



**AMERICAN  
FRIENDS OF  
KURDISTAN**

# **Fact Sheet on the Kurds in Iraq**

American Friends of Kurdistan  
Washington, DC

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# Mission

## American Friends of Kurdistan Mission

American Friends of Kurdistan (AFK) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(4) advocacy organization.

AFK strengthens, protects, and promotes American-Kurdish relations and supports policies that advance the national security and prosperity of Americans, Kurds, and our other allies.

AFK is the first organization of its kind, founded in 2019 by a group of Americans who believe American policy toward Kurds and greater Kurdistan is lacking and all-too-often ignored.

A century after the Sykes-Picot Agreement divided Kurdish communities across four countries, we believe the status quo has largely failed the Kurds and America's strength in the region has been undermined as a result.

AFK advocates for the development of a unique, realistic, and tailored policy for every region of Kurdistan which includes northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. With an estimated 45 million Kurds worldwide, and over 40 million of them living in the greater Kurdistan region, we believe it is in the American interest to empower Kurds to lead their own peaceful efforts toward democratic self-determination in keeping with American values. Kurds are on the frontline in the war against radical Islamic terrorism and are one of America's strongest allies in the Middle East.

AFK is independent and nonpartisan. We will achieve greater support for the U.S.-Kurdish alliance by advocating for bipartisan Congressional solutions, while also working to educate American civic and national security leaders at all levels of government.

AFK is the only advocacy organization established specifically to enhance American-Kurdish relations. We are not affiliated with any American or Kurdish political party, and we do not accept financial assistance from any government.

The Kurds have a saying, "no friends but the mountains." At AFK we believe the Kurds have a mountain of American friends.

# Background

The Kurdish population in Iraqi Kurdistan (South Kurdistan or Bashur) is estimated to be about 5.5 million. The Kurds are one of the largest stateless minorities in the world and are the fourth largest ethnic group within the Middle East. Overall, there are an estimated 35-45 million Kurds spread between Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The Kurds in Iraq inhabit the four northernmost provinces; Dohuk, Erbil (capital), Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja. These four provinces are governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which was formed following the first Gulf War by the support of the United States. The KRG is led by two rival political factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzani clan and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of the Talabani clan.

In the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991, the KDP and PUK came to a power sharing agreement for the newly established Kurdish government. As a result of an internal rivalry between the Barzani and Talabani families, violent civil war erupted in 1994 between the two political parties until a U.S.-sponsored peace agreement was signed ending the conflict in 1998, called the Washington Agreement.

Iraqi Kurdistan has had a de facto autonomy since the U.S. established a no-fly-zone after the first Gulf War, which prevented further repression from Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. Iraqi Kurdistan is the only region in which the Kurds have self-autonomy. The Kurdish region in northern Iraq was recognized as a semi-autonomous region as a result of the passing of Iraq's 2005 constitution.

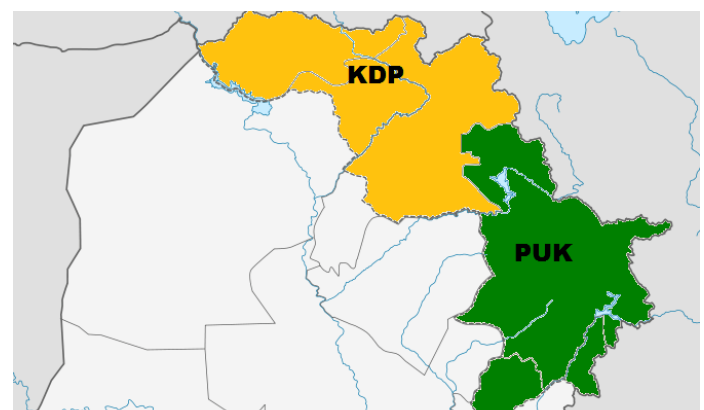
The Kurdistan Region is known to be split between yellow-green zones or KDP-PUK zones. KDP controls Erbil and Duhok, while PUK controls Sulaymaniyah and Halabja provinces.

