



# The Land Between Two Anniversaries



*The photographs on the front and back covers are by Richard Wilding. They are respectively of the Citadel in Erbil, Rawanduz Gorge - the biggest in the Middle East - and a shepherd. Many thanks to Richard for these. His work can be found at [www.richardwilding.com](http://www.richardwilding.com)*

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## **The land between two anniversaries.**

### **The perils and promise of the Kurdistan Region on the centenary of Sykes-Picot and the 25th anniversary of the Kurdish uprising.**

**Reports on a parliamentary fact-finding delegation in November 2015.**

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#### **Parliamentary disclaimer and funding sources**

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This short statement of principles has been agreed by the whole delegation. The second part of this report was written by the Director of the APPG who gives a wider and longer perspective having visited the Kurdistan Region and Iraq over 20 times since 2006. The delegation believes that the article is worthy of discussion.

# Preface

**E**conomic crisis has worsened since November. Salary cuts are making life difficult but also prompting people to start small businesses, which could be a long term gain. A more dynamic private sector of many more small and medium enterprises is crucial to a more sustainable economy that is not dangerously addicted to state employment or commodity revenues.

Yet the KRG needs international loans to tide people over, fairly reduce state staffing establishments, and invest in infrastructure - roads, rail, bridges, schools - that could be magnets for small and medium sized enterprises, as well as foreign investors.

## Loans

An emergency loan of \$200 million from Turkey and \$300 million from a large private company have been made. Michael Knights, an informed Kurdistan-watcher at the Washington Institute, has also written that emergency financial assistance to the near-bankrupt KRG will only postpone Kurdistan's economic collapse by perhaps a year and that the policy aim should not merely be to keep the KRG afloat until Mosul is liberated but provide a much larger financial infusion that helps the Kurds well afterward. He argues that the International Monetary Fund and other institutions are key to not only saving Kurdistan, but also fostering sustainable political and economic relations between the KRG and the Iraqi federal government.

He writes that "International mediation could help Kurdistan get its fair share of federal revenues, reserves, and multi-billion-dollar aid packages, while IMF conditionality and monitoring could help KRG officials reform the economy and restore shattered public trust in its revenue and spending figures. In addition, a more benign relationship with Baghdad could eventually net other benefits for Erbil, such as airspace control and backing for sub-sovereign

loans." Such thinking should also be examined by the UK government.

The KRG remains a vital ally in fighting Daesh. The Middle East Minister, Tobias Ellwood, told an APPG meeting in March that "Daesh is a global threat. Iraq and the Kurdistan Region are on the frontline. The UK supports the government and people of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as they fight to rid their country of extremism, and put their nation back on the path to security, stability and prosperity. I would like to pay tribute to the courage and sacrifice of Kurdish Peshmerga forces."



*KRG High Representative Karwan Jamal Tahir and Gary Kent on the road to Slemani.*

He added: "The UK's commitment is clear. We have deployed more than 1000 British military personnel to the region in support of the Global Coalition against Daesh. We are providing air and logistical support, weapons, equipment and training. UK military trainers are providing counter-IED training and equipment, and combat medical skills to Iraqi and Kurdish Security Forces. We have trained more than 3,100 Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in infantry fighting skills. And with Coalition partners we are working to undermine Daesh's poisonous narrative and ideology, cut off its finances and shut down the flow of foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and other countries."

There are discussions between the KRG, the American Administration and the UK Government - Foreign Secretary Phillip

Hammond was in Erbil in March - about the Kurdish contribution to freeing Mosul, itself facing mortal danger from a possible collapse of the Mosul Dam along with a tranche of land extending to Baghdad.

### Weapons

The reliable supply of weapons to the KRG is an essential part of this, and emphasises the need for replacement rounds for the heavy machine guns gifted by the UK and which ran out many months ago.

There is also a need for a political and military strategy that seeks to avoid Mosul being the victim of sectarian Shia forces, although the Peshmerga could be both a significant military and moderating force. Unrestrained revenge by irregular forces could hand a propaganda victory to Daesh. They may, in such circumstances be defeated, but a new version of the organisation could then acquire a momentum in the Middle East and elsewhere. Such a disaster would also undermine public acceptance of liberal interventionism, which our allies in Kurdistan have long emphasised as essential.

