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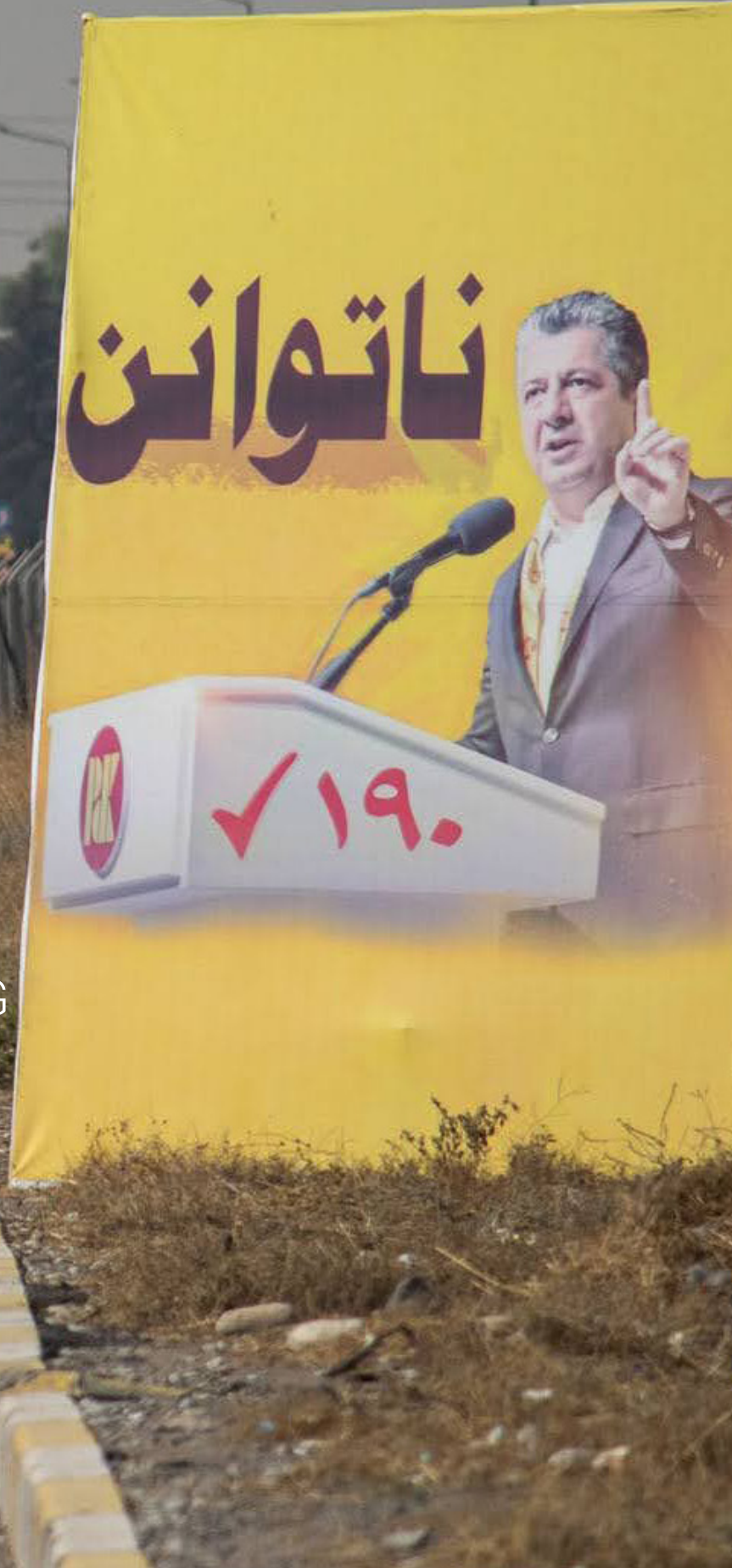


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INSECURE LEADERS

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MAY FACILITATE THE
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KURDISTAN REGION

Zmkan Ali Saleem



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Insecure Leaders: How Elite Infighting May Facilitate the End of Iraq's Kurdistan Region

