



## After the Earthquake – Perpetual Victims

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### Executive Summary

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- \* The unfolding of the crisis in Kurdistan in the aftermath of the referendum on Kurdish independence has become the focal point of the regional powers' quest for long-term power. Most significant is the struggle between the lust for lasting power of the leaders of states and the yearning for self-rule at the sub-state level by the grassroots - both Arabs and minorities.
- \* At the core of the still unfolding all-out campaign to crush the Kurds is the exploiting of the referendum by Tehran and Ankara, as well as a reluctant Baghdad, in order to consolidate their regional hegemonic aspirations in the name of saving the Iraqi, and for that matter the Syrian, state from a Kurdish menace.
- \* With the major road system in the Khanaqin area secured after the Kurdish withdrawal, Tehran moved in early November to expedite the consolidation of the Iran-Mediterranean route in a major offensive by diverse Shiite forces. The Iran-sponsored and Shiite-controlled major road from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean is now open and secure. This would not have happened had the Kurds were able to continue to control the Khanaqin district.
- \* The Kurds and their dreams of freedom and statehood are but the latest victims of Washington's irrationality and betrayal, Tehran's resolve and audacity, and the ineptitude of their own Erbil leadership.
- \* Kurdistan's Sulaimani-centered PUK-affiliated young leaders who emerged as the most promising post crisis leaders have so far failed the Kurds. While these young leaders have all the attributes to rise to the occasion - they have so far disappointed. Instead of focusing on leading the salvation of all Kurds - they have instead immersed in a vicious fratricidal fight for personal gains and power within the ranks of the PUK's fractured leadership.
- \* Kurdistan is in dire need for a new generation of leaders who will confront both the local Sunni Jihadism and Tehran and its proxies, as well as will rise and meet the challenges when dealing with Baghdad and the world powers increasingly involved in formulating the new post-crisis greater Middle East. The current aspirant leaders are yet to prove they will be able to navigate the Kurds out of their current plight to resuming their central role in the nascent Fertile Crescent of Minorities and the new-old greater Middle East.



## About ISPSW

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## About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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*Yossef Bodansky*



## Analysis

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The unfolding of the crisis in Kurdistan in the aftermath of the September 25, 2017, referendum on Kurdish independence has become the focal point of the regional powers' quest for long-term power. Most significant is the struggle between the lust for lasting power of the leaders of states and the yearning for self-rule at the sub-state level by the grassroots - both Arabs and minorities.

Hence, the outcome of the multi-faceted struggle for Kurdistan might determine the long-term tenuous relations between the modern Arab state and its increasingly hostile citizenry.

Masoud Barzani's greatest mistake was believing his lavishly paid lobbyists in Washington who assured him that, rhetoric notwithstanding, Washington would support the Kurds on account of the long-term relations, the friendship with Israel, and the Kurds' loyal support for the US in the region - particularly in fighting against both Saddam Hussein and the Islamic State. Several American "friends" convinced Barzani not to heed to the veiled warning that was buried in the assurances and praises made by the US special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk during their meeting in Erbil on 14 September. "Why would Washington want to punish Kurdistan?" Barzani wondered aloud in his resignation speech on 29 October. "Nobody stood up with us other than our mountains," he added. Barzani failed to comprehend that the US is no longer the dominant power in the region, and that Washington has long had other regional priorities that would be pursued relentlessly at the expense of the most loyal of friends.

Thus, the key issue at hand is not the mere conduct of the Kurdish referendum - no matter how incompetently and recklessly it was conducted. Nor is it the warnings by great and small powers - starting with the US - that the Kurds must not conduct the referendum and instead commit to the territorial integrity of an Iraqi state that has ceased to exist in the aftermath of the US invasion back in 2003.

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At the core of the still unfolding all-out campaign to crush the Kurds is the exploiting of the referendum by Tehran and Ankara, as well as a reluctant Baghdad, in order to consolidate their regional hegemonic aspirations in the name of saving the Iraqi, and for that matter the Syrian, state from a Kurdish menace. That the Trump Administration, in stark contradiction to its vehement anti-Iran rhetoric, is the primary supporter of both Tehran and Ankara, while the Kremlin, ostensibly the ally of both Turkey and Iran, is adamantly opposed to these maneuvers, only adds to the unique regional posturing and their long-term ramifications.

There has never been any doubt that virtually all Kurds want to secede from the states they're in - Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq - in order to realize their quest for self-determination and establish a Kurdish state of their own. The ongoing repression by all states involved has resulted in centuries of insurrection and violence. Military setbacks and reneged on political promises have not diminished the yearning and determination of the Kurds. Thus, the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan was an audacious gambit to bring to the forefront what has always been known yet suppressed for the expediency of great powers. The 92.73% of support for independence was merely a reaffirmation of the long-known reality. There was no real threat to the regional order since then KRG president Barzani never intended to declare independence unilaterally.

What the Kurds did was to poke a hole in the chimera, if not travesty, of the US-sponsored regional order. Official Washington has always insisted that the toppling of Saddam Hussein led to the establishment of a new democratic Iraq, and that soon the toppling of Bashar al-Assad will lead to the establishment of a new



democratic Syria. Needless to say, these new states are expected to endorse US hegemony that will enable the US to take advantage of their oil, gas and other natural resources.

As well, the outcome of the Kurdish referendum effectively destroyed the edifice of the US state- and nation-building policies since the end of the Second World War. And since the Kurds have long been stalwart friends and allies of the US - their audacity to refuse the US *diktats* was unacceptable and intolerable to official Washington, and particularly the Deep State. Hence, the extent of the self-perceived affront to long-held US policies determined the fury of Washington's reaction to the referendum. The right of the Kurds to their own destiny and self-determination means nothing in Washington. After the referendum, official Washington intensified the pressure on Baghdad to punish the Kurds severely for their audacity to vote and blatant disregard of Washington's demands. Ultimately, all that US officials had to do, and indeed did do, was to signal to the local aspirant powers - Iran and Turkey - that the blood of the Kurds was now permitted.

The inner-Kurdish dynamics complicated in the aftermath of the referendum. While the ruling KDP lost much of its luster - the other main parties, and particularly the PUK, failed to fill the ensuing vacuum. Significantly, the ability of the PUK to counter-balance and contain the KDP's continued bellicosity and provocations toward Baghdad collapsed by the concurrent health deterioration and ultimate death of the venerable "Mam Jalal" Talabani on 3 October. The PUK was consumed by the death of their great leader and failed to address other national issues. At the same time, Talabani's funeral in Sulaimani on October 6 was supposed to be a demonstration of Kurdish-Iraqi unity since Talabani was the President of Iraq from 2005 to 2014. That official Baghdad had other ideas became apparent when Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi did not bother to return from an official visit to Paris in order to attend the funeral.

