



The New War in Iraq: No Safe Place for the Arabs and the Kurds - Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora

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The world has been shocked by the “two monumental crisis”, the “twin plagues of Ebola and ISIS”, UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Zeid Raad al-Hussein stated recently. It is not that the international public sees Africans dying or Middle Easterners being massacred en masse for the first time, but the west represented by the UN with a humanitarian face feels threatened by the real and potential repercussions of the two terrifying man-made disasters for their self-interests. The “twin plagues” before they infect the land, people and interests of the western world should be contained wherever they originate from by any means.

The US and British concerns about the uncontrolled expansion of [“Islamic State”](#)



(IS) in the Middle East reached an alarming level in August, not necessarily because unprotected civilians including the Yazidis were brutally attacked by IS (civilians being murdered is a daily routine in Iraq since 2003), but because IS was making advances into the [Kurdistan region of Iraq \(KRI\)](#), the only safe haven in Iraq since 2003. The KRI started sharing a border with “Islamic State”, when IS took over Mosul and the arms left behind by the Iraqi army in June.



Baghdad accused Erbil for supporting IS and Erbil accused Baghdad for having an ineffective army and undemocratic government unable to protect the Iraqi territory. President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron declared that IS was representing a direct threat to their national security and to the allies of the US and the UK in Iraq, i.e. the [KRG \(Kurdish Regional Government\)](#) as their only trustworthy ally in Iraq. Nobody was more content than the Kurds when Anglo-American coalition forces invaded Iraq in 2003. The fall of [Saddam Hussein](#)'s regime in Baghdad made the Kurds of Iraq believed that fortune was finally smiling on them. The Kurdistan region of Iraq was already autonomous *de-facto* since the 1991 intifada and American interference through [the Operation Provide Comfort](#) on the grounds to protect the Kurds from Saddam's atrocities and to facilitate the safe return of the Kurdish refugees back home.

The establishment of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq in 1991 was the first major US-led international action to institutionalize the separation between the Kurdish Iraq and the Arab Iraq.



Iraqi Kurdistan remained in despair and a civil war between the [KDP](#) of Barzani and the [PUK](#) of Talabani during most of the 1990s. When Barzani asked Saddam Hussein for help to defeat the PUK in 1996, this insidious treachery traumatized the Iraqi Kurds and left a painful wound in their national memory that would never heal and would remind them that they could not trust anyone, not even each other, but the mountains. There was no hope in autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan until 2003, or until foreign military officers, diplomats and advisors convinced the two-headed Kurdish leadership to forget about the enmities of the past and cooperate to exploit the economic potential in their region with the help of international businesses.

The invasion in 2003 was a war against the Iraqi state and crushed its institutions to smithereens creating a huge vacuum of power and leaving the civilian Iraqis to the mercy of various militant groups and movements that would whet the appetite of the war industry. In Iraqi Kurdistan however, the institutions of the earlier regime that were under the Kurdish control since 1991 and the Kurdish armed forces, [peshmerga](#) that was always independent from the Iraqi army have been kept intact and reformed according to the standards and expectations of the foreign governments and the UN.

Erbil, the Kurdish capital, was helped to secure economic and political concessions from Baghdad and the Kurdish leadership was made to believe in the likelihood that a safe haven for business in Iraqi Kurdistan could be created while the rest of the country were being bombed to dust and flooding in blood.



The Kurdish leadership, under the official recognition of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) by the Iraqi central government in 2005, has been willing to cooperate peacefully with the foreign governments, UN and oil companies to do business with the rest of the world and to gain international sympathy for Kurdistan's future independence from Iraq. KDP and PUK have continued to have their separate peshmerga forces; that indicates the lack of trust between the two militant Kurdish parties controlling recently enlarged territories of Iraqi Kurdistan (following the IS intrusion in Iraq) and shows that they may be running a two-party government in northern Iraq (there is also Goran party with increasing political leverage, but no peshmerga force), but are far away from the idea of a unified state apparatus above parties.

Against this backdrop, thousands of Kurdish refugees and expatriates who had



been uprooted in the 1980s and 90s and residing in Europe and the US have come back to Kurdistan to start a new life and build much-deserved independent Kurdistan within a safe haven protected by the Kurdish peshmerga trusted and armed by the western allies. For the rest of Iraq, the invasion has been the final stage of an internationally organized crime against the people of Iraq that had first been committed in 1991 with the imposition of the heinous UN sanctions. According to the most conservative statistics, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed by the Anglo-American forces since 2003, more than one million Iraqis have died because of war-related causes and more than four million Iraqis have been displaced internally and internationally. Most of the ones internally displaced have sought refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, reminding the Kurds that there is a war in Iraq that they are still a part of.



There are so many Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan including simple civilians and high-ranked officials within the KRG who welcome the displaced [Iraqi Arabs](#) since 2003 with compassion remembering the days that the Kurds were in the same situation.