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Abstract

The stability of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) continues to deteriorate due to the power struggle between the region's two ruling parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). While they have refused to compromise and collaborate in the interest of the KRI and its citizens, the leaders of both parties have primarily relied on opportunistic tactics to weaken each other and secure short-term gains. This study attributes the sources of the ongoing PUK-KDP rivalry to leadership insecurity. Rooted in the region's predatory system of rule, this insecurity has recently deepened due to economic and political factors, generating greater divisions between the two parties to the detriment of Kurdistan's survival. Renewed power-sharing arrangements between the ruling parties without steps toward transforming the region's predatory system into a democratic one will likely fail to produce long-lasting stability in the KRI.

Executive Summary

The stability and integrity of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are being challenged by the intensifying rivalry between the region's two dominant parties: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). While they have refused to compromise and collaborate in the interest of the KRI and its citizens, the leaders of both parties have primarily relied on opportunistic tactics to weaken each other and secure short-term gains. This has undermined not only the stability of the KRI, but also the long-term power and survival of the PUK and KDP leaderships. How can this self-defeating behaviour be explained? This report attributes the deepening divides between the PUK and KDP to the insecurity of the two parties' leaders. Rooted in the predatory system the parties established in the region after 1991, the leaders' insecurity has recently been exacerbated by several factors, including economic vulnerabilities, party fragmentation, the emergence of a younger generation of leaders, and party-driven regional alignments. Leaders' insecurity and the rivalry and mistrust it entails may result in further weakening, and potentially the demise of, the KRI as an autonomous region within Iraq. In analysing the sources of intra-Kurdish rivalry in Iraq, the report makes the following arguments:

1. **Fears of political – and possibly physical – survival drive the ruling elites in the Kurdistan Region.** This sense of insecurity is further exacerbated by increasing military attacks from Turkey and Iran on the KRI, which have targeted security personnel and businessmen closely affiliated with the leaders of both parties. Under these circumstances, the PUK and KDP leaders prioritise clinging to power over securing the rights and interests of Iraqi Kurds through mutual collaboration. Both parties feel existentially threatened when their control over government institutions, resources, and territory diminishes.
2. **The leaders of the region's two dominant parties perceive each other as sources of political and physical insecurity, driving them further apart.** While the Baghdad government and regional states (Turkey and Iran) may constitute primary sources of deepening economic vulnerabilities and rising security threats for the PUK and KDP, the leaders of the two parties perceive each other as having a role in the challenges and threats they face. Each party has sought to manipulate the other's internal divisions to its own advantage, further deepening distrust between the two.
3. **Leaders with limited political experience and a securitised view of politics are increasing inter-party tensions.** The actions and policies of a younger generation of PUK and KDP leaders partly explain the intensifying rivalry between the two parties in recent years. Rising to political prominence mainly due to family ties, these leaders view politics in zero-sum terms and refuse to compromise, which ultimately undermines their own power as well as the stability of the KRI.
4. **Leader insecurity and subsequent inter-party rivalry may continue to destabilise the KRI in the short and long terms.** Short-term stability is under threat due to the intensifying rivalry between the region's two ruling parties. The US and its Western allies might be able to foster a level of collaboration between the two through another power-sharing arrangement in the KRG, though this, as the past six years have shown, is likely to be quite fragile and dysfunctional.

Introduction

The two main parties in Iraq's Kurdistan Region are engaged in a vicious rivalry. The antagonism between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) plays out across multiple fronts within the region and further afield. The two parties exchange harsh accusations in statements and counterstatements and undermine each other at every opportunity. They have further allowed themselves to become entangled in geopolitical competition between foreign powers. The region is once again divided into distinct military, administrative, and political zones of influence, with the KDP controlling Erbil and Duhok governorates and the PUK governing Sulaimaniyah governorate (Saleem, 2024a). Through their actions, these rival leaderships are likely paving the way for the demise of the Kurdistan Region, ultimately threatening their own power and influence. But what explains the self-defeating strife between the PUK and the KDP?