Indeed, the funeral events were characterized by sharp bickering behind the scenes. Iraqi President Fuad Masum (himself a Kurd and nominally PUK member) and Vice-President Nouri al-Maliki (Iran's man in Baghdad) delivered concrete threats to Barzani, warning him of a harsh impending retribution for the mere conduct of the referendum. The Iraqi leaders also met privately with small groups of Kurdish leaders in a Dukan-area resort near Sulaimani in order to reiterate and emphasize the ultimatum. In his meeting with PUK leaders, Masum delivered explicit ultimatums from Abadi and the leaders of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi. Abadi's message stressed that Baghdad was considering the referendum "a declaration of war" and warned the Kurds of dire ramifications. The Al-Hashd al-Shaabi warned that any "military intervention or troop movements" by the Peshmerga would be crushed promptly. Masum urged the PUK leaders to accept all the demands of Baghdad unconditionally. Publicly, Baghdad's hostility was evident in the virulent criticism in Iraqi media that Talabani's coffin was covered with the Kurdish flag and not the Iraqi flag.

The political unclarity was further complicated during the funeral event because Jalal Talabani left no designated successor and no well-defined policies. Consequently, the PUK leadership and the entire Sulaimani body politics were consumed in a fierce succession struggle to the detriment of their ability to contribute to the national interest - particularly help contain Baghdad's pressure and threats. At first, Talabani's widow Hero Ibrahim Ahmed and his eldest son Bafel (Pavel) Talabani emerged as the most powerful leaders in Sulaimani - albeit unofficially so.

By now, Tehran became the dominant power in the unfolding crisis. Back in mid-Summer, the turning points in both Syria and Iraq all but assured that the Kurds were contemplating their audacious challenge to Baghdad and consequently the regional order Tehran was determined to attain and impose. Hence, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei established a small high-level task force to handle and resolve decisively the



Kurdish challenge. Khamenei ordered that the Kurds be suppressed and punished in such a ruthless way that no other aspirant nationality - such as Syria's Alawites - would dare to challenge Iran's preeminence in the foreseeable future. The task force would be answerable directly to Khamenei.

The head of the task force is Ayatollah Mohamadi Gulpaigani, the Chief of Staff of Khamenei, and the two key members are Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani (who was put in direct command of suppressing the Kurds) and Brigadier General Hossein Salami, the second-in-command of the IRGC (who deployed with IRGC forces to Iranian-Kurdish Kermanshah in case direct military intervention would be required). Soleimani explained to his staff that Khamenei ordered them to suppress Kurdish secessionism and that of all other minorities while securing Iran's on-land access to the Mediterranean via Iraq and Syria.

Tehran never concealed its true objectives from Kurdish leaders. While in Erbil in the first half of September, Soleimani had a private meeting with Barzani. Soleimani threatened to cut the Kurds down to size and push them back to the 2003 borders and even beyond. Barzani disregarded the Iranian threats. In the next couple of weeks, Iranian Intelligence also reached out to the leadership of the PUK - informing them of the threats to Barzani and alluding that the PUK might not have to suffer the fate of the KDP should the referendum take place. Unlike Barzani, the Talabani family did not reject the Iranian threats and offers off hand.

Some understanding was reached on or shortly after 6 October - the funeral of Jalal Talabani. The interlocutors arrived in the delegation of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif who attended the funeral. On 9 October, Baghdad launched a legal anti-corruption campaign aimed at lucrative oil revenues and illegal market monopolization by Kurdish leaders. Both the Barzani and Talabani families were at the focus of the investigation. However, within a day, Tehran pressured Baghdad to lay off the Talabani family and focus only on the Barzani family.

On 12 October, Bafel Talabani spoke on Kurdish TV and urged unilateral concessions by the Kurds as the sole alternative to war and defeat. He offered to unilaterally dissolve the Kurdish-led Kirkuk Provincial Council, for long a demand of Baghdad, as a demonstration of good will before comprehensive negotiations. "I now call for unconditional negotiation with Baghdad using the constitutional law written under the guidance of Mam Jalal. This way we can guarantee the rights of our people ... with the support of the international community." Bafel warned that the Peshmerga and Kurdistan were "on the specter of war. A war we do not need, a war we do not want."

In Erbil, also on 12 October, McGurk assured Barzani and his military aides that there was no viable Iraqi military threat to the Kurdish forces despite the Iranian threats. McGurk reported that the "Iraqi forces [are] shifting in mass from [the] Hawija front to west Anbar to liberate Rawa, Qaim and secure Iraq's borders with Syria." Hence, these forces should not be considered by Erbil as a threat.

On 14 October, Qassem Soleimani visited Mam Jalal's grave site, laid a wreath, and offered a long prayer. He wrote in the condolences book that Mam Jalal was "a fighter who served nearly 60 years to achieve freedom for the Iraqi nation, including the Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Yazidis." Soleimani hinted that Talabani's conciliatory policies should provide inspiration. "Talabani was a great man. New presidential positions didn't affect his greatness. Rather, it was he who gave greatness and honor to these positions. He was a person who often saved Iraq from disagreements and problems." The entire politically-active Talabani family was present at the grave site and later met privately with Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani delivered anew the ultimatum from Tehran: Should the Kurds refuse to accept the humiliating deal with



Baghdad - Iranian forces will join the Iraqi forces in completely crushing all Kurds. On the other hand, the Iranian-Iraqi forces will spare the PUK in case they unilaterally accept the deal irrespective of Barzani's position.

On 15 October, the PUK leadership organized an emergency meeting of all Kurdish leaders - formal and informal - in the Ashur Hotel in Dukan. The participants included Iraqi President Fuad Masum, Kurdish President Masoud Barzani, Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, as well as senior PUK officials including Kosrat Rasul, Hero Ibrahim and Bafel Talabani. Formally, the talks focused on reducing the tensions between the Iraqi federal and Kurdish forces in the Kirkuk area. In reality, the discussions were on the Iranian ultimatum. While the PUK leaders, including Masum, urged prudence and accepting the ultimatum - the KDP leaders refused to compromise.

Despaired, the PUK leaders invited Qassem Soleimani to address the meeting. According to a participant, Soleimani warned the Kurdish leaders of their grave situation and of the dire consequences of resisting the inevitable. "Abadi has all the regional powers and the West behind him and nothing will stop him from forcing you to return back to the mountains if he decides so," he told the Kurdish leaders. According a PUK senior official, Soleimani provided "wise counsel" to the gathered officials. "Soleimani's visit ... was to give a last-minute chance for the decision makers not to commit a fatal mistake," explained PUK senior Ala Talabani. "Soleimani advised us ... that Kirkuk should return to the law and the constitution, so let us come to an understanding."

These meetings enabled Qassem Soleimani to mediate a secret nine-article agreement that was subsequently signed in Kirkuk on the night of 15 October. Two senior leaders of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and close allies of the IRGC since the early 1980's - Hadi al-Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis - traveled to Kirkuk to join Soleimani and Bafel Talabani who arrived from Dukan. They negotiated the venues for the advance of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces and the withdrawal of the various Peshmerga forces - mainly the PUK's. At the end of the negotiations, Hadi al-Amiri and Bafel Talabani signed the nine-article agreement. The agreement was guaranteed by Soleimani and a special emissary of Abadi. Soleimani guaranteed the agreement in his official role of "military adviser to Al-Hashd al-Shaabi" as recognized by the Iraqi Government.