Map of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)



Source: New York Times

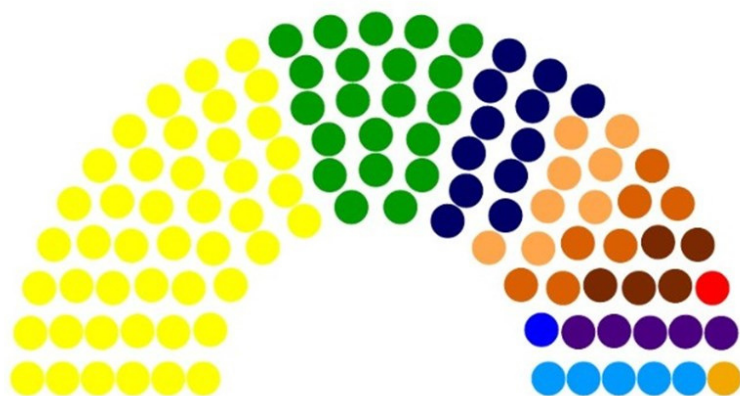
Map of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) KDP-PUK zones



Source: Wikipedia

# Political Parties of the KRG

## Kurdistan Parliament



Source: [Kurdistan Parliament](#)

Following the first Gulf War, the Kurds desperately needed to establish governance and a way to carry out public services. The first democratic election in Kurdistan was held on May 19th, 1992. Since then there have been five Kurdish parliamentary elections in total: 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2018. The Kurdish National Assembly was formally changed to the Kurdistan Parliament in 2009. There are 111 seats in the Kurdistan Parliament and it not only seeks to preserve the rights of Kurds but of other ethnic and religious minorities as well.

## List of KRG's Political Parties

Kurdistan Democratic Party	45
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	21
Gorran, Change Movement	12
New Generation Movement	8
Kurdistan Islamic Group	7
Kurdistan Islamic Union	5
Sardam, Socialist Democratic Party	1
Azadi, Freedom Party	1
National Union Coalition (Christian)	3
Assyrian Syriac Chaldean Popular Council	1
Rafidain Party	1
Turkmen Development Party	2
Turkmen Reform Party	1
Turkmen Front	1
Nation Party (Turkmen)	1
Armenian	1
Independent	4

## Dominant Political Parties



KDP



PUK



Gorran

# Leadership of the KRG

Top roles in the KRG are held by the Barzani and Talabani families in a power sharing agreement in the form of splitting and exchanging key positions. The former president of KRG was Masoud Barzani, he continues to lead the KDP. Today the President is Barzani's nephew, Nechirvan Barzani (former PM), while Masoud Barzani's son Masrour is the Prime Minister. The Deputy Prime Minister is Qubad Talabani, Jalal Talabani's son. Bafel Talabani, Jalal Talabani's other son is co-chair of the PUK along with Lahur Talabani, Jalal Talabani's nephew.

The exchange of key positions can also be seen in KRG representative offices abroad. The U.S. Representative for KRG based in Washington, D.C. was previously controlled by PUK's Qubad Talabani, now Deputy Prime Minister. Today the KRG representative office in Washington is solely controlled by KDP. In exchange, the United Kingdom Representative office for KRG is controlled by the PUK. This continues across all offices abroad.

Key ministerial positions in the KRG are mainly controlled by the KDP, such as the Ministry of Natural Resources. The former minister of natural resources was Ashti Hawrami, known for his deep ties with the Barzani family and corruption. The newly appointed minister is Kamal Mohammad Atroshi, previously Masrour Barzani's energy advisor.

Important positions such as the ministry of natural resources allows KDP to dominate Kurdistan's revenue. By not equally distributing KRG's revenue across all provinces, PUK in return becomes weaker, its region economically deprived but also leaves KRI divided.

Nechirvan Barzani, President



Masrour Barzani, Prime Minister



Qubad Talabani, Deputy Prime Minister





# Politics of the KRG

In the wake of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, the late Jalal Talabani of the PUK was elected President of Iraq by the Iraqi Parliament, a position he held from 2005-2014. Masoud Barzani of the KDP was President of the Kurdistan Region from 2005-2017. Politics in Iraqi Kurdistan have historically revolved around the Talabani and Barzani families. The political struggle for power between them continues to this day and is largely tribal and authoritarian. The KRG is dominated by the KDP and PUK, with a smaller opposition party emerging known as the Change Movement, or Gorran. Gorran was founded in 2009 by the late Nawshirwan Mustafa, a former member of the Peshmerga and PUK. Gorran was established to combat the extensive corruption of the KDP and PUK.

As of 2018, the KDP holds 45 seats in Parliament with the PUK and Gorran Movement holding 21 and 12 seats. Both the KDP and PUK control separate elements of the Peshmerga and often do not cooperate with each other due to their internal rivalry. The KRG is also at odds with the Baghdad government. Tensions were raised in 2017 as the KRG held a referendum on Kurdish independence. The international community, including the U.S. was against the referendum. Particularly Iran and Turkey, as both countries are regional powers and Turkey having the largest population of Kurds.