Furthermore, the recent trickle of IDPs from Mosul would again swell and add to the nearly two million people who have sought refuge in Kurdistan, an increase of a third, and which is straining the capacity of the state.

### Film

The Kurds will drive the changes needed to overcome these crises and make new economics at home and mutually beneficial connections abroad. One of the most important means of making the world pay attention to the past, present and future of the Kurds is through cinema. The scenery of Kurdistan could also suit many foreign films and I can imagine an action packed car chase of a Bond film made in Kurdistan. But more important than useful revenues is that a home-grown film industry would build understanding and solidarity. Many don't know where Kurdistan is. More Kurdish films will literally put Kurdistan on the map and

encourage tourism. There are plans afoot by a group of British film industry executives to assist that, and the APPG could encourage this.

**Gary Kent. March 2016**

## Delegation statement

**T**he Kurdistan Region in Iraq has become a valued ally of the UK and the West. Its people have a deep affection for the UK which sheltered many who fled from Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, and which Kurds widely think liberated them in 1991 and in 2003.

Its leaders thank the UK for assistance in combatting Daesh. Our airstrikes certainly helped save the Region from being overrun by Daesh in August 2014 and our continued military support and advice remain vital.

We urge the British government to consider increasing supplies of heavy weapons and of military advice. In particular, the UK government should urgently consider supplying more rounds, which the KRG claims ran out in the middle of 2015, for the forty heavy machine guns which it gifted.



*With the Governor of Slemani*

The unacceptably high proportion of Peshmerga deaths from treatable wounds can be reduced by providing mobile medical units as well as the continued and increased transfer of expertise in

demining. Seriously wounded Peshmerga could be offered the chance to recuperate in British hospitals.

The KRG should also be recognised as an essential part of the international coalition against Daesh and invited to take part in all its regular meetings. The same principle applies to all international meetings concerning refugees. Most of the refugees in Iraq are in the Kurdistan Region.



*A view of Dukan Dam*

We ask ministers and MPs in debates on the plight of refugees from the Syrian war to cite the substantial Kurdistan contribution in looking after up to two million refugees and internally displaced people - an increase of a third in their population.

We fear that external crises could undermine the KRG's capacities, which are straining to breaking point under the combined burdens of war and refugees and IDPs, as well as shortfalls in funding from the federal government in Baghdad.

The failure of Iraqi federalism, the obstructive and insouciant approach of leaders in Baghdad, and what increasingly looks like the de facto partition of Iraq are driving moves to the independence of the Kurdistan Region. There may be a referendum of the people of the Kurdistan Region on the principle of independence later this year. We support the right of the people of Iraqi Kurdistan to make that determination before its leaders negotiate

with the federal government in Baghdad, and win support for it from its neighbours and the great powers.

We accept the conclusions of the landmark Foreign Affairs Committee report of January 2015 as a major intellectual counterweight to the inertial force of the One Iraq policy. It concluded that 'If the Kurdistan Region is to become independent, it should be with the consent of the rest of Iraq. But the UK and its international partners should stand ready to help ensure that any clear expression of will in favour of independence, and on reasonable terms, is accepted and respected.'

Iraqi unity may be desirable but any return to centralisation will both hobble the Kurds, as they regain their economic dynamism, and also make it harder to persuade Sunnis to break with Daesh. Without moves to end the marginalisation and alienation of Sunnis, there is a grave danger, as many Kurdistan leaders told us, of Daesh Mark Two being incubated by continuing hostility to Sunnis.

We also welcome new thinking on partition suggested by senior foreign policy practitioners William Hague and John Bolton. Hague argued that the borders of Syria and Iraq should not be considered immutable, partition is possible and that Kurds have shown their ability to run their own affairs. Bolton argued that Iraq and Syria as we have known them are gone and recognised a de facto independent Kurdistan. Such views deserve a proper airing as we approach the 25th anniversary of the Kurdish Uprising in March and the centenary of Sykes-Picot in May.

### **Sykes-Picot**

Sykes-Picot is shorthand for a longer process that led to Iraqi Kurds being incorporated into Iraq as a balance between Shias and Sunnis. Kurds often talk about betrayal but should also recognise that their political incoherence and divisions at the time allowed better organised forces to get their way. But incorporation into Iraq has clearly not been a happy experience for the Kurds who long suffered discrimination,



neglect, and ethnic cleansing. Ultimately, it led to genocide in Iraq, which was formally recognised in February 2013 by the House of Commons, if not yet the British government.



