

Kurdish Criticism of US Grows

Some doubt American commitment to resolve disputes over oil-rich Kirkuk. A flurry of diplomacy between United States and Kurdish leaders has done little to curb growing wariness among Kurds who say their long-time ally is dragging its heels in efforts to settle potentially explosive claims over disputed territories.

Some Kurdish politicians have rejected assurances from the White House and Kurdish leaders who say Washington is committed to help resolve the status of Iraq's disputed areas, notably the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. Growing criticism of Washington represents an about-face for Kurdish popular sentiment that has lavished favour on the US for the past two decades.

"In the past US officials promised many things regarding Kirkuk to the Kurds but they were just words without deeds," said Mohammed Tofiq, a senior leader of the Kurdish opposition Change movement.

Kurdish officials, however, maintain that their ties with the US have never been stronger. They point to high-level Kurdish visits to Washington, and White House support for an Iraqi constitutional mandate, known as Article 140, to resolve the status of Iraq's disputed areas.

Article 140 states that a census and a referendum should have been held by 2007 to determine who will govern Kirkuk, a province claimed by Arabs, Turkoman and Kurds. While constitutionally mandated, the process has been continually delayed and remains a key point of contention between the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, and the Arab-led central government in Baghdad.

Kurds, who believe that Kirkuk is historically part of Kurdistan and would be annexed to the KRG in a referendum, are deeply frustrated with the Iraqi government for postponing the census. Many believe the support of their influential ally, the US, would push the process forward.

Arabs and Turkoman, however, believe Kurds are attempting to expand the Kurdish region's borders at any cost. Analysts warn that disagreements over Kirkuk could result in widespread violence. Some argue that any resolution should include a power-sharing agreement for the province's ethnic and religious groups.

The international community, including the US and the United Nations, has been cautious about not taking sides or urgently pushing the process - a point of frustration for Kurds who say the delays are unconstitutional.

Unlike Iraqi Arab representatives who saw it as tantamount to US interference in Iraqi affairs, Kurdish officials took heart from a White House statement last month affirming its support for the census and for "the full and fair implementation of the Iraqi constitution", including Article 140 and Article 142. Article 142 allows for amendments to the constitution.

"The White House statement is very important," said Fouad Massum, head of the Kurdish bloc in Iraq's parliament. "It's the first time we've seen such a statement from America."

Kurdish official media downplayed the White House's support for Article 142, instead focusing on the commitment to the census, which is now scheduled for October 2010.

But some Kurds say their community should not interpret the statement as American support, arguing that the US position on resolving disputed territories remains vague.

Mahmud Osman, an independent Kurdish member of parliament in Baghdad, noted the White House statement "mentions Article 140. But it expresses its commitment to Article 142 of the constitution which calls for amending the whole Iraqi constitution, and this is against us".

Many Kurds fear that Iraqi Arab deputies will try to amend or eliminate Article 140 because of concerns that the census and referendum will give Kurds, who believe they are the majority in Kirkuk, control over the province.

"Unfortunately, Kurdish leaders make too much of [Kurdish relations] with the US and its promises," Osman said. "I don't think our relations reached 'the golden era' that some claim. I hope that this relationship is not overemphasised [in the future], because I doubt that it will result in anything."

Ako Hama Karim, a political sciences professor at Sulaimaniyah University in Iraqi Kurdistan, said, "The US doesn't have permanent friends - it has permanent interests.

"I think we, the Kurds, expected more from the US. People became upset once we realised that the US doesn't do everything we want and doesn't care as much about Kurdish demands."

Tofiq expressed scepticism about US-Kurdish relations, despite his regular contact with the Americans. Embassy officials met Change leaders last week in Sulaimaniyah.

"If the US doesn't care about our [Kurdish] demands then why should we consider them our close ally?" he said. "We believe that the US could have implemented [Article] 140 before."

Some Kurdish politicians said the White House statement was issued in exchange for Kurdish support of a US-backed elections law that paved the way for Iraq's parliamentary polls in March.

Kurdish lawmakers' backing for the law broke a deadlock that threatened to further delay the elections, and came shortly after KRG president Massoud Barzani spoke with US president Barack Obama and vice-president Joe Biden, who has close ties with Kurdish officials.

The Kurdish opposition press accused Washington of pressuring Kurdish leaders to support the election law which they say did not allocate enough seats to the KRG's three provinces.

"The Kurdish leaders placed our destiny in the hands of vague promises made by the US," Change's newspaper pronounced in a huge front-page headline, in reference to the White House statement supporting the census.

Reflecting the views of many ordinary Kurds, Nadhifa Slaih, a 49-year-old housewife, she said she was a huge supporter of the US after the invasion but today is disappointed.

“The US hasn’t met our expectations,” she said. “We still have electricity and water shortages, and politically Kirkuk is not solved.”

Deeply suspicious of their neighbours and Arab Iraqis, many Kurds have long considered the US their strongest ally.

Kurdish Peshmerga fighters were a proxy force for the Bush administration in the 2003 Iraq war. When Saddam Hussein was overthrown, US troops and officials were received with flowers in Iraqi Kurdistan – in stark contrast to the resistance they faced elsewhere.

But despite the current wave of Kurdish criticism of the US, KRG leaders claim ties with Washington are stronger than ever.

Barzani is planning a trip to Washington to follow up a visit by KRG senior officials in late December, when they met senior White House and Pentagon officials.

Article 140 was high on the agenda, said the KRG’s minister of foreign relations, Faleh Mustafa, who was part of the delegation. In private meetings and in the White House statement, he said the US showed its “commitment to help us carry out a census” in Kirkuk.

And at a press conference this week in Erbil after meeting Kurdish leaders, US ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill appeared to reassure Kurds nervous about progress over the disputed province and US/Kurdish relations in general.

“With regard to promises, we have always maintained to the Kurdish authorities that we would be engaged in these disputed boundary questions and that we would be engaged on the basis of the Iraqi constitution ...

“Obviously we look forward to the successful resolution of issues including the disputed borders, that’s where our focus is right now to make sure that we can be helpful in this regard.

“I think we can be a very good friend to the people of Kurdistan ... We look forward to a very strong relationship here, a relationship with Kurdistan in so far as it is part of Iraq.”

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