Throughout, Barzani would not budge even when it was increasingly clear that a clash with the Iraqi forces - both Iran-controlled militias and the Armed Forces - was imminent.

The Iranian-Iraqi Shiite forces moved for the kill on the morning of 16 October. Most of the Peshmerga units withdrew ahead of the advancing Shiite forces. There were a few pockets of resistance in Tuz Khurmatu and parts of Kirkuk - but these were overwhelmed quickly with massive firepower. Within a few hours, the main Iranian-Iraqi Shiite forces took over the entire strategic infrastructure and facilities throughout the Kirkuk province area - including the North Oil Company, the Baba Gurgur oilfield, the K1 military base, the Mullah Abdullah oil refinery, Kirkuk's main airport, and the Tikrit Bridge. Other Iranian-Iraqi Shiite units took over other areas held by the Kurds since 2014/5 - the Tuz Khurmatu district in Saladin province, the Khanaquin district in Diyala province, and the Makhmur, Sinjar and Sheikhan districts in Mosul. Special attention was paid to seizing the oil wells and infrastructure. By the end of the day, Iraqi Oil Minister Jabbar Ali Hussein al-Luiebi announced that Baghdad was "controlling all the oil wells in Iraq." Actually, it took the 15th Brigade Forces of the Iraqi Army a few days to complete the seizure of Zummar, northwest of Mosul, and nearby two oil fields. With that, Baghdad controlled the 44 oilfields previously held by the KRG. Subsequently, Al-Hashd al-Shaabi continued to advance along the Iraqi-Turkish border - separating between the KDP-held territory and the border with Turkey.





The swift offensive of 16 October was an Iranian operation. Qassem Soleimani, officially only a “military adviser” to the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, was clearly in command. The main units that spearheaded the assault are known for their close relations with, and effectively subservience to, the IRGC’s Qods Force. These are the Ktaeb HizbAllah under the command of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Asaib Ahl al-Haq under the command of Qais al-Khazali, and the Badr Organization under the command of Hadi al-Amiri. Moreover, several Iranian units participated in the Kirkuk operations with many of the troops wearing the uniforms of Iraqi Police. Kurdish and Turkmen officials in Kirkuk who approached these forces discovered that “they want to speak Persian, they are of Iran.” One of the key IRGC Special Forces unit in the Kirkuk area was under the command of Sardar Soleimani - the brother of Qassem Soleimani. This unit captured the Tikrit Bridge and other key bridges before the Peshmerga could attempt to blow them up.

In the coming days, official Tehran would gloat over the centrality of Iran in the defeat of the Kurds. On 20 October, in Tehran, a senior official “close to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani” highlighted the effectiveness of the Iranian assistance to the Iraqi Shiite effort. “Tehran’s military help is not a secret anymore. You can find General Soleimani’s pictures in Iraq everywhere,” he noted. “Now, beside political issues, Kirkuk’s oil is a very key element for Iran, which is an OPEC member. Control of those oil fields by Iran’s enemies would be disastrous for us. Why should we let them enter the oil market?”

On 24 October, Mohamadi Gulpaigani attributed the victory over the Kurds to Khamenei and Soleimani even if the forces on the ground were “Shiite militia guided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.” Tehran committed to confronting the Kurds in order to thwart “a joint Israeli-Kurdish-American” conspiracy to create a “second Israel” on Iran’s borders rather than in reaction to the referendum. “The United States and Israel had plotted to create a second Israel in the Kurdistan Region, and it was shameful to wave the Israeli flag there, but the instructions of the Supreme Leader and the sacrifices of general Soleimani spoiled their plots, and Kirkuk was liberated without a single drop of blood being shed,” Gulpaigani stated. “Our victory in Kirkuk is a victory over the US and Israel, and an answer to Trump’s threats to Iran,” agreed Sheikh Nabil Qaouk, the deputy head of the HizbAllah’s executive council.

Shiite Iraqi leaders concur. For example, Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, the commander of the HizbAllah al-Nujaba that is fighting in both western Iraq and central Syria, stressed the crucial role of Iran in resolving the Shiite crisis. “The Islamic Republic of Iran’s efforts to resolve the [Kurdish] issue and the presence of General Qassem Soleimani and his talks with all sides led to important achievements and peaceful settlement of problems, prevented bloodshed and kept safe the Iraqi people of all ethnic groups,” al-Kaabi explained. It was the efforts of “General Soleimani and other Iranian officials” that resulted in both the restoration of Iraqi Shiite rights and the prevention of unnecessary bloodshed. “We always need relations and friendship of Iran,” al-Kaabi concluded.

Under such circumstances, most troubling was the participation of the US-trained and -controlled 9th Armored Division, 16th Infantry Division and counter-terrorism special forces - mainly the Emergency Response Unit of the Federal Police - in the Iranian-led assault on the Kurds. Given the large presence of US personnel in these units, their mere presence in the area was widely interpreted as an indication of US support for the Iraqi offensive against, and ultimate defeat of, America’s Kurdish allies. Moreover, there are numerous reports from the Kirkuk area of “US military advisers” who were “actively monitoring” the fighting. A US communications center was reported in the K1 air base near Kirkuk.



Moreover, many of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces, including the closest allies of the IRGC, used diverse US military equipment - from M1A1 Abrams tanks to Hummers, to small arms and communications gear - in their attacks on the Peshmerga. Some of this equipment requires extensive training and maintenance provided by the US Army. The Iran-controlled militias have long received widespread support, including large quantities of US-made weapons, as part of a US program to reinforce “the common cause” with Iran and its Iraqi proxies in fighting the Islamic State/Caliphate. The program was launched under the Obama Administration and continues under the Trump Administration.

Ultimately, the key achievement of Iran is the seizure - ostensibly by the Iraqi Government - of the Khanaqin area adjacent to the Iranian border. Tehran specifically insisted on receiving the Khanaqin area from the Kurds as part of the penalties for the referendum. The Kurdish unilateral withdrawal was agreed to on explicit instructions from Qassem Soleimani after he had threatened an Iranian invasion had the Kurds refused. Indeed, large Iranian forces under the command of Hossein Salami deployed very close to the border. When the local Peshmerga forces withdrew, some of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces that seized the area crossed over from Iran. This is a major strategic achievement for Iran. The Iranian control of the Khanaqin area opened the major road westward - potentially all the way to the Mediterranean. This entire road is now under Iranian control.

The strategic significance of the Iranian operations against the Kurds was not lost on Ankara. Hence, Turkey decided to establish an ostensibly anti-Kurdish *cordon sanitaire* that will provide for a buffer between Turkey and the Shiite bloc established by Iran. However, rather than confront Iran, Turkey elected to highlight the emerging Kurdish threat along its entire border and justify the establishment of the buffer as an anti-Kurdish, rather than anti-Shiite Iranian, undertaking. Back on 14 October, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim introduced the threat and resolve to eliminate it. “We will respond to attacks on our nation’s sovereignty, regardless of where they originate from. We will do what is necessary to protect our country’s honor and reputation,” Yildirim declared. “They are trying to form a Zone of Evil on our southern borders with Syria and Iraq. We recognize the enemies who are seeking to destroy our unity and solidarity. Thus, the Turkish people will not allow them to establish a terror state whatever it takes.”