Their good intentions look like a brotherly pat on the shoulders of the homeless Iraqis who are reminded everyday by the circumstances that they are “guests” in “Kurdistan”. The KRG claims to be pursuing an “open door policy” for displaced Iraqis and Syrians, while Arabs (and visitors like me) are seriously questioned at the check points and given only a cold glimpse of what could have happened without proper travel documents. The Kurdish leadership acknowledges the multiethnic, multicultural nature of “Kurdistani society” that is composed of Christian Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Assyrians, Yazidis, Turkmens and Kurds. The



incoming flow of Iraqis and Syrians with various ethnic, religious and sectarian identities has the potential to change the ethnic composition of Iraqi Kurdistan if an “open door policy” is genuinely practiced; this is a serious concern for the Kurdish leadership who are trying to make sure that however the ethnic composition in the “Kurdistani” cities and towns, the Kurds are always the majority. There are wide-spread concerns and growing frustration both among the Kurdish natives and within the KRG regarding the increasing number of displaced Iraqis and Syrians (for over two years) in their cities and towns.

Nonetheless, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan are frustrated as much with the two-party domination, corruption, censorship and repression as with the increasing number of desperate “guests” from Iraq and Syria at their gates. The Kurdish leadership is militarized, authoritarian and corrupt as well, and the Kurds are not afraid to voice their anger at their regional government. Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, houses disturbing contrasts. You can see refugee children begging on the streets and their families living in precarious shelters in and outside of the city, while the privileged minority- the wealthy Kurds, foreigners and expats- drives luxurious cars, dine in the 5-star hotels protected by private security guards and indulge themselves by extravagant spending in the western style shopping malls.



Economic rent and privileges are extremely unequally distributed among the social classes and communities in Iraqi Kurdistan and the people struggle with poverty and unemployment hoping for a change in their circumstances after the long-awaited independence. There are also Indians and Bengalis working on the construction sites and in the industries and Filipinos working in the service sector. Poor natives of Iraqi Kurdistan looking for jobs and asking for their share of the economic opportunities available only to a selected group of privileged minority feel frustrated to the extent that protests targeting the guest workers, their employers and the KRG take place quite often and are repressed by police violence.

They say that security is the most important asset of Iraqi Kurdistan before its rich oil resources. IS has been a serious challenge to the KRG as they share a border as neighbors today.



There is also a fear among the civilian Kurds and the Kurdish officials that displaced [Sunni Arabs](#) might be potential or real IS sympathizers or supporters. The intolerance toward Sunni Arab residents and guests in Iraqi Kurdistan is exacerbated by the IS brutality and makes it convenient for the extreme nationalists within the KRG to defend segregation of the Arabs from the Kurds in northern Iraq as a policy alternative. The KRG presents itself as a bulwark against Radical Islamism in Iraq; but the irony is that radical Islamist organization in Iraq started first in northern Iraq in the 1990s (Al Qaeda at that time), after the imposition of the No-Fly Zone by the US-led international community.

IS has also presented a golden opportunity for the Kurds to capitalize on. When in Erbil, I heard stories about the Arabs from the disputed territories who were discouraged to stay there, or encouraged to move to the Kurdish cities like Erbil, as part of the Kurdish policy to increase the percentage of the Kurds in the disputed territories and to dislocate the Arabs of these lands to the Kurdish cities where they become a minority. IS advances in Iraq have recently made it very convenient for the Kurdish peshmerga to take over the disputed territories for security reasons. Kirkuk, currently under the Kurdish peshmerga control, is a prime example. The KRG currently controls the large swaths of the disputed territories and plans to have referendums in the near future in these provinces without negotiating with the government in Baghdad. [Fuad Hussein](#) of the KDP recently informed the international public in D.C. about the upcoming referendum in Kirkuk.

The KRG sees the Iraqi state as a failed state with no legitimacy. An almost dissolved Iraqi army and an ineffective government in Baghdad make it easier for the Kurdish leadership to legitimate the inevitability of an “independent, secular, stable and democratic” Kurdistan with more and direct authority to govern the territories, the people and the resources (oil, gas, pipelines etc.)



they claim ownership of.



Reports from various organizations and news from local sources show that the Middle East is in a regional humanitarian crisis from Gaza to Iraq, from Syria to Yemen. Something with such an extensive scope cannot be contained within one country or in the region; violence is not a virus that can be quarantined. It kills civilians and displaces the survivors; but most importantly it produces the wicked circumstances for economic and ideological exploitation that perpetuates violence.

Iraqi Kurdistan has been considered as a safe-haven within a country struck by violence and terrorism, an exceptional success story about state-building and economic growth in the era of military neo-liberalism. The recent chaos in Syria



and Iraq indicate that there could be no peace in Kurdistan, federal or independent, until the blood surrounding their “secular, stable and democratic” island dries.

The hope is that the Kurdish leadership that has been trying to push forward their political agenda for Kurdish independence, capitalizing on the war circumstances understand this.