religions. This pragmatic position is expressed from the perspective of political compromise in order to avoid an escalation of the crisis with the Kurds. However, the fragmentation of the Arab position, in addition to the deep divisions in the Arab community, has weakened the positions of the political blocs in Baghdad, making a radical solution to the crisis almost impossible.

Prospects: The Fragmentation of the Landscape and Liquidation of Alliances

It is clear that the tensions in Baghdad's relationship with the Kurdish region are not likely to end by occasionally giving doses of painkillers. The region's independent institutions, its army, its role in the region and the residence permit granted by the Kurdish security authorities to Arab Iraqis who enter the region make it as much a de facto state as any other. However, finding a final solution to the Arab-Kurdish issue requires a local, regional and international agreement which is not likely to be reached in the current situation. The socio-political scene in Iraq in the post-2003 era has witnessed major divisions, where there is hardly a national or ethnic group or sect without fragmentation and conflicts.

More recently, the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki accused the Syrian regime for its role in creating chaos and sending car bombs to Iraq. Today, it is supporting the survival of Assad in power, contrary to the position of the Kurdish region which supports the Syrian Kurdish opposition. Even Massoud Barzani had a good relationship with Maliki and was at odds with the Iraqi List led by Iyad Allawi. Today, he regards the Iraqi List as an ally and Turkey as a friend. The question is: will this close relationship between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds persist for a long time or is the situation in the region on shifting sands? Does the road to Iraq pass through Syria, in the sense that what happens in Syria will determine the fate of many pending issues in Iraqi affairs, including the issue of the Kurdistan Region and its relationship with the Arabs and the region in general? This is what is to be determined in the coming days.

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