The same day, Erdogan’s soul-mate Ibrahim Karagul elaborated in *Yeni Safak* on the dire ramifications of the emergence of “the ‘Zone of Evil’ from the Mediterranean to the Iranian border” dominated by the Kurdish terrorist organizations and their allies. “No terrorist organization can be sheltered along Turkey’s southern border or establish control in the north of Syria and Iraq. No foreign country, foreign power, or foreign military elements should be allowed to establish control in this zone.” Karagul identified a Kurdish comprehensive conspiracy on behalf of the US and Israel. “The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Daesh are all as such and finally, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani has also joined them. These circles and organizations are, by establishing regional effectiveness through identities, preparing the ground for a Western invasion and paving the way for the division of the region.”

The emerging threat to Turkey’s vital interests is unacceptable. “This country cannot be stuck between the PKK-Barzani alliance,” Karagul asserts. “It is an obligation for Turkey to take action with historical depth, taking into consideration the region as a whole, with the political mind ongoing since the Seljuks. Because this is the only key to Turkey’s future, its integrity and the only way to break the multidimensional siege aimed at our country and overcoming that jealousy.” Karagul is confident that Turkey will soon “destroy the ‘Zone of Evil’” by force. “Turkey will, once again, overcome the Zone of Evil in the north of Syria and Iraq, the outside threat set to destroy it through the same methods; it will act with that profound political mind. This is also its only choice,”





Karagul concludes. “A ‘Turkey Shield’ from the Mediterranean to the border with Iran is the only way to eliminate the ‘Zone of Evil’ the multinational invaders are trying to establish.”

On 3 November, Erdogan embraced the imperative to destroy all Kurdish bases along the southern borders of Turkey. “There is nothing more important than the perpetuity of our nation. We do not have to ask for permission, if the legal sovereign state in Qandil or Sinjar cannot solve the problem, then we will settle it. We do not have to wait for the terrorist organizations that are growing outside our borders. It is permissible for us to conduct all kinds of operations on land and in the air,” Erdogan said. “We will destroy all terror camps in Iraq and Syria. We are determined to exterminate all terrorist camps outside our borders. We may spread our successful operations like those in al-Bab and Idlib to other regions. Western countries may oppose this,” he shrugged. “For us, those who stand by terrorists are also terrorists.”

Concurrently, Turkish fighter-bombers and special forces have expanded the area of air-strikes and raids throughout northern Syria and northern Iraq in an unprecedented manner. On 5 November, for example, the Turkish Air Force bombed for the first time the Asoz Mountains area less than 35 miles from Sulaimani - destroying Kurdish sites that have nothing to do with the PKK. Ankara sent a signal to Sulaimani.

In early November, Ankara raised the specter of an even more sinister a US conspiracy against the steadfast allies - Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Turkish Intelligence (MIT) warned their counterparts that the US is planning to dismember Syria-Iraq into seven “boutique states” comes mid-2018 in order to deprive them of the fruits of their victory and consolidate US-Israeli hegemony. The MIT reported that their source was a former Syrian General who originally defected to the rebels in 2013 and very recently defected to Turkey because of his opposition to the US-sponsored grand design. Just prior to his latest defection, the General attended a meeting with other leaders of the Syrian opposition in the Reyhanli District of Turkey’s Hatay Province. In this meeting, “officials from the US State Department and Pentagon” briefed the Syrian commanders on the US grand designs and provided clear instructions as to the anticipated roles of the participants in implementing these plans. “I was told that in the second half of 2018, a total of seven boutique states would be declared in Syria and Iraq,” the General stated. The first such boutique states will be Kurdish “in order to grant the Peshmerga and Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) legitimacy.”

According to the MIT, the Syrian General provided specific details of the proposed “boutique states” as designed by the US. “The US, which included the Latakia-Tartus-Damascus line in the Nusayri [=Alawite] federal region, has reserved the as-Suwayda-Golan-Quneitra line for the Druze community. Aleppo, Idlib and Hama were allocated to the Sunnis in the divisive map plotted by the US. The map allocates al-Hasakah, northern Deir ez-Zour, Raqqa, Manbij and Qamishli to the PKK. Iraq’s Tikrit-Salah ad Din-Anbar-Falluja is allocated to Sunnis, Erbil-Duhok-Halabja-Sulaymaniya is allocated to the Peshmerga and Baghdad-Nassriya-Kadisiyye-Najaf corridor is reserved for the Shiite.”

Turkish officials and their close allies in the Turkish media echoed the new threat. The concept of “boutique states” was first introduced by Kemal Ozturk back in October 2017 in the context of the looming Kurdish threat as an instrument of US conspiracy against Turkey and all Muslims. “At present, the US is making great concrete efforts to establish a boutique PKK/PYD state in northern Syria. According to what has been said, it intends to unite this state with the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, to reach the Mediterranean, and to set up an oil transport route there. ... In short, the US has a project, albeit complex and variable.”



In early November, Sadik Unay warned of the “brave new world of micro-nationalism” spread by the US and its allies. “The West does not seem to be bothered much about the rising tide of micro-nationalism in the Middle East, which is categorically perceived as an endemic conflict zone.” Again, Kurdish entities were to be the initial test runs for the US conspiracy. However, the harsh reaction of Iran and its allies, including Turkey, doomed the US conspiracy for now. Unay explained that “Masoud Barzani, the recently resigned president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, pushed for an illegitimate referendum for full independence with the tacit support of global powers. The micro-nationalism of Barzani failed to bring together northern Iraq’s Kurds and ended in abysmal failure, costing him his political career and perhaps the relative stability of northern Iraq at the end of an effective response through Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi collaboration.”

Although the MIT attributed the conspiracy to establish seven “boutique states” to the US - the real objective of Ankara, Tehran and their allies is to defeat the Russia-pushed Fertile Crescent of Minorities to which both Ankara and Tehran were exposed in the Astana talks and other fora. Alas, Turkey, Iran and their allies do not dare to confront Russia, and therefore found it expedient to focus attention on yet another US conspiracy. The mislabeling of the culprit need not distract from the unwavering resolve of Turkey, Iran and Iraq to defeat the design virtually at all cost. Ultimately, the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities is effectively the sole obstacle to Iran and Turkey consolidating control over the entire greater Bilad al-Sham region from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean.

For Shiite Arab Baghdad, particularly the Abadi faction, the implications of the Kurdish crisis were clear - growing and stifling dominance by Iran, and to a lesser extent Turkey. Most alarming was Washington’s cheering of the Iranian-Iraqi suppression of America’s erstwhile Kurdish allies. For Abadi and his camp, the drastic change in the US position raised the quandary: If the US betrayed the Kurdish allies so suddenly and drastically, to what extent can Shiite Arab Baghdad trust Washington not to do the same sometime in the future?