This paper argues that the intensifying rivalry is largely driven by the deepening insecurity of their leaders. It examines the PUK-KDP relationship through the lens of how political leaders' actions are influenced by their perceptions of their opponents. Fearing that their rivals might exploit opportunities to gain political advantages at their expense and potentially threaten their power, political leaders often refuse to compromise and instead engage in opportunistic behaviour. Although this might offer short-term benefits, it is ultimately self-defeating and perpetuates a cycle of tension and rivalry that leaves everyone less secure (Goldsmith, 2004).

Insecurity is a hallmark of predatory systems, where political institutions are weak, rent-seeking is pervasive, and political power is heavily reliant on patronage and clientelist networks (Diamond, 2008; Richards, 1997; Fatton, 2006). The governance system in the Kurdistan Region displays all these key traits and is falling ever more deeply into their grasp (Hassan, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2019; Saleem & Skelton, 2020; Wahab, 2023; Rodgers, 2023).

The paper attributes the deepening insecurity of the leaders of the PUK and KDP and the escalating rivalry between the two parties in recent years to several factors: 1) economic vulnerabilities, 2) party fragmentation, 3) the emergence of a younger generation of leaders, and 4) party-driven regional alignments. It examines the role of these factors in driving the rivalry between the two parties and looks at its implications for the region's stability, security, and autonomous status within Iraq. The report is based on interviews with second-tier PUK and KDP leaders from the two parties' politburos and leadership councils, as well as existing literature on the topic and information and analysis from local and international media.

Trapped in a Cycle of Tensions and Competition

The relationship between the Kurdistan Region's two major parties has significantly deteriorated in recent years, arguably reaching its lowest point since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The parties compete fiercely and, short of resorting to violence, use all available means to advance their separate agendas. While refusing to compromise, both parties act opportunistically, prioritising short-term gains over resolving differences or achieving long-term stability. More than a mere competition between two parties within a single region, their relationship now resembles a rivalry between two adversarial states.

A struggle for power and resources lies at the heart of this rivalry (Fleet & Connelly, 2021; Aziz, 2022a). Since 2019, the KRG has functioned through a power-sharing deal, with key positions held by officials from both parties. This arrangement was established after the 2018 regional elections, where the KDP secured 45 of the 111 parliamentary seats and the PUK won 21. After months of contentious negotiations, the two parties reached an agreement on how to distribute ministerial and parliamentary positions. However, the power-sharing arrangement failed to stabilise their relationship because of pervasive mistrust between the two sides.

The PUK accuses the KDP of ignoring the terms of their power-sharing agreement by excluding it from government decision-making and monopolising control over resources (Interviews with PUK leaders in Erbil-Sulaimaniyah, June-September 2024). The KDP rejects the PUK's claims and accuses its rival of failing to recognise its weaker position relative to the KDP. A KDP leader explained that 'the principle of 50-50 for the distribution of power between us and the PUK no longer applies. The PUK needs to admit that we made greater electoral gains and, therefore, are legitimately entitled to a larger share of government power and positions' (Interview in Sulaymaniyah, June 2024).

Over the past two decades, the balance of power in the Kurdistan Region has increasingly tilted in favour of the KDP. The party has maintained control of key government positions, including the presidency and prime ministership, while also overseeing major economic hubs such as Erbil. Additionally, the KDP controls profitable border crossings, including the Ibrahim Khalil crossing, which connects Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkey (Saleem & Skelton, 2020, Aziz, 2022b).

Meanwhile, the PUK has emerged weaker, leaving its leadership concerned about the party's survival. The party currently holds only the position of deputy prime minister and has lost influence over critical portfolios, including the oil sector and foreign relations. Further, business and infrastructure in Sulaimaniyah (a key PUK zone of influence) has failed to develop at a pace comparable to Erbil and Duhok.

While the KDP has worked to protect and enhance its relatively strong position, the PUK has tried to achieve greater parity. With neither side willing to compromise or make serious concessions, the two parties have heavily relied on opportunistic tactics to advance their

separate interests. For instance, the KDP has exploited its control over top government positions, such as the prime minister, and key resources including the oil sector and other lucrative local revenue sources to prevent the PUK from exercising governmental authority or accessing its revenues and finances. Further, the KDP has sought to coopt tribal and military figures in the Sulaimaniyah area with the aim of extending its military and political influence into the PUK's zone of control.