Other areas outside of Iraqi Kurdistan sought to secede from Iraq, such as Kirkuk, as many Kurds see Kirkuk as the “Kurdish Jerusalem”. Kirkuk was a victim of Saddam’s Arabization program under his Ba’athist regime with thousands of Kurds being expelled. As a result of this, threats against KRG secession were issued from the Iraqi, Turkish, and Iranian governments. The Iraqi Army mobilized with support from Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) against the Kurds in Kirkuk. Both PUK and KDP forces withdrew causing the Kurds to lose all territory outside of Iraqi Kurdistan including the gains they made from the fight against Daesh.

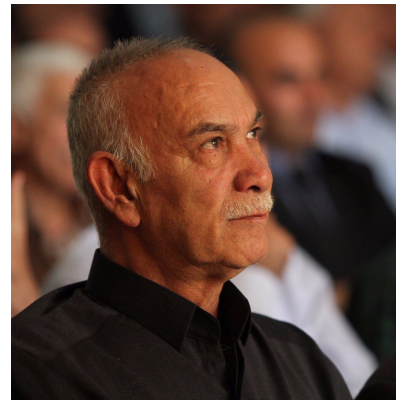
Masoud Barzani (KDP)



Jalal Talabani (PUK)



Nawshirwan Mustafa (Gorran)



# Security

The KRG's military apparatus is the Peshmerga, and is now estimated at between 150,000-200,000 troops. The name "Peshmerga" translates to "those who face death". The Kurds and the United States have a long history of intelligence and strategic cooperation dating back to the Cold War. In 1998, the U.S. dispatched operatives from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to develop a close relationship with the Kurdish Peshmerga in order to work against Saddam Hussein and his regime.

In 2003, Kurdish Peshmerga provided intelligence support in Operation Red Dawn, the military operation that culminated with the capture of Saddam Hussein. In 2004, with the help of intelligence provided by the CIA, Peshmerga forces captured an Al-Qaeda envoy for Osama Bin Laden, Hassan Ghul. Hassan Ghul's capture and interrogation by Peshmerga would later provide intelligence that would ultimately lead to the location of Osama Bin Laden. In the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/Daesh), the Peshmerga has proven a powerful force, halting the Islamic States' advance as Iraqi troops withdrew in 2014.

As a result of coordinated airstrikes from U.S. Special Forces, Peshmerga forces were able to not only drive out Daesh terrorists from Iraqi Kurdistan but were able to drive further south to eliminate Daesh remnants. The U.S., British, and French have all sent advisors to assist in training the Peshmerga forces in order to transition the Peshmerga from a largely guerrilla warfare fighting force to a more conventional military.

Peshmerga forces in training



Source: Defense Logistics Agency.

Since 2014 the U.S. has worked to unite the different factions controlling the Peshmerga in an effort to streamline the Kurds into a professional fighting force free of political rivalries. Many Kurds support the U.S.'s efforts as many feel left behind by the Barzani and Talabani families due to their consolidation of power during the fight against Daesh. As early as 2009, the U.S. military offered to train and arm the Peshmerga but only if the Peshmerga agree to unite as a singular professional entity. This has been slow to materialize as KDP and PUK officials are failing to come to an agreement.

An estimated 30,000 Peshmerga forces receive salaries from the U.S.. In early 2021, the U.S. temporarily halted funding to the Peshmerga due to lack of unity, commitment and progress by KDP-PUK.

The Peshmerga receive their U.S. funding through the annual National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The goal is to train, equip, advise, and professionalize the Peshmerga.

# Kurdistan Region and Daesh

Since the beginning of the military intervention to defeat Daesh (Islamic State) began in 2014, the Peshmerga in Iraq as well as the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria have been instrumental. Peshmerga forces have been backed by U.S. and other allies with training, military advisors, and air support. The Peshmerga have also proved to be versatile in that they have acted as a humanitarian force as well as a military. In 2014 with U.S. support the Peshmerga were able to rescue thousands of Yazidi's, off of Mount Sinjar. The Yazidis are a religious minority that Daesh has actively targeted and massacred. Two major military campaigns that the Peshmerga demonstrated great combat effectiveness were the 2015 Sinjar and 2016 Mosul Offensive. The Sinjar Offensive was a critical victory in the fight against Daesh. The capture of the town of Sinjar cut Daesh supply line to Syria and Mosul. Capturing Highway 47, the major road that connects Mosul to Syria, not only cut Daesh supply lines but allowed coalition forces to concentrate on the Daesh stronghold in Mosul.