On 21 October, Abadi rushed anew to Saudi Arabia to engender support. While the Saudis were forthcoming, Abadi encountered a firm position from visiting US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Officially, the US focused on establishing “a new axis that unites Riyadh and Baghdad as central to countering Iran’s growing influence from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.” The first step, according to Tillerson, was to have the Iranian “militias” leave Iraq. “Certainly, Iranian militias that are in Iraq, now that the fighting against [ISIS] is coming to a close, those militias need to go home,” Tillerson said. “All foreign fighters need to go home.” Ultimately, however, Tillerson demanded that Baghdad effectively accepts Tehran’s policies to consolidate a strong viable central governance, and continue to crackdown both Kurds and Sunni Arabs. Abadi was cognizant that the type of government Tillerson wants to see in Baghdad will be beholden to, and totally dependent on, the Iranian government.

Browbeaten, Abadi decided to travel to Amman, Ankara and Tehran in order to gain their instructions and blessing for Baghdad’s next moves. In Amman, he summoned Moqtada Sadr for urgent consultations on the extent of Arab policies - as distinct from all-Shiite policies - Baghdad could get away with. Sadr was very pessimistic given the Iranian audacity and high-profile presence in northern Iraq and eastern Syria.

However, on 23 October, Abadi had to break his trip, return to Baghdad to deal with a surprise visit by Tillerson. Tillerson focused on the “reaffirmation of US support for a unified Iraq” in the aftermath of the suppression of the Kurds. In his meeting with Tillerson, Abadi acknowledged his subservience to Tehran. Contradicting Tillerson, he noted that the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi “is part of the Iraqi institutions” and not an



Iranian proxy. “Popular Mobilization fighters should be encouraged because they will be the hope of the country and the region,” Abadi stressed. Tillerson had no clear policy to offer. “We are concerned and a bit sad,” Tillerson told Abadi. “We have friends in Baghdad and friends in Erbil, and we encourage all parties to enter into discussion ... and all differences can be addressed.”

On 25 October, Abadi resumed traveling. He first stopped in Ankara to clarify the extent of the Turkish intervention in the anti-Kurdish fighting in northern Iraq. The Turkish position was that although Iraq “reclaimed full control over the beleaguered Iraqi Kurdistan Region,” Turkey retained the right for unilateral military intervention against the PKK and other threats. Still, Erdogan reiterated Turkey’s commitment to Iraq’s territorial integrity. Abadi warned about the impact of Kurdish secessionism. “With the referendum, [the Kurds] tried to break up our territory. They tried to redefine our borders,” he noted. Erdogan responded by chiding Abadi for ignoring Erdogan’s earlier recommendations for anti-Kurdish policies. “From the beginning, we have always expressed that we supported territorial integrity in Iraq, and we will continue to do so,” he said. “We did not get a positive response to [our] warnings, so we decided to impose sanctions.” Erdogan and Abadi agreed on joint “political, economic and military measures” to respond to the Kurdish challenge.

The next day, 26 October, Abadi arrived in Tehran. All the local leaders reiterated Tehran’s commitment to a strong central Shiite government in Baghdad. They promised Iran’s unwavering support for “Baghdad’s battle against terrorism and its efforts to boost national unity.” Rouhani was effusive. “The Islamic Republic of Iran, in the path of fighting terrorism, strengthening unity and solidarity in Iraq, and preserving the territorial integrity of the country, has always been and will be alongside the Iraqi government and nation,” he assured Abadi. “The Islamic Republic of Iran, with all its capabilities and power, is ready to contribute to the reconstruction and development of Iraq and stand with its government and nation.” Hossein Amir-Abdollahian dismissed the reports of a US-mediated rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. “The strategic relationship between Tehran and Baghdad is firm and lasting,” he stated. Khamenei went further, demanding that “Iraq should not rely on the United States” in its fight against both Sunni Jihadism and Kurdish secessionism. The Shiite brotherhood of Iranians and Iraqis is the key. “[Shiite] Unity was the most important factor in your gains against terrorists and their supporters ... Don’t Trust America ... It will harm you in the future,” Khamenei told Abadi.

Khamenei, his closest assistants and the IRGC High Command did not trust Abadi. By the time he left Tehran, they notified Iraj Masjedi, the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq who is a Brigadier General at the Qods Forces and Soleimani’s right-hand man, and Vice-President Nouri al-Maliki, Iran’s stalwart ally in Baghdad. They went into decisive action by the first of November.

First, Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization element of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, went to the Marja’iyya (the Shiite highest religious jurisprudence) in the holy city of Najaf in order to receive a religious edict and guidelines for managing the enduring conflict with the Kurds. The Marja’iyya decreed that Erbil “must revoke [the] 25 September ‘illegitimate’ independence referendum before entering into any peace talks.” Once such talks begin, al-Amiri explained, “[the] Marja’iyya also has put forward four preconditions for peace talks with Erbil: 1) Erbil must commit itself to Iraq’s unity and territorial integrity. 2) Annuling Erbil’s independence bid as a fait accompli. 3) All negotiations must be based on Iraqi constitution. 4) Iraqi Supreme Court must arbitrate in all disputes between Baghdad and Erbil in the future.” Only by pursuing the Shiite policy as put forward by the Marja’iyya “reaching a peaceful settlement between Bagdad and Erbil can be achievable.”



The edict Hadi al-Amiri received from the revered Marja'iyya effectively deprives Abadi of any possibility to demonstrate flexibility or largesse. The edict stipulates that all future negotiations must abide by the strict interpretation of Shiite jurisprudence - a constraint likely to stall any meaningful discussions.

Meanwhile, the First Vice Speaker of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) Humam Hamoudi was summoned to Tehran in order to guarantee yet another source of pressure on Abadi. Significantly, Hamoudi's main contact in Tehran was the Chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi who had recently been snubbed by Abadi during a visit to Baghdad and Najaf. The objective of Hamoudi's visit was to further "the expansion of all-out relations and cooperation between the two countries." In their meeting, Shahroudi "warned Iraq to stay vigilant against foreign efforts to influence the Iraqi people and parliament." Baghdad is facing a major threat. "Some foreign countries are striving to influence and leave impacts on the Iraqi people and parliament," he said. Therefore, Hamoudi and the ISCI must "exercise vigilance in dealing with such developments." Shahroudi addressed "the latest developments in the Muslim world" and warned that "some Arab countries are seeking to infiltrate Iraq and spread the thoughts that are contrary to the ISCI objectives." He urged Hamoudi "to remain vigilant against plots to undermine their unity."

