The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Achieving stability in a time of transition

Summary of the Panel Discussion June 15, 2012

Maya Janik

Keynote: Minister Falah Mustafa
Podium: Maria Fantappie, Joost Hiltermann
Moderation: Cengiz Günay
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The panel discussion aimed in the first place at analyzing and assessing the ongoing transitional process in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, including the challenges and problems it is facing. Further topics, which were discussed, concerned Iraqi Kurdistan’s role in other Kurdish-populated areas in the region and the power struggle for the control over the future political and social development in Syria’s Kurdish area.

**Minister Falah Mustafa** opened the round table with an overview of Kurdistan’s history with focus on the past century, and further provided a personal assessment of the political situation in the Kurdish region.

According to Minister Falah Mustafa, the knowledge of Kurdistan’s history is indispensable for the understanding of the transformation process Kurdistan has gone through as well as the currently dynamically changing reality in the Kurdish-populated areas and the numerous challenges Kurds are today faced with.

As stated, Kurdistan is the world’s largest population that does not have a country of its own. Its history is marked by a continuously changing political landscape in the context of struggle between powers dominating regional politics and repression opposed by resistance and the persistent fight for liberty and recognition of minority rights.

Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, the 1920 Treaty of Sevres promised Kurds a state of their own. Nonetheless, the agreement was never fulfilled. Instead, the pledge of independence was ultimately annulled three years later with the Treaty of Lausanne. Thus the area of Greater Kurdistan was to remain divided between the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria until the present day.

Since the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy and the establishment of the modern state of Iraq, history of Iraqi Kurdistan has been marked by betrayals of the Iraqi government and constant political repression.
Iranian Kurds too have faced violence and repression throughout history. The first autonomous Kurdish government, the “Mahabat Republic”, was soon after its establishment in January 1946 crushed by Iranian forces after the Soviet Union withdrew its support from this embryonic state.

In March 1970, the Iraqi government and the Kurdish leadership signed an autonomy agreement, granting broader freedom for Kurds and allowing Kurdish participation in the government. Over the next few years, however, the situation dramatically deteriorated, resulting in the rescindment of guaranteed autonomy and the outbreak of new fights.

Later on, especially since the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s, as a part of the “Arabization campaign” the Iraqi government began genocidal operations against Kurds living in Iraq, which, as explained, ultimately threatened the existence of Kurdistan.

The Kurdish Spring of 1991 marked a watershed in Kurdistan’s history of struggle for a better future. Suppressed from its onset by the Iraqi army, under the protection of the international community and internationally supervised establishment of the no-fly zone the uprising eventually initiated the transition of the region to democracy and free market economy. The first elections in the region were held in May 1992, establishing a Kurdish parliament which in turn created the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

According to Falah Mustafa, the fall of the Baathi regime in 2003 brought about an end to the darkest days of Kurdistan’s history, placing hope of a future in democratic and pluralistic Iraq within the reach of Kurds. Since then, as explained, the Kurdish leadership has chosen to remain part of a new democratic and pluralistic Iraq despite its own achievements in self-governance. Being convinced that this option is the most reasonable way, the Kurdish leadership, as argued, has undertaken strong efforts to effectively participate in building a democratic Iraq. As Falah Mustafa noted, whether this decision will be upheld in the future however depends on the character of new Iraq and commitment of the Iraqi government to preserve and respect the constitutional rights of Kurds.
Kurdistan’s political leadership has been contributing to this development forasmuch as it is has been for years actively participating in the process of building new quality of Iraqi democracy with a federal government.

Today, as Falah Mustafa argued, the Kurdish population still has not shaken off the burden of the past and its history marked by persistent repression and the struggle for liberty. The historical legacy is still present in challenges and problems Kurds are facing. As emphasized, despite of shortcomings, the current democratic and economic situation and high levels of stability and security which have been achieved so far are not to be underestimated, especially given the fact that the region still finds itself in the transitional process.

Conclusively, Minister Falah Mustafa drew attention to the fact that, according to him, Kurdistan is currently going through a very important period of its history, especially in regard to the recent past decades of repression and isolation.