*Press conference at the Ashti IDP camp near Slemani*

Iraqi Kurds will probably endorse independence but this is not a prelude to a Greater Kurdistan. Kurdistan leaders are clear there are four separate Kurdistans, each at a different stage of development. The time for a Greater Kurdistan has been overtaken by history and there is no merit in hankering after the impossible.

KRG leaders also know, as a landlocked country, that a formal political break with Baghdad must involve an amicable divorce with Baghdad and with at least the acquiescence of its other neighbours.

It is increasingly difficult to believe that Iraq will be put back together given ever sharper differences between its constituent parts. But nor can the Kurdistan Region attain statehood without reforming its unproductive and state dominated economy, whose defects are now more evident thanks to the dramatic reduction in oil prices upon which the economies of the Kurdistan Region and of Iraq have long been far too dependent.

## **Oil**

The KRG's independent oil exports are necessary but not sufficient in paying for government services. We urge the UK and its allies to accept the legitimacy of such exports

and seek to persuade the federal government of this.

But the KRG also needs to address its ingrained problems with greater alacrity. We heard in detail about long-simmering internal disputes between the parties on the terms of the presidency. We take the point made by Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani that, in contrast to the terrible civil war of the 1990s, different parties have turned their pens rather than their guns on each other. We are hopeful that a period of calm, moderation and dialogue can allow a resolution of these issues.

We commend the KRG Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani's recent launch of a wide-ranging reform programme, beginning with the restructuring and reform of the finance ministry. We also commend his recognition that action should have been taken earlier when oil revenues were high and when, from 2006-2014 there was over \$30 billion worth of investment in the Kurdistan Region, \$5 billion of it foreign investment.

The Prime Minister rightly argues that 2016 is a year of reform and modernisation and we hope these plans are implemented with determination, as well as practical and political external support. British assistance in public financial management, and encouraging and sustaining entrepreneurialism are essential.

Other priorities include diversifying the economy beyond reliance on energy and further professionalising the Peshmerga as part of building the capacity of the KRG. Austerity, fiscal resilience, restructuring and tackling corruption are all essential components of uniting the parties and people behind a new patriotic mission that encourages a new work ethic. A social contract based on taxation and fair utility charges can increase accountability and reduce waste of vital resources such as water, fuel and electricity.

Reform will be hard and take time but the Kurdistan Region is in a state of severe crisis now. Its valiant Peshmerga forces have not been

paid for months, are under-fed, under-armed and under-equipped. Disaffection is growing thanks to non-payment of salaries, debt, low economic activity, and growing unemployment and poverty. All this could hollow out the KRG from inside.

### **Tough love**

The KRG cannot go on like this without something giving. We need the KRG to be a strong ally and Britain and the wider international community should urgently consider extending loans to help them through. However, no one wants to throw good money after bad. Tough love on reform is reasonable.



*Taking tea at the People's Cafe in Slemani*

A strengthened KRG is necessary for either continued and genuine Iraqi federalism, smart regionalism, independence, or confederation. Official British fears about different futures should not be used to drip-feed the KRG at a time of its greatest need.

As economic activity returns, we hope that the building blocks of a stronger and deeper commercial and cultural relationship between the UK and the Kurdistan Region will be further developed. The APPG has long sought practical changes on visas, direct flights and in encouraging trade and investment.

The Kurdistan Region should be seen as a vital ally against Daesh and in encouraging wider reform in the volatile Middle East. The renewal of its economic dynamism and democratic

aspiration and its being a model of Muslim tolerance, secularism, and freedom of conscience can be powerful antidotes to extremism.

Its position at the heart of the Middle East has also long necessitated Kurds finding diplomatic solutions to problems with larger neighbours. The historic rapprochement between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey of the last decade remains a major if sometimes overlooked bonus for both countries.

The Kurdistan Region must continue to sort out its own affairs and make itself match-fit for whatever future beckons but cannot as a strategic ally be expected to do that alone given the depth of external challenges and internal defects. It is in all our interests that it succeeds and we should not be found wanting.