Shahroudi instructed Hamoudi to protect the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi whom he described as "volunteer forces who rushed to confront the Takfiri menace following a Fatwa issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani." Shahroudi reminded that ultimately the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi would not have succeeded on their own despite their zeal and commitment. "Throughout the battle, Iran has remained beside Iraq, providing it with valuable military advice and other aid and is famously known to have provided [=supplied] Baghdad after the Arab country's pleas for arms from the West went unheeded," Shahroudi concluded. Returning to Baghdad, Hamoudi mobilized the ISCI and other religious-political bodies to pressure Abadi not to deviate from the Iranian "advice" when dealing with Erbil.

With the major road system in the Khanaqin area secured after the Kurdish withdrawal, Tehran moved in early November to expedite the consolidation of the Iran-Mediterranean route. Implementation became within grasp when Iraqi forces - mainly the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi with support from the Armed Forces - seized the district of al-Qaim and opened the main venue to the Syrian border. The only main challenge was the liberation of the Syrian city of al-Bukamal virtually on the Syrian-Iraqi border. "For the IRGC and HizbAllah, al-Bukamal is their chance to link the capitals of Tehran, Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus through a roadway flowing through both Iraq and Syria," explained a Syrian senior military official. Therefore, "the IRGC currently has a very large force participating in the ongoing offensive to al-Bukamal to ensure the border does not come under the control of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces."

The overall commander of the operation is Qassem Soleimani. He remained in command despite the death of his 95-year old father on 1 November. He took only a brief reprieve to rush to his home village - Qanat-e Malek in Kerman Province - for the burial, and then returned to the front. Soleimani's mission was to exploit the last phases of the offensive against the remnants of the Islamic State/Caliphate in order to complete and consolidate the Iranian hold over the entire on-land corridor between the Iranian border and the Mediterranean. On 5 November, Qassem Soleimani and a few senior commanders of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi arrived in Deir ez-Zor in order to coordinate with the Syrian military, the Iranian IRGC and HizbAllah forces the decisive phase of the pincer offensive on al-Bukamal and the remnants of the Islamic State/Caliphate in both eastern Syria and western Iraq. A few days later, Soleimani was back in western Iraq coordinating the operations of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi and other Iraqi forces. "The presence of Soleimani in Iraq is to support the



security forces and no one has to hold anyone accountable for the presence of the security forces' advisers," Al-Hashd al-Shaabi spokesman Ahmed Asadi announced on 10 November.

Iran committed large forces for the al-Bukamal offensive in both Syria and Iraq. The Iranian strategy called for a pincer attack from Syria in the west and Iraq in the east. In Syria, the key participants were armor and special forces units of the Syrian Arab Army, special forces of Iran's own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the HizbAllah and the Liwaa Fatemiyoun (Afghani-Iranian militia). On the Iraqi side, the Iranians deployed large forces of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi that were redeployed from the Al-Anbar, Nineveh, and Salaheddine Governorates. "These Al-Hashd al-Shaabi fighters will play an integral part in the upcoming battle to take al-Bukamal, as they have a lot of experience fighting the Islamic State terrorists in the desert," explained the Syrian official.

Over the weekend of 3-5 November, Iran-controlled forces - the IRGC and HizbAllah from the west and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi from the east - succeeded to link-up in the first border post linking Iraq's Al-Anbar Governorate and Syria's Deir ez-Zor. The Iran-controlled forces were thus less than 20 miles from al-Bukamal - their primary objective - with very few Jihadist forces between them. On 6-7 November, Syrian and Iraqi military units also linked-up on the borderline. This enabled the IRGC, HizbAllah and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi already in the area to focus on encircling nearby al-Bukamal.

Baghdad was trapped under such circumstances. Having celebrated the liberation of "the strategic border-city of al-Qaim" by a joint force of the Iraqi Army and the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi - Abadi could not keep away from the next assault on al-Bukamal. Moreover, large units of the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi that are nominally beholden to the Iraqi Government were already operating deep inside Syrian territory. To remain relevant, on 7 November Abadi signed a decree that "has given his troops the green light to attack the Islamic State in Syria." In reality, the main Iraqi Army forces in the area were arrayed in al-Rawah, Al-Anbar Governorate, and were yet to cross the border.

On 8 November, the Iranian and Shiite forces encircled and attacked al-Bukamal. The city fell into the hands of the Iran-sponsored Shiite forces after a complex pincer maneuver. "During the battle, HizbAllah forces entered Iraq and the Iraqi Al-Hashd al-Shaabi crossed into Syria to help capture the town," explained a senior Syrian commander. For the main assault on the city, "Syrian Army [units] and their allies were able to enter al-Bukamal's eastern district from the Iraqi border-city of al-Qaim on [8 November], prompting the Islamic State to abruptly retreat from the area." The maneuver was possible because the Iraqi military permitted the Syrian military and the Shiite allies to cross into and attack from Iraqi territory. Iranian reports stressed that the HizbAllah forces were "the foundation in the battle of al-Bukamal" while the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces were the second most important forces in the capture of al-Bukamal.

Parts of the city of al-Bukamal kept changing hands for the next ten days. The battle was decided when the Iranians committed to battle four battalions of the Iraqi elite militia Harakat HizbAllah al-Nujaba. They crossed from Iraq over floating bridges laid by the IRGC. One of Qassem Soleimani's deputies and long-time friends - Khairallah Samadi - was killed in a mortar attack of the Islamic State during the last phase of the battle for al-Bukamal. Throughout, however, the strategic road between Iraq and Syria remained firmly in the hands of the Iran-sponsored forces.

"With both al-Bukamal and al-Qaim liberated, the Syrian and Iraqi governments now share an imperative border-crossing that will allow for continued commerce between Baghdad and Damascus," a Syrian senior



official observed on 9 November. Simply put, the Iran-sponsored and Shiite-controlled major road from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean is now open and secure. This would not have happened had the Kurds were able to continue to control the Khanaqin district.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish leadership - mainly Barzani's KDP - continues to collapse under pressure from, and military moves of, the Shiite militias ostensibly under the control of the Iraqi State. The ensuing Kurdish inner fighting were intense given the high-stakes for all. The socio-political devastation that followed the referendum brought wide segments of the Kurdish populace to not only question Barzani's competence and judgement - but also that of the entire Erbil-centered KRG political system. All Kurds now realize that drastic changes have to take place.

Powerful voices call for a thorough shake-up of the entire political system to be symbolized by the transfer of the Kurdish capital to Sulaimani (aka Sulaymaniyah). In late-October, numerous Western diplomats in Erbil were expecting the imminent ascent of an alternate government and political system. They reported approvingly that "the formation of a new government in KRG's Sulaymaniyah was starting" and that the forming of "a dual parliament administration system had also started." Turkish senior diplomats reported to Ankara that "the discharge preparations for Masoud Barzani had started and that the new capital of the KRG would be Sulaymaniyah." They warned of the negative ramifications for Ankara because the Sulaymaniyah-based parliament and government would be "backed by Tehran and Baghdad" to the detriment of Turkish influence and interests.