The PUK's response has not been less opportunistic. From this position of relative weakness, the PUK has resorted to aligning with Baghdad-based parties and authorities to counter the KDP-dominated KRG. With support from Shia parties in Baghdad, the PUK succeeded in including a provision in the federal budget law that allows the party's zone of influence in Sulaimaniyah to bypass the KRG and receive funds directly from the federal government (pukmedia.com, 2023). Once enacted, the provision will effectively reduce the powers of the KDP-dominated KRG. While the PUK may have scored a point in its struggle against the KDP, the real winner here is Baghdad, which has exploited the intra-Kurdish rivalry to undermine the strength of the KRG's financial autonomy.

Drivers of Inter-Party Rivalry

Conflict and competition between the PUK and the KDP are nothing new (McDowall, 2021). However, the recent intensification of their rivalry is arguably unprecedented in the post-2003 period. Leadership insecurity appears to be the primary cause. This is driven by a number of factors, including economic vulnerability, party fragmentation, the rise of a new generation of leaders, and party-driven regional alignments.

Economic Vulnerability

The leaders of the PUK and the KDP are increasingly insecure due to the Kurdistan Region's deepening economic and financial crisis. Historically, a steady flow of revenue allowed both parties to expropriate and utilise these funds to sustain patronage and clientelist networks, which are central to their power. However, recent funding disruptions placed both parties in a precarious position with respect to their support bases. As the two parties have had to compete over shrinking resources, their rivalry has intensified.

Economic incentives played a crucial role in PUK-KDP cooperation during the decade following the US invasion of Iraq (Jüde, 2017). With a unified stance, the two parties effectively secured a near-monopoly on revenue inflows from various sources, including the 17% of the federal budget allocated to the KRG, the region's oil and gas sector, and taxation on international trade at border crossings with Iran and Turkey. They also made significant amounts of money from local businesses and government construction projects, whose contracts were often awarded to companies aligned with the parties. Beyond the self-enrichment of the senior leadership, the parties used public revenues under their control to build extensive patronage networks (Chorev, 2007). They offered jobs

to supporters within KRG institutions, party organisations, and affiliated security forces and companies. Resource abundance motivated and enabled the PUK and the KDP to set aside their differences and cooperate in jointly ruling the region.

However, the good times were not to last. The parties' heavy involvement in rent-seeking and corruption (Hassan, 2015), financial pressure from Baghdad (Aydögan & Alaca, 2023), the loss of access to Kirkuk's oil following the KRG's failed 2017 independence referendum, and the halt of the KRG's independent oil exports since March 2023 reduced the revenues available to both parties (Wahab, 2023). In this challenging context, the PUK has been more adversely affected, primarily due to its deeper internal factionalism and the strength of opposition groups within its zone of influence. PUK leaders attribute their difficulties in maintaining their power base in Sulaimaniyah to inadequate access to revenues and resources, which they blame on the KDP. They contend that the KDP, leveraging its dominance over KRG institutions, deliberately weakens the PUK by obstructing access to the party's rightful share of government revenues. A PUK politburo member claimed that 'KDP-affiliated officials at the top of the KRG are withholding finances from Sulaimaniyah to undermine our party' (Interview in Erbil, July 2024). The KDP rejects this accusation, instead blaming corruption within the PUK. A KDP leader responded that 'the PUK wants to siphon off revenues from Erbil and Duhok, while hoarding finances generated in Sulaimaniyah. This is unacceptable to us' (Interview in Erbil, July 2024).

Setting aside the blame game, it appears that the KDP, with its greater economic and governmental power, has decided that maintaining its power base in Erbil and Duhok provides more immediate strategic advantages than collaborating with the PUK and sharing revenues for the overall benefit of the Kurdistan Region. In response, the PUK has opted to seek additional funds directly from Baghdad, bypassing the KDP-dominated KRG. These policies may result in short-term economic gains. However, the leaders of the two parties are blind to the fact that stable access to resources and finances requires collaboration both within the region and, particularly, with Baghdad. This is especially important in light of the central Iraqi government's gaining the upper hand over Kurdistan's main sources of revenue, including the oil sector and increasingly significant revenues generated through cross-border trade with Turkey and Iran. This strategic shortsightedness is, in part, driven by elites' insecurity, which stems from the internal divisions and factionalism within the two parties.

