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## Kurdistan Is a Model for Iraq

*Our path to a secular, federal democracy is inspired by the U.S.*

By [MASOUD BARZANI](#)

Iraq's Kurds have consistently been America's closest allies in Iraq. Our Peshmerga forces fought alongside the U.S. military to liberate the country, suffering more casualties than any other U.S. ally.

And while some Iraqi politicians have challenged the U.S.-Iraq security agreement, Iraq's Kurdish leaders have endorsed the pact as essential for U.S. combat troops to continue fighting terrorists in Iraq.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is committed to a federal, democratic Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors.

We have benefited enormously from the service and sacrifices of America's armed forces and their families, and we are deeply grateful. We are also proud to have shared in such sacrifices; my brother was among those severely wounded during the liberation of Iraq.

Last year, following a U.S. request, we deployed Kurdish troops to Baghdad. These troops played a decisive role in the success of the surge. Last month I once again visited Baghdad to meet with the leadership of the federal government. We stressed our commitment to developing an Iraqi state that abides by its constitution and that is based upon a federal model with clearly delineated powers for its regions.

In spite of all this, some commentators now suggest that the Kurds are causing problems by insisting on territorial demands and proceeding with the development of Kurdistan's oil resources. These allegations are troubling. We are proceeding entirely in accord with the Iraqi constitution, implementing provisions that were brokered by the U.S.

In the constitutional negotiations that took place in the summer of 2005, two issues were critical to us: first, that the Kurdistan Region has the right to develop the oil on its territory, and second, that there be a fair process to determine the administrative borders of Iraq's Kurdistan Region -- thus resolving once and for all the issue of "disputed" territories.

Unfortunately, ever since the discovery of oil in Iraq in the 1920s, successive

Iraqi governments have sought to keep oil out of Kurdish hands, blocking exploration and development of fields in Kurdistan. Saddam Hussein's government went even further, using Iraqi oil revenues to finance the military campaigns that destroyed more than 4,500 Kurdish villages and to pay for the poison gas used to kill thousands of Kurdish civilians.

The Kurdish leadership agreed to a U.S.-sponsored compromise in 2005 in which the central government would have the authority to manage existing oil fields, but new fields would fall under the exclusive jurisdiction of the regions. Since then, the KRG has taken the lead with Baghdad in negotiations on a hydrocarbon law that is faithful to Iraq's constitution and is conducive to modernizing Iraq's oil infrastructure and substantially increasing its oil production.

We have awarded contracts for foreign oil companies (including some American ones) to explore our territory. In so doing, Kurdistan is not threatening the unity of Iraq. It is simply implementing the constitution.

The "disputed territories" have a tragic history. Since the 1950s, Iraqi regimes encouraged Arabs to settle in Kirkuk and other predominantly Kurdish and Turkmen areas. Saddam Hussein accelerated this process by engaging in ethnic cleansing, expelling or killing Kurds and Turkmen, or by requiring nationality corrections (in which non-Arabs are forced to declare themselves to be Arabs) and by moving Arabs into Kurdish homes.

The dispute between Baghdad and the Kurds over Kirkuk has lasted more than 80 years and has often been violent. All sides have now agreed to a formula to resolve the problem, to bring justice to Kirkuk, and to correct the crimes against Kurds committed by Saddam Hussein's regime. Iraq's constitution requires that a referendum be held in disputed territories to determine if their populations want to join the Kurdistan Region. Conducting a plebiscite is not easy, but it is preferable to another 80 years of conflict.

If the pro-Kurdistan side should lose the referendum in Kirkuk, I promise that Kurdistan will respect that result. And if they win, I promise that we will do everything in our power to ensure outsized representation of Kirkuk's Turkmen, Arabs and Christians both on the local level and in the parliament and government of the Kurdistan Region.

Regional stability cannot come from resolving internal disputes alone. That is why expanding and deepening our ties with Turkey is my top priority.

My meeting last month in Baghdad with the Turkish special envoy to Iraq was a historic and positive development. There should be further direct contacts between the KRG and Turkey, as well as multilateral contacts that involve the U.S. We are eager to work with Turkey to seek increased peace and prosperity in the region.

I am proud that the Kurdistan Region is both a model and gateway for the rest of Iraq. Our difficult path to a secular, federal democracy is very much inspired by

the U.S. And so we look forward to working with the Obama-Biden administration to support and defend our hard-fought successes in Iraq, and to remain proud of what the Kurdistan region is today: a thriving civil society in the heart of the Middle East. When we insist on strict compliance with our country's constitution, we are only following America's great example.

**Mr. Barzani is the president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.**

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