Joost Hiltermann firstly analyzed the current internal situation of the Kurdish-populated region of Iraq. According to him, during the last twenty years Iraqi Kurdistan has been going through significant transformation and made substantial progress. Unlike the time when the region was a warzone in the early 1990s, present day Kurdistan is a thriving region not least due to the remarkable investment of international companies. Another factor which has to a large extent contributed to the progress in the Kurdish-populated region, as asserted, is the persistent effort of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to sustainably improve the political and social situation of Kurds. The KRG has built out its political autonomy from Baghdad firstly by constantly seeking independence from the capital of Iraq under Saddam Hussein between 1991 and 2003, and subsequently by working in Baghdad as part of the federal government what meant taking part in drafting the constitution providing greater autonomy for Kurdistan. Since then, this autonomy has been consistently extended. Especially the building up of the economy, notably through the rapid development of the oil and gas industry, has reinforced this process.
Nevertheless, evident political and economic progress which has been achieved so far aside, the country is still facing many challenges and problems. As Hiltermann argued, one considerable problem which perniciously affects other issues is the fact that Kurds are landlocked and therefore dependent on the states surrounding them. Kurdistan will also have - despite any degree of autonomy - to meet the challenge of oil export.

In order to solve this problem, Hiltermann suggested negotiating a new deal with Baghdad, as a similar agreement of the past allowed Kurdish oil export through the national pipeline, but was suspended by the KRG in April 2012. Another possibility is a bilateral agreement with Turkey, which would allow the transport of oil through Turkey independently of Baghdad. This option, however, as Hiltermann emphasized, does not solely lie in the hands of Kurds and requires the Turkish party to change its strategies what would mean handling Iraqi and Kurdish matters separately. However, according to him, Turkey is not ready for this step yet and it is not clear how soon this may change. Given the fact that Kurdistan’s economy is based only on one resource, the difficult circumstances accompanying the region’s oil export undeniably constitute a serious problem.

This “oil curse”, as argued, is also a source of other problems, such as corruption, unequal wealth distribution, as well as autocracy and repression.

The internal income inequality, as explained, is rising with the economic growth and fuels corruption, a serious threat in itself. Another problem, strictly connected with the latter, is the political repression and autocratic rule. Although there is actual democratic progress in Kurdistan, remarkably striving in the view of the difficult circumstances and dangerous environment, there is still much left to be done to improve the region’s political development and transparency.

Conclusively, Hiltermann argued that the region can only make considerable economic progress with help of foreign investor, but first the mentioned problems need to be seriously addressed and effectively managed.
In the second part of his speech, Hiltemann talked over the regional context, discussing Iraqi Kurdistan’s relation to its neighbours. As Hiltemann noted, since 2007 the KRG has built a strong strategic relationship with Turkey based on trade and economic investment. According to him, this cooperation has been built on a strong foundation and will evolve in the future.

Iran is another country which is active in the Kurdish region, although its influence is not as important as Turkey’s. The role played by Tehran has always been historically important, as for example Kurdish alliance with Iran during the Iran-Iraq war showed. At the same time, however, Iran never ceased to be a regional spoiler. Tehran can demonstrate with ease discontent with the Kurdish decision-making and progress through sabotage and repression.

Regarding Syria Hiltemann argued that there is now an opportunity for the KRG to play an active role in the Kurdish area of Syria and take part in the process of co-shaping the future.

Maria Fantappie discussed the role of the KRG in the Kurdish-populated areas in Syria on the one hand and the struggle over influence in this region between the KRG and other actors of the regional political scene on the other.

At the outset Fantappie noted that most of the analyses concerning the so called Arab Spring of 2011 did not pay attention to the fact that these civil uprisings made the Kurdish issue reappear on international agenda. Regarding the research on Kurdistan, as argued, a new approach to the Kurdish issue has become visible yet. Whereas in the past the study focused on Kurdistan’s struggle for independence and formal existence and the Kurdish people as national minorities spread over the region, fighting for their political and human rights, today a new perspective on the Kurdish issue unfolds. Currently, as argued, the object of analysis is a Kurdistan as a not to be underestimated regional player, which is in the position to exert influence in states with Kurdish-populated areas.
In this context, according to Maria Fantappie, the function and importance of the KRG in the Kurdish-populated region in Syria is twofold: Firstly, the KRG has been organizing the Kurdish political scene and nurturing the formation of the political class of Syrian Kurds, embodied through the Kurdish National Council. As Fantappie explained, in fact, the enduring Syrian situation opened up the opportunity for the Kurdistan Iraqi region to exert enhanced influence over the political situation in the area populated by Syrian Kurds. Hitherto, the political scene was extremely fragmented and the regime of Damascus did not tolerate the political organization of Syria’s Kurds. According to Fantappie, the Kurdish population already became an integral part of the Syrian society. Moreover, as stressed, any political actor aspiring to legitimately govern Syria in the future will necessarily need the support of Syria’s Kurds.