### **The delegation**

**Mike Gapes MP (Delegation Leader), Liam Byrne MP, Lord Glasman, Gary Kent (APPG Director), Danny Kinahan MP, Jack Lopresti MP, Henry Smith MP, Garvan Walshe (Conservative Home columnist), and John Woodcock MP.**

### **Who and what they saw**

**The delegation visited Erbil, Slemani and Kirkuk between 11-16 November 2015. They met the KRG Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani, Planning Minister Dr Ali Sindi, Foreign Minister Dr Falah Mustafa Bakir, Natural Resources Minister Dr Ashti Hawrami and the President's Chief of Staff Dr Fuad Hussein, as well as the Governor of Slemani, Dr. Aso Faraydoon. They met the British Consul-General, Angus McKee and his colleagues, YouGov, and the British Business Group Kurdistan as well as representatives of the KDP, the PUK and Gorran. They visited a Qaiwan Group petrol refinery, the Red House Museum in Slemani, the American University of Iraq in Slemani and the front line in the south of Kirkuk.**



# Further Analysis

**T**he Kurds in Iraq are seen by the British Government and the international community as key allies in the generational fight against the monstrous Daesh movement and as a positive and pro-Western, indeed pro-British, force in the Middle East. UK relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its people have substantially deepened and thickened over the years.

The APPG, which has promoted such links, is an independent friendship group that unites parliamentarians from across the political spectrum and seeks to encourage two-way dialogue between leaders and people, and myriad commercial, cultural, economic and political connections for mutual benefit.

The British government has messages to convey to the KRG and, following a pre-delegation briefing kindly afforded us by the Middle East Minister, Tobias Ellwood, the delegation discussed these with senior Kurdistan leaders on its last delegation in November 2015.

KRG Prime Minister, Nechirvan Barzani asked them to convey the appreciation of his government and people for British military support in liberating Sinjar, the day before they met him, and in helping shoulder the humanitarian burden as well as in assisting the resolution of political problems about which he was optimistic.

The KRG has done remarkably well since it voluntarily embraced democracy in 1991 but recent internal events have disappointed friends of Kurdistan, and connected external challenges require greater British commitment to supporting Kurdistan, whether it remains in Iraq, becomes independent, or embraces some other arrangement. The British government should be open to new solutions and particularly those of the landmark report of the Foreign Affairs Committee of January 2015.



*At the American University of Iraq in Slemani*

Its summary rightly argues that 'The UK should not allow question marks over the Region's future constitutional status to stand in the way of deepening an already strong and trusting partnership.'

## Internal challenges

The Kurdistan Region is dominated by three political parties. One of them is Gorran, a split from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two historic parties. Gorran has been a formal opposition - a major bonus in the Middle East and a role to be cultivated. But relations between the leading Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Gorran have deteriorated.

It is impossible to comment in detail on the tragic events in October 2015 when several people were killed in and near Slemani as tensions over constitutional matters and economic crisis boiled over, were manipulated, or a mixture of the two according to different interpretations.

Five offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party were torched. Four Gorran ministers were expelled - put on temporary leave according to the Deputy Prime Minister, Qubad Talabani. The Speaker, a member of Gorran, was prevented from returning to the Parliament, which remains in a state of suspended animation.

There is much behind the scenes work to overcome obstacles on the inevitably long

journey to higher democratic standards and calm, restraint and dialogue are needed. Talabani said work to find a solution had failed, that he and others were embarrassed about some reactions but the saving grace, compared to the 1990s civil war, is different parties have turned their pens rather than their guns on each other.

But some Kurds, possibly several thousands, who returned from exile to the Kurdistan Region have upped sticks and taken their valuable expertise with them.



*With academics and students in Slemani*

One of the internal flashpoints concerns the powers and means of election of the presidency and between a parliamentary or presidential system. The delegation is collectively agnostic about whether the presidency is directly or indirectly elected - a matter of six of one and half a dozen of the other - but any new system and a draft constitution should be ratified by parliament, and endorsed by the people in a referendum.

The Kurds should double down on negotiations to resolve the issue, and members noted the recognition that the Kurdistan parliament has been 'damaged.' President Barzani's Chief of Staff, Dr Fuad Hussein said that, apart from the Prime Minister, key decision-makers are not in government or in parliament. He was referring to the role of party Politbureaus. Parliament should play a greater role in public life, which also illustrates the importance of the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and others in imparting experience and expertise

from our own parliamentary and political systems.