With Sinjar in coalition hands, the Peshmerga and their allies focused their attention on Islamic State's capital in Iraq, the city of Mosul. Mosul fell to the Islamic state in 2014 as Iraqi government forces retreated. The Battle of Mosul would last 9 months of brutal urban fighting, from October 2016-July 2017. An estimated 100,000 coalition troops took part in the assault on Mosul with the Peshmerga contributing 40,000 of its own in the fight against Daesh. Peshmerga forces fought alongside Iraqi Security Forces, Sunni paramilitaries, as well as fighting from ethnic and religious minorities. While having a record of human rights allegations, Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) also took part in the fight against Daesh. The Peshmerga were also largely responsible for clearing out villages on the outskirts of the city held by the Islamic State. During the offensive, Peshmerga forces captured nine Daesh held villages which equaled to an area of exactly 200 sq. km. After 9 months of hard fighting, then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi arrived in Mosul to declare victory over Daesh in July of 2017.

Peshmerga move into Sinjar



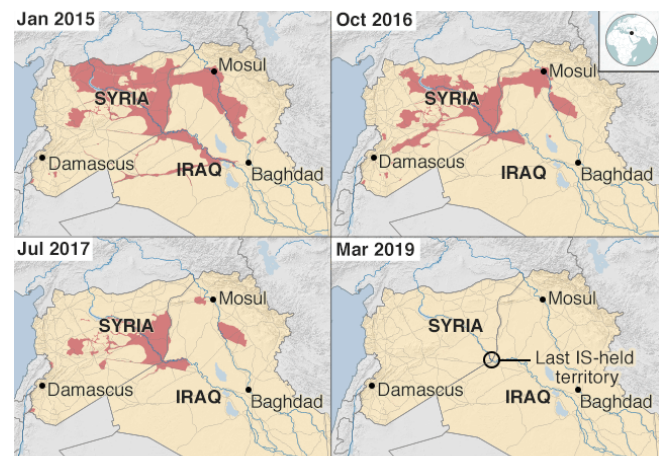
Source: [New York Times](#)

Peshmerga Advance on ISIS positions in Mosul



Source: [BBC](#)

Map of Territory lost by Daesh



Source: [BBC](#)



# Recent Developments

## KRG-Baghdad

In recent months there has been growing cooperation between the Baghdad government and the KRG. This improvement of relations stems from increased cooperation on intelligence and security issues in Iraq. Both sides are seeking to close the security gap and eradicate any remaining Daesh elements operating in Iraq. According to a Peshmerga spokesperson, Daesh has shifted its tactics from large scale attack to small hit and run attacks. Peshmerga forces have been returning to the K1 military base outside Kirkuk in light of increased cooperation. In May 2021 it was announced that the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga will be establishing Joint Coordination Centers (JCC) in order to fill the security gap and eliminate Daesh remnants.

## Turkey's military campaigns

In 2021 Turkey showed more aggression in Iraqi Kurdistan's Duhok province regularly launching military operations against the PKK. Many Kurds have been forced to flee their homes as a result of the attacks. On April 23rd, 2021 Turkish forces launched two military offensives against the PKK known as Operation Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt. In Operation Claw-Lightning, Turkish forces assaulted suspected PKK positions with the support of airstrikes and artillery, while Operation Claw-Tiger saw a massive bombing campaign on over 80 suspected PKK positions. In a recent attack near Makhmour refugee camp, a high-ranking leader of the PKK was killed in Turkish airstrikes along with several civilians.

## Protests

Kurdistan Region has been faced with an increase in protests due to lack of basic services, rampant corruption and nepotism by the ruling families. Mass demonstrations took place in August 2020 demanding civil servants rightful salaries to be paid. Over 280 people were arrested including teachers, civil servants, journalists and human rights activists.

Protests flared again in December 2020, Washington Post reported "security forces fired tear gas on hundreds of protesters demanding the release of government salaries and pensions." Eight demonstrators were killed and hundreds were injured.

## Jailing of journalists and activists

Kurdistan Regional Government led by KDP's Masrour Barzani has increased his target on critical voices. Despite international condemnation including from the United States, Masrour Barzani sentenced five journalists and activists to 6-years in prison. The PM stated these men were in fact not journalists or activists but spies acting on behalf of foreign entities. The PM interfered in the judicial process prior to a trial. The five individuals faced harsh interrogation tactics and were even threatened with the rape of their wives if they did not confess.



**Fact sheet created by James Motamed and edited by Diliman Abdulkader.**

**AFK fact sheets will be periodically updated.**

**The goal of AFK fact sheets is to give an overall picture, it does not cover all aspects of the topic.**

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**AFK is the leading independent advocacy and education organization in Washington working to enhance U.S.-Kurdish relations.**