Secondly, the KRG plays a significant role in terms of architecting the solution to the Kurdish issue in the region. Fantappie contended that there is a will, most notably visible in the demands of the Kurdish National Council to reproduce the Iraqi Kurdish model which has proven successful in Iraq’s Kurdish-populated areas to the situation of Syrian Kurds. This model, as emphasized, is a peaceful political solution, which aims at broader autonomy for the Kurdish-populated areas reaching from self-administration to federalism, and - most importantly - recognizing the Kurds as an ethnic group and as an independent nation.

However, the KRG’s proposed solution is confronted with competing suggestions for solving the Kurdish issue by the PKK (i.e. the Turkish Kurdistan Worker’s Party) on the one hand, and Ankara on the other one.

The PKK’s vision of a Kurdish region in Syria stands in utmost contrast to the Iraqi Kurdish model as it favors an armed struggle firmly rejecting a political solution. The PKK, as Fantappie noted, is currently trying to strengthen its position and expanding its power through the Kurdish-populated areas of Syria.

Turkey’s proposed solution displays similarities to the model of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is mostly visible in its peace-oriented nature. Nonetheless, it differs from the KRG’s proposal insofar as it aims less at decentralization and a high degree
of autonomy for Kurds. Also Turkey’s vision of the future of the Kurdish issue does not include the recognition of Kurds as a nation what is clearly demanded by the Syrian National Council based in Turkey. Instead, as argued, Ankara has tried since the beginning of the Syrian crisis to solve the Kurdish issue in the framework of Syria as a nation.

Despite their differences, according to Fantappie, one common aspect of these models is the incompatibility between the proposed solutions and the real demands of Kurdish people of Syria.

The presentations of the speakers were followed by a vivid discussion. Questions raised by the audience among others issues concerned in the first place the role of geopolitical partners of the region, Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) or the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil.

In response to the question concerning the PKK’s influence on the relationship between the KRG and Turkey, Fantappie argued that by paradox, the existence of the PKK strengthened their cooperation as its attitude towards the Kurdish issue stands in opposition to both the KRG’s and Ankara’s viewpoint. The KRG therefore regards the Turkish government as an ally in its internal competition with the PKK.

Regarding the international community’s impact on the Kurdistan region, Hiltermann argued that while the United States have always had huge influence, not least due its longstanding military presence in Iraq, Russia and the European Union’s presence has been mostly limited to their energy interests. Nevertheless, as contended, the international community is attentively monitoring the development of Kurdistan as it has a stake at the region’s commitment to the rule of law and democratic order.

Commenting on the Hiltermann’s statement that Kurdistan has an existential interest in keeping Baghdad as weak as possible, Minister Falah Mustafa relativized this argument insofar as he emphasized that a strong Iraq is not a threat to Kurdistan as long as it will be strong in sustaining its commitments to
democratic principles, the rule of law and its efforts to build a civil society and support the freedom of speech. A strong Iraq in a military sense, however, will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Falah Mustafa stressed that Kurdistan would undertake any effort to undermine Baghdad’s aspirations to militarize the country.

As for the question regarding the KRG’s position on the Syrian crisis, Falah Mustafa stressed that after the outbreak of the conflict the Kurdish leadership appealed to Syrian Kurds not to undertake violent acts and encouraged the Kurdish National Council to pursue dialogue with the Syrian opposition in order to find a mutually accepted peaceful solution to achieve stability and security.

Summarizing, the speakers in overall agreed that Kurdistan made remarkable progress during the past twenty years. Nevertheless, it is still to face numerous challenges and threats which will have to be successfully managed in the years to come. Questions concerning the future political and social development in Kurdish-populated areas in the region still remain unanswered. It is beyond doubt, however, that the future of Kurds depends to a large extent on the development in countries they are spread over, as well as the outcome of the power struggle between political actors trying to exert influence on the Kurdish issue. It thus remains to be seen how the situation will unfold in the following years and whether the Kurds’ struggle for a better future will prove successful.