### **The path to reform**

The dispute about presidential powers is over a decade long. But the Kurds have shown in the past a great ability to innovate. The APPG started sending delegations to the Kurdistan Region in 2008 when once impossible developments were in their infancy - a major and very welcome rapprochement with Turkey, and the building of a dynamic energy sector from scratch. Such determination and innovation can be applied to maturing democratic processes and civil society.

Successive delegations have built a detailed picture of other reforms that could enable the Kurdistan Region to navigate its way in what its leaders usually call a tough neighbourhood. That has become even tougher with the rise of Daesh, the implosion of Iraq and Syria, and the end for now and maybe for a long time of economies based on oil prices of over \$100 a barrel. The barrels are now worth more than the oil in them.

In summary, the KRG needs to diversify its economy so it is not over-dependent on either energy or a large state sector. Reducing the size and sway of the public sector can reduce recurrent expenditure and encourage a larger private sector, not least in agriculture, tourism, and industry. Mineral extraction could be another opportunity for raising revenues and for foreign investors.

Talabani outlined plans to reduce wasteful spending and reduce subsidies that encourage wasteful use of resources. Reform also requires developing banking, insurance and other financial services as well as finding ways to borrow money on the international markets.

At the same time, the authority and capacity of the KRG needs to be developed and not least in the further professional unification of the Peshmerga. Civil society institutions need to be

nurtured as does an independent and professional media.

The British government and various private bodies could take the lead in encouraging entrepreneurialism. A wider range of small and medium sized enterprises can challenge cartels and underpin political pluralism and the reduction of clientilism. They are also needed to mop up lost jobs in the public sector as it is reshaped to suit lower revenues and to lift the dead hand of the state being seen as the solution to all problems.

Such reform can also engage young people. Most of the region's population is young and political stasis, especially when combined with profound economic crisis, can create the conditions for their alienation and even jihadist radicalisation - several hundred Kurds have joined Daesh. The deliberate pluralism and tolerance of Kurdistan society, and continued efforts to improve the status of women, are major bulwarks against home-grown extremism.

Dr Hawrami put it succinctly: 'We need to be clear-headed. Kurdistan must liberate itself from reliance on oil and gas or be a lazy nation without reform and diversification, a postage stamp distributing money.' And, he added, 'why should everything be Made in Baghdad' in a country whose mosaic never gelled or only by force. He appealed for a stable income if Kurdistan is to fight terrorism.

The KRG has identified many reforms in a landmark report from the Ministry of Planning - 'Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020: A Vision for the Future' in September 2013. The plan was overtaken by the rise of Daesh. It is at [http://www.iraq-jccme.jp/pdf/archives/krq\\_2020\\_english.pdf](http://www.iraq-jccme.jp/pdf/archives/krq_2020_english.pdf)

The scale and scope of reform is well-known to Kurdistan leaders and is the basis of a cross-party consensus but needs to be more rigorously and vigorously applied. And such reform takes time, expertise and money.

### **Daesh and the perfect storm of crises**

It is impossible, however, to be in Kurdistan for any time without seeing the impact of Daesh. The normally five million strong population has increased by about a third, very many refugees arriving at short notice and with nothing to their name.

KRG resources have been further reduced by increased defence spending, less revenue from independent oil exports and dramatically reduced budget payments from the federal government as well as excessive state expenditure, which overlays an unproductive economy, reliant on energy sales.

Kurdistan was saved from Daesh in August 2014 by American, British and French airstrikes, which remain an essential part of degrading and rolling back Daesh. We salute the bravery of the Peshmerga and their signal successes in defeating Daesh, not least in Sinjar at the time of our visit and after a year of planning. That was a major psychological blow to a movement that requires momentum and territory to attract extremist support globally. The capture of Sinjar also cut the supply route between Mosul and Raqqa and will make life more difficult for Daesh.



*In the Ops Room near Kirkuk*

The UK expects much of the KRG: to defend its territory, to participate in further offensive actions against Daesh, look after its own people and its guests, and further reform its society. But



the British government should understand the perfect storm of crises facing Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **The humanitarian challenge**

British ministers regularly cite the contributions of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in hosting refugees but oddly and often omit that of Kurdistan, which hosts 300,000 mainly Syrian Kurdish refugees and about 1.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs). Population numbers have doubled in two of the region's 33 districts and some Kurdistan towns have effectively been Arabised.