Party Fragmentation

Growing fragmentation within both parties contributes to a sense of insecurity for their respective leaderships. Both parties opportunistically try to exploit the internal problems of their rival, which only serves to drive them further apart. During the period of the Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani leaderships, internal coherence provided a sense of security for these leaders. As a result, the PUK and the KDP were able to maintain balance relative to each other, project an image of strength to their supporters, and negotiate and sustain power-sharing agreements that secured political and economic gains for each. However, this is no longer the case, as the two parties have experienced varying degrees of internal fragmentation in recent years.

Compared to the KDP, the PUK has experienced greater internal divisions, which have persisted under the leadership of Bafel Talabani, Jalal Talabani's son (Aydögan & Alaca, 2023). Since 2021, the party has tried to centralise its decision-making, mainly to prevent the KDP from intervening in the party's internal affairs. However, recent events suggest this strategy has not worked. In 2022, for example, the KDP opposed Bafel's preferred candidate for the Iraqi presidency, Barham Salih, and instead supported another PUK party member, Latif Rasheed (amwaj.media, 2022).¹ Ultimately, Rasheed won out and became president, highlighting how the KDP has successfully exploited divisions within the PUK to undermine the latter's leadership.

The KDP, on the other hand, has demonstrated greater unity under the continued leadership of Masoud Barzani, with his nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, and his son, Masrour Barzani, serving as his deputies. However, the internal stability of the party may be challenged due to the emerging competition between Masrour and Nechirvan (Muhammed, 2018a; Muhammed, 2019). Both cousins wield significant influence within the KDP and are vying to succeed the 78-year-old Masoud (awene.com, 2021; Aziz, 2022b). However, through his continued influence, the elder Barzani has so far managed to keep the competition between them at a manageable level, preventing it from jeopardising the KDP's coherence (Muhammed, 2019). The stability of the KDP could be in doubt upon his death, likely leading to serious divisions within the party due to Masrour and Nechirvan's intensifying rivalry.

Nevertheless, the current unity at the highest level of the KDP has not prevented the PUK from attempting to exploit other divisions within the party. For example, Bafel courted Adham Barzani, Masoud's cousin and a former KDP leader now estranged from Masoud (Kurdistani Nwe, 2024). Extending symbolic support to Adham, who has little influence within the KDP, may not directly destabilise the party. However, it is sufficient to signal the PUK's ambition of exploiting the KDP's own divisions if possible.

Factional competition further complicates the chances for compromise or collaboration between the two parties in other ways. Bafel's anti-KDP stance is central to his power within the PUK. Therefore, pursuing a lenient position with regards to the KDP, such as accepting a power-sharing arrangement that leaves the PUK as a junior partner again, may weaken Bafel in the eyes of his supporters within the PUK and embolden his challengers outside the party. Meanwhile, Masoud Barzani may be unwilling to concede a key position within the KRG – such as the presidency – to the PUK, as this could leave Nechirvan without a top job. This could lead Nechirvan to focus his energy on challenging Masrour, which would have negative implications for the KDP's internal stability.

Role of the Younger Generation of Leaders

Insecurity runs deep among some of the key members of the younger generation of

¹ Latif Rasheed is not a senior member of the PUK; he is the husband of Shanaz Ibrahim Ahmed, a PUK politburo member and Bafel's aunt. The fact that Rasheed competed against Barham Salih and refused to withdraw to allow Bafel's candidate to win the race highlights the persistent divisions within the upper echelons of the PUK's ruling elite.

leaders in the PUK and the KDP, particularly Bafel and Masrour. They are the main figures that have exacerbated tensions between the two parties since coming to power. Both leaders have scant prior political experience and instead have backgrounds in party-aligned security forces. Their rise to political prominence is ultimately a consequence of the ongoing dominance of the Talabani and Barzani families over the PUK and KDP, respectively (International Crisis Group, 2019). In terms of style, both harbour suspicions about internal and external threats to their power and rely on narrow circles of loyalists. Each believes that the other is determined to undermine their power and their party and has acted under these assumptions (Saleem, 2024a).