The resignation of Barzani on 29 October is a good start on Kurdistan's road to rebirth. The widespread corruption of Barzani and his coterie affected decision-making and prioritizing, and thus had a role in the disastrous policy formulation process preceding the referendum and soon afterwards. Turkish Intelligence reported that they have learned from "a former senior KRG official" about the extent of the wealth "amassed through illegal activities" of the entire Erbil elite. "The former official, who held a critical position in Erbil between 2009 and 2014, estimated Barzani's personal wealth at \$55 billion," the MIT reported. Hence, the key to a drastic change must be the transfer of the political center out of the corrupt Erbil to new leaders in Sulaimani. This, provided the various factions within PUK and the few other parties will rise to the challenge and present viable national leadership and interim governance to start pulling Kurdistan from the debilitating crisis.

This is not a simple task. The ultimate objective of the Shiite campaign is to destroy the economy and governance of the Kurdish zone in its entirety through punitive-administrative measures rather than a military strike. These measures are all aspects of a stifling campaign that goes beyond reversing the gains of 2014 (in the aftermath of the Kurdish contribution to the US-led war on ISIS). "These administrative changes do not sound dramatic, but they effectively end the semi-independence of the Iraqi Kurds which they had built up over the past 26 years. Kurdish president Masoud Barzani, who is to give up his post on 1 November, put these gains at risk when he held a referendum on Kurdish independence on 25 September," noted Patrick Cockburn of *The Independent*. Abadi confirmed to Cockburn that "Iraq [is] to end decades-old policy of semi-independent rule in Kurdistan."

Indeed, since mid-October, Baghdad has been issuing a slew of administrative decrees that, taken together, has been stifling Kurdistan. "All border crossings in and out of Iraq must be under the exclusive control of the federal state," Abadi decreed. Indeed, Baghdad resolved to close the main crossing point with Turkey at Faysh Khabour (or Habur), including the oil pipeline to Ceyhan. Instead, Ankara and Baghdad agreed to establish a





new Ovakoy border gate “in order to bypass the existing Habur border gate ... which is currently the only gate between Turkey and Iraq.” Subsequently, Iraq and Turkey intend to open a new direct trade route via Ovakoy, and even a new pipeline if necessary - all in order to “push Barzani out of the remaining zone too.” Abadi decreed that “Iraq’s federal authorities will impose exclusive control over all international entry points to and from the Kurdistan Region, including airports.”

The designs of Baghdad and Ankara regarding Ovakoy have been thwarted by Peshmerga forces under the command of General Mansour Barzani. His forces conducted a series of defensive battles that stalled attacks by large Iraqi military and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces and prevented their advance toward Ovakoy. The Iraqi military and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi committed to battle some of their best weapon systems - from US-made M1A1 Abrams tanks to Russian-made heavy artillery and TOS-1 rocket launchers. Yet, the Peshmerga forces stabilized their lines as a tense face-off developed. While the Iraqi military is nominally committed to a cessation of hostilities, the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi forces - mainly of the Badr Organization under the command of Hadi al-Amiri - continue prodding and raiding the Kurdish lines in the hope of finding way to resume the advance toward Ovakoy.

Meanwhile, Baghdad ordered the seizure of the oil fields still held by Kurds and the stopping of all oil and gas exports by the KRG. “The government of Iraq wants the Kurdistan regional government to halt independent crude exports to international oil markets,” declared Alaa al-Yasiri, the director of the Iraqi State Organization for Marketing Oil (SOMO). Baghdad would also determine, in consultation with Tehran, to whom Iraqi oil would be exported and at what price. Baghdad started implementing quickly. “The Ministry of Oil is in talks with the Iranian Oil Ministry to supply the Kermanshah refinery with crude oil,” al-Yasiri reported on 7 November. Initially, Iraq would supply Kermanshah with 15,000 bpd of Kirkuk oil by trucks. On 10 November, Iraqi Oil Minister Jabbar al-Luaibi reported that Iraq could soon supply Iran with 30,000-60,000 bpd. “The deal stipulates that Iraq receives the same amount of oil from Iran through its southern borders,” Iraqi officials explained. Thus, the crux of the deal is that Baghdad diverts Kurdish oil to a refinery in northwest Iran to the detriment of Kurdish income and in return have refined products delivered to the Shiite Arab southern Iraq.

Back on 31 October, Abadi decreed that “Kurdish Peshmerga forces must either come under Iraqi control or downsized to a small force paid by [now impoverished] Erbil” in order to emaciate the Kurdish impressive military capabilities. This is a political-strategic drive. “The steps taken within the operation have been conducted under the strategic cooperation of Turkey, Iran and Iraq,” explained senior Turkish officials. Baghdad is proceeding with impunity because it has the backing of, and support from, official Washington.

The US-inspired higher objective is to demonstrate to all that no regional entity can survive an attempt of quest for self-determination. This is taking place at the time that the Russian-led initiative of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and granting self-determination/self-rule to the localized tribes and nationalities is widely considered the key to the future of the greater Bilad al-Sham. The quest for the self-empowerment of sub-state entities is taking off. Moscow is committed to a new venue for a Syria peace conference starting with the Khmeimim/Hmeimim national conference of Syria’s diverse grassroots, minorities, and political foci. The moment Moscow decided to bring in the Kurds as a viable entity in Syria and beyond - Ankara fought hard to delegitimize the conference or have it postponed indefinitely on account of the Kurdish representation. Indeed, Erdogan’s spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, announced that the Kremlin had informed Ankara the conference was being postponed. Russia denied the Turkish claim. “This congress is being prepared now,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said. “No one has postponed it because the date of the congress has not been officially



announced.” Thus, the Russian-led commitment to the Fertile Crescent of Minorities - and the central role of a Kurdish self-ruling entity therein - remains strong.

This puts official Washington in a quandary. The US has always committed to a strong centralized State of Iraq as the key to American regional presence. But this is no more. “For America, the short, sharp fighting in northern Iraq has revealed a brutal truth: Its dream of a democratic and federal, united Iraq is over,” explained former Ambassador Robert Ford. “But as the fighting shows in Iraq and foreshadows in Syria, Washington never had a political plan to deal with the underlying ethnic and sectarian contests for power that originally gave birth to ISIS.” Simply put, the US has no alternate plan and very few options in any case. Ford acknowledged that “[the] White House has no Plan B or C in the Middle-East region.” One major reason for this dire state of affairs, Ford explained, is that “America never understood Iraq” and never tried to.

Therefore, Washington is focused on destroying others’ - mainly Russia’s - prospects for success and conflict resolution. This means focusing on preventing the Fertile Crescent of Minorities - including the Kurdish self-ruling entity therein - from emerging. The US remains fixated with the sustenance of modern states even if such policy leads to de-facto close cooperation with Iran and major strategic setbacks such as the consolidation of Iran’s on-land access to the Mediterranean - all in stark contradiction to President Trump’s declared policy. This is yet another proof of the predominance of the Deep State in Trump’s Washington. “There is a difference, there is tension between what the President [or] what the White House wants to achieve, and what the State Department wishes to achieve,” Dr. Sebastian Gorka, former Deputy Assistant to the President, explained recently. “A lot of policies and statements from the State Department are made by legacy individuals, people who come from the Obama Administration.”