Bafel views Masrour as the primary reason behind the PUK's weakness in the KRG and the party's limited access to the region's resources and finances. He made Masrour the central target of his election campaign during the recent elections, repeatedly stating, 'We will end it'² and 'We will bring it down,' in a clear reference to Masrour's premiership (pukmedia.com, 2024). Bafel believes that Masrour is intent on weakening his position by co-opting and aligning with political and security leaders whom he previously removed from the PUK. One example of this is the perceived alliance between Masrour and Lahur Jangi, the PUK's former co-president, who was ousted from his position by his cousin Bafel in 2021.

Reportedly, Lahur has softened his vigorous anti-KDP stance and repaired his relations with the KDP and Masrour. Media outlets close to Bafel claim that this has led to an emerging alliance between the two, directed against the PUK (esta.kurd, 2024). This perceived collaboration between erstwhile enemies and the KDP's attempts to bring senior PUK intelligence officers over to their side (Ismail, 2022) has likely deepened Bafel's distrust of Masrour and the KDP at large.

Masrour, on the other hand, is known for his anti-PUK stance,³ likely driven by his security background and deep distrust of the PUK's current leadership (Muhammed, 2018b). A staunch advocate of the KRG's 2017 independence referendum, he has maintained a deeply suspicious view of Bafel, accusing him and other PUK leaders of treason for allegedly colluding with the Baghdad government and surrendering Kirkuk in the aftermath of the referendum. Masrour's distrust of Bafel has deepened due to the latter's recent political maneuvering, which centred on relying upon Baghdad-based authorities and political factions with the clear aim of limiting the Masrour-led KRG and weakening the KDP's influence and power bases both in the KRI and in the disputed territories.⁴ Given the distrust between Bafel and Masrour, along with the influence each exerts over their

² 'We will end it' was also the central banner of the PUK's election campaign.

³ A PUK leader stated, 'Any goodwill we previously built with the KDP was destroyed by Masrour. Masrour hates the PUK and is the worst prime minister the KRG has ever had' (Interview in Erbil, July 2024).

⁴ For instance, Bafel's close alliance with Babylon, a Christian political faction aligned with influential Shia parties in Baghdad, poses particular challenges for the KDP. Led by Rayan Kildani, Babylon maintains a clear anti-KDP stance and has been instrumental in advancing the PUK's governmental gains in the disputed territories following the December 2023 provincial elections in Iraq, often at the expense of the KDP.

respective parties, compromise and cooperation between the PUK and KDP has been difficult, if not impossible.

Party-Driven Regional Alignments

PUK-KDP relations are further strained by their respective geopolitical alignments. The Kurdistan Region's ruling parties have deep historical ties to Iran and Turkey, which are shaped by geographic proximity, mutual economic interests, and efforts by Tehran and Ankara to contain restive Kurdish communities within their own borders. Although more complicated than this in practice, the general landscape is that the PUK maintains strong relations with Iran (pukmedia.com, 2024b) and the KDP has closer ties with Turkey (kurdistan24.net, 2023).⁵ In recent years, the PUK and KDP have increasingly leveraged regional relationships to counter each other's influence (alarab.co.uk, 2024) and to balance the power of Baghdad and other political forces in Iraq. This dynamic, combined with rising Turkish and Iranian pressure on the region, has heightened the sense of insecurity among the leadership of both parties and has further driven them apart.

Turkey has strategic security interests in the Kurdistan Region due to the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and has undertaken extensive military operations inside the Kurdistan Region in recent years. As part of this posture, it applies pressure on the PUK, accusing it of supporting the PKK and allowing the group to operate in Sulaimaniyah governorate (Leven, 2024). Turkey has targeted civilian facilities, such as airports, in Sulaimaniyah and has also attacked security forces directly linked to the PUK's top leadership (Salim & Zeyad, 2023; Alaca, 2024). Additionally, Turkish government officials have conveyed strong warnings to the PUK, signalling Ankara's determination to pursue further actions to achieve its objectives in the party's stronghold (Sofuoglu, 2024). The threat posed by Ankara's strategy has been acutely felt within the PUK's top leadership. Referring to Turkey's 2023 attack on Sulaimaniyah's Arbat airport, which resulted in the death of three members of the PUK-aligned Counter-Terrorism Group, PUK president Bafel Talabani stated, 'Turkey unjustifiably martyred three heroes of the fight against ISIS; three of my own personal friends' (YouTube, 2023).

Given the close ties between the KDP and Ankara, the PUK suspects the KDP of playing a role in the Turkish threat it faces. In this context, the PUK has alleged that the KDP provides false intelligence to Turkey to facilitate drone attacks on PUK-controlled areas (pukmedia.com, 2023a; politicspress.com, 2024). The KDP's alignment with Turkey is partly due to its rivalry with the PKK in Iraq and Syria (Mandiraci, 2022). The KDP has accused the PKK of provoking Turkey's military operations in the Kurdistan Region, including Ankara's attacks on the PUK's areas of influence. For example, after a 2023 Turkish airstrike near Sulaimaniyah airport, Masrour Barzani condemned the incident but notably did not directly blame Ankara (shafaq.com, 2023).

⁵ Despite the alliance with Turkey, the KDP maintains ties to Tehran. These ties serve the economic interests of both sides through exporting the KRG's oil via Iran.

While the security of the PUK leadership has deteriorated under Turkish threats, the KDP leadership has faced challenges from military actions by Iran and its allies among Shia armed groups in Iraq. Iran and its aligned factions are unsettled by the KDP's close relations with the US and its political manoeuvring in Baghdad.⁶ This tension, combined with anger over the Israel-Gaza conflict, has led to increased security threats for the KDP, including drone and ballistic missile attacks on Erbil, the seat of the KDP's top leadership. Iranian ballistic missiles have targeted and killed businessmen closely affiliated with the KDP's leading Barzani family (aljazeera.com, 2024).

When it condemned these attacks on Erbil, the PUK barely mentioned Iran, in a reflection of the KDP's weak objection to Turkish attacks on Sulaimaniyah. Nevertheless, the insufficient response deepened the KDP's suspicion of the PUK and strengthened its concerns about the party's relationship with Tehran. Indeed, KDP-aligned media outlets subsequently ran stories accusing Bafel Talabani of direct involvement in attacks on Erbil by sharing intelligence with Tehran (basnews.com, 2024).

Implications for the Region's Governance, Stability and Autonomy

The intensifying PUK-KDP rivalry has serious consequences for the Kurdistan Region's stability, its relationship with the federal government in Baghdad, and its interactions with its neighbours. Competition between the two parties extends into the governance and security sectors, resulting in governmental failure and fears about renewed violence between the parties. Furthermore, the region has lost much of its autonomy to Iraq's federal government, which has exploited the divisions and tensions between the two parties to its advantage. Additionally, partisan-based regional alliances further weaken the KRG's position with respect to Iran and Turkey. Both countries have manipulated PUK-KDP tensions to advance and impose their own agendas, often at the expense of the region's security and stability.

Governance Failure and Security Tensions

The growing tensions and competition between the PUK and the KDP are hindering the KRG's ability to pursue a comprehensive development plan for Kurdistan. Inter-party rivalry and the prioritisation of private political gains have paralyzed the KRG, preventing it from completing essential public service projects (Saleem, 2024b). More worryingly, inter-party tensions have threatened the region's security. A notable example of this is the 2022 assassination of a PUK intelligence officer who had defected to Erbil along with the former head of the PUK's intelligence agency. The Kurdistan Region Security Council, previously headed by Masrouf, swiftly blamed the assassination on the PUK's Counterterrorism Group and its top commander, a close ally of Bafel (Rudaw, 2022). The KDP-controlled Ministry of Interior subsequently issued arrest warrants for PUK security commanders and courts in Erbil issued death sentences for them. Using his authority as

⁶ Following the 2021 national elections, the KDP, for instance, aligned with the Sadrist and Sunni factions in the so-called tripartite alliance, which aimed to control the government in Baghdad and potentially exclude pro-Iran Shia factions and groups from power in Iraq.

prime minister, Masrouf went further and stopped salary payments to the Counterterrorism Group. In a show of defiance, Bafel arrived at Erbil airport with the Counterterrorism Commander the KDP had blamed for the assassination, nearly precipitating a violent reaction from the KDP.