The Kurds and their dreams of freedom and statehood are but the latest victims of Washington’s irrationality and betrayal, Tehran’s resolve and audacity, and the ineptitude of their own leaders.

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In the aftermath of the loss of Kirkuk, the Kurds are even more confused and despaired than at the time of the brief eruption of violence. The sharp switch from the euphoria of the referendum to the shock from the harsh reaction by both the US and Iran and its proxies devastated the populace and the leadership. Consequently, there emerged two seemingly contradicting trends.

On the one hand, the grassroots population is cognizant that profound changes must take place in order to pull Kurdistan out of the current destitute and put it back on the right track. Such endeavor must be undertaken by a competent leadership with strong grassroots mandate and legitimization.

On the other hand, the entire Kurdish leadership has all but collapsed. The Erbil leadership has delegitimized itself by the catastrophic mishandling of the referendum crisis. The surfacing in public of accusations of widespread and endemic corruption have tainted the Erbil leadership, making recovery in the foreseeable future a daunting challenge.

In Sulaimani, Kurdistan’s other political center, the death, on 3 October, of Jalal Talabani, the venerable leader of the PUK, and the incapacitation, on 10 November, of Kosrat Rasul Ali, the acting leader of the PUK, have deprived the PUK of its traditional leadership at a time of great need. Other veteran leaders, most notably Hamid Haji Ghali, Talabani’s closest ally in the mountains, are wavering - thus sending the PUK leadership into greater disarray and chaos.



Another group of PUK veteran leaders, most notably Barham Salih (who is trying to negotiate his own private deals with Tehran), elected to attempt to take a shortcut to power outside the party structure - joining a growing list of wannabe-leaders and their fringe parties. Each of these individuals has a small coterie of loyalists. While none of these aspirant leaders can muster the popular support and legitimacy required to assume power - their mere campaigning disrupts the ability of the PUK and the Sulaimani-area establishment to recover and reorganize.

Thus, there exists the quandary regarding the Sulaimani PUK-affiliated power base. In principle, the Soleimani leadership is considered by the grassroots as the preferable alternative to the presently discredited Erbil leadership. Ever since “Mam Jalal” was the first President of the new Iraq - the PUK has earned stately legitimacy. At the same time, there remains the widespread adulation of the Barzani clan’s contribution to the Kurdish liberation struggle since the days of Mullah Mustafa Barzani (1903-1979) that balances the grassroots disappointment with Masoud Barzani’s handling of the referendum crisis. Consequently, there are growing confusion and mistrust among the majority of Kurds - in both the KDP’s Yellow Zone and the PUK’s Green Zone - regarding who will lead Kurdistan out of the current crisis.

The grassroots’ faith in principle in the PUK is impaired by the absence of discernable leaders. There is a group of younger aspirant leaders - the generation of “the sons of” - who emerge as forces to be reckoned with. Significantly, there remains the cloud of their involvement in, and to a great extent responsibility for, the deals with the Iranians and their proxies that lost the Kurds large territories and powers of governance. Although these deals also prevented the eruption of widespread fighting that would have inevitably wrought heavy losses for the Peshmerga and greater loss of territory - they nevertheless stand in sharp contrast with the pockets of armed resistance by the KDP’s Peshmerga forces that held the line in some places and conducted only limited withdrawal in others. Although the Iraqi and Iran-controlled proxy forces that attacked in the KDP’s Yellow Zone were smaller than these arrayed in the PUK’s Green Zone - the principled difference is of growing political significance. Moreover, as the Iranian-led Shiitization campaign in the Kirkuk area escalates - the grassroots’ doubting of the competence of the younger leaders on account of their Faustian deals with the Iranians becomes widespread.

At the core of the PUK’s young leadership are several distinct individuals - all in their mid-40's - who form a tight group on account of common background and long bonding. The indisputable leader of the group is Bafel Talabani. Other key members include Rebwar Hamidi Ghali (the commander of the southern borderline with Iran), and the brothers Lahur and Polad Talabani (Bafel’s cousins who hold key positions in intelligence and security). While these young leaders have all the attributes to rise to the occasion - they have so far disappointed. Instead of focusing on leading the salvation of all Kurds - they have instead immersed in a vicious fratricidal fight for personal gains and power within the ranks of the PUK’s fractured leadership. That these internal struggles both self-destroy the potentially most competent elements of Kurdistan’s future leadership and undermine the Kurds’ ability to withstand the growing pressure from the outside matter to none. The ongoing political infighting has all but delegitimized those who could have been viable leaders. Indeed, the Kurdish grassroots take notice of the self-serving priorities of these aspirant young leaders.

Meanwhile, the challenges facing Kurdistan are more daunting than just the aftermath of the referendum. Any and all agreements between Erbil and Baghdad are unlikely to survive the growing political turmoil in Baghdad and the forthcoming Iraqi elections next spring. Hence there is urgent imperative to focus on rebuilding Kurdistan in the context of the evolving Middle East, emerging regional mega-trends, and within the



constraints imposed by the outside powers - most notably Iran, Turkey, Russia, China and the United States.

The Middle East, and particularly the greater Bilad al-Sham, is changing profoundly on its own. Irrespective of the dynamics of the various international negotiations venues - the grassroots are charting their own respective courses. The indigenous entities formed at the grassroots level are committed to the consolidation of inward-looking heritage-derived entities based on blood relations. This commitment to the unchallengeable prominence of the *Qaum* (roughly nationality-centric and ethno-centric identity) is the direct and obvious realization that the *Qaum* has been the sole social bond that had endured the years of wars and depravation. No political entity - local states, great powers, or international organizations - will be able to reverse the comprehensive commitment of the indigenous grassroots to the *Qaum* at the expense of all else. The dramatic ascent of the *Qaum* is best manifested in the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

Great powers, most notably Russia and China, are cognizant that the recovery and rebuilding of the greater Middle East must be accomplished at the regional level. None of the localized inward-looking entities is capable of sustaining and maintaining any viable project on its own. Moreover, the indigenous grassroots will refuse to accept state-level programs, even if foreign-sponsored, for dread that these will legitimize the existence of the modern state they abhor and are committed to eradicating. As well, the practical challenges in rebuilding the greater Middle East, particularly the economic infrastructure, cross borders. Ultimately, the tangible success of the region-wide recovery will depend on the integration into global economic engines such as the New Silk Road. Such integration will provide the key for long-term socio-economic stability.

Before the referendum crisis, the Kurds emerged as a most active element in the consolidation of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. Despite the trauma of the referendum and its aftermath, the mega-trends and dynamics in the region have not changed. It is only a question of time before the grassroots, including the Kurds, will be compelled to return to pursuing the new-old blood-based entities. The hope is that a new young leadership rising out of both Sulaimani and Erbil will be able to rise to the occasion, meet the daunting challenges, and navigate the Kurds from their current plight to resuming their central role in the nascent Fertile Crescent of Minorities and the new-old greater Middle East.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.