In pursuit of policies and actions designed to bolster their image as strong and decisive figures, the PUK and KDP leaderships fail to consider the impact of their actions on the region's security. The above-mentioned incident not only further heightened tensions between the parties, but also raised concerns that the situation could get badly out of control.

Baghdad Gaining Upper Hand

Iraq's federal government has consequently weaponised the divisions between the PUK and the KDP to re-assert its authority over the Kurdistan Region. By exploiting the rift between the two parties, Baghdad can intervene more directly in the region's politics. For instance, when the two parties failed to agree in 2023 to amend the region's electoral law, the PUK decided to take the case to the Baghdad-based Federal Supreme Court (FSC). This provided the FSC with a platform to reshape the region's politics by reducing the number of the minority quota seats in the Kurdistan Parliament. The federal authorities have also exploited PUK-KDP divisions to maintain pressure on the KRG on issues including the budget and oil. Previously, a united front by the PUK and the KDP in Baghdad had successfully secured a substantial share of the federal budget for the KRG. However, with the parties unable to work together, the KRG has found itself with little leverage and faces ongoing challenges in accessing its share of federal finances.

Threats of Iran and Turkey

Tensions between the PUK and the KDP hinder their ability to unite against external pressure, particularly the military threats posed by Iran and Turkey. While the KRG lacks the military strength to counter these countries' formidable capabilities, a unified stance from the two parties could improve the management of Iranian and Turkish incursions. A joint diplomatic effort by the Kurdish parties might also better address the security and political concerns of Tehran and Ankara, potentially reducing the likelihood of military action by these regional powers. Instead, the ongoing divisions between the PUK and the KDP make the Kurdistan Region vulnerable to interference by Tehran and Ankara.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Representatives of the international community and influential external players such as the US and the UK expressed relief after the Kurdistan Region finally held its much-delayed parliamentary elections on 20 October 2024. They may be hoping that the PUK and the KDP will form a new power-sharing KRG and work together to address pressing issues facing the region, such as governance dysfunction, economic challenges and relations with the federal government in Baghdad. While this is the correct course of action for the region's stability, the insecurity of the two parties' leaders may well inhibit such a positive trajectory in both the short and long terms.

Under pressure from the US and its Western allies, as well as the ambitions of the two parties to retain power in the face of nascent opposition groups like New Generation – which secured 15 seats during the recent elections – the PUK and KDP may again be forced to form another power-sharing arrangement. As the experience of the past six years has demonstrated, such a power-sharing deal is likely to be fragile and may fail to tackle the sources of instability. Further, developments such as the potential resumption of oil exports from the region via Turkey may address some of the sources of elite insecurity in Kurdistan. However, the ongoing inter-party struggle – which also centres around control of the region's oil and gas sector – could undermine the positive outcomes of restarting oil exports.

International community members interested in stabilising Iraqi Kurdistan should address elite insecurity at its roots by committing to gradually transforming the region's predatory system into a truly democratic one. This should begin by supporting efforts to dismantle the bonds of patronage and clientelism through comprehensive reforms in the region's economic, security, and financial sectors (Saleem & Skelton, 2020). Moreover, the US, UK and EU states should leverage their influence and ties in the KRI to emphasise the rule of law and strengthen the role of the region's parliament and other accountability institutions. Only a rules-based, institutionalised political system can both restrain and address the insecurity of PUK and KDP leaders, encouraging them to compromise and collaborate in the interests of Iraq's Kurdish citizens.

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Cover Image

A poster featuring Masrouf Barzani featuring text that says 'You cannot,' during the KRI parliamentary elections on 20 October 2024. Source: Winthrop Rodgers

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