*Surveying Daesh positions in Kirkuk*

The UK provides the second largest contribution to the UN's work with refugees in Kurdistan but the actual amount is low and UN efforts are under-subscribed. And the bulk of the humanitarian burden in Kurdistan concerns IDPs where Baghdad is failing to pull its weight and in some cases directing IDPs towards Kurdistan.

The KRG Minister of Planning, Dr Ali Sindi referred to the 'continuous bleeding of KRG resources' and their assessment of \$31 billion worth of infrastructure improvements to provide clean water and health for them and the native population. The KRG once achieved near 24/7 power supplies but this has been more than halved due to increased demand.

Dr Sindi suggested, with gallows humour, that if the 8 million displaced people in Syria and the four million in Iraq swapped places they could obtain superior treatment. He urged new

international conventions to cover the plight of IDPs.

The presence of many Sunni Arabs causes economic disruption, presents security risks and destabilises the demographic balance. Kurdistan values its religious and ethnic pluralism, with 11 out of parliamentary 111 seats set aside for Christians and Turkomen, as well as a 30% quota for women.

But the permanent presence of so many Sunni Arabs will unreasonably alter the composition of Kurdistan and spark Kurdistan resentment. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the influx includes Daesh sleeper calls. The KRG's extra security for incoming Arabs is a necessary response to that danger. However, the KRG should use its powers with the greatest care and take action if security forces overstep the mark.

The delegation visited IDP camps in Ashti and Beharkar, near Slemani and Erbil respectively, and heard how the vast majority of those currently residing in Kurdistan yearn to return home. That requires an end to civil war in Syria and the defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq.

Even if that were to happen quickly, it would take longer before IDPs felt safe to return. Many, especially Christians and Yezedis as well as Sunnis in some areas, do not trust former neighbours who looted their property. Special measures will be needed for them and include building new towns and villages as near to where they came from as possible.

Dr Sindi said that Sinjar and other liberated towns were more like Leningrad or Stalingrad after the defeat of the Nazis. One Sunni Arab elder told the delegation that Daesh had destroyed ten percent of his village but that Shia forces from the Popular Mobilisation Units had destroyed much of the rest. The destruction in liberated Kobane in Syria and in Sinjar also demonstrates the need for a major programme of reconstruction and reconciliation. The KRG also recognises that the liberation of Mosul will probably unleash a further wave of IDPs.



*Inspecting a mortar position near Kirkuk*

The comprehensive and expert report of the Task Force, based at Columbia University in New York, on State Building in Iraqi Kurdistan, (<http://theKurdistanproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/State-Building-in-Iraqi-Kurdistan.pdf>) urges the federal government to pay salaries to civil servants who are IDPs and the rations of all IDPs, while noting that civil servants in Daesh territory receive both.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis and burden needs to be highlighted if the international community is to make it a priority. The Columbia report recommends that the KRG develop a comprehensive post-conflict recovery plan and present this plan at a special session of the UN Security Council. This can be convened by a UNSC member under the Arria formula. The UK could initiate or support it.

KRG Foreign Minister, Dr Falah Mustafa told us that Baghdad had refused a Polish shipment of humanitarian supplies to the Kurdistan Region and that the KRG is keen on controlling its airspace.

The delegation joined the Commander of the Peshmerga on the southern sector of Kirkuk, Wasta Rasul who accompanied it to survey the frontline with Daesh controlled villages two miles away. He thanked the UK for its air assistance and praised the contribution of two RAF Tornados on the front but added that two more would be useful. He also outlined how Daesh sought to capture a bridge behind

Kurdish lines with three Humvees packed with explosives. The Peshmerga managed to kill the drivers but the vehicles exploded on the bridge and set off an oil pipeline. Armoured vehicle suicide bombs are a regular feature of Daesh attacks.

This illustrates the need for the Peshmerga to be equipped with more heavy machine guns that can stop such attacks before they reach their targets. It is a matter of luck if the Peshmerga can kill the drivers in their armoured cabins while heavy machine guns and missiles can stop the vehicles at a distance.

The Commander also said that the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces share a long border but there is no co-ordination between them although that would open a more direct route to Daesh positions.

The British government facilitated the delivery of soviet-era weapons from Eastern Europe and ammunition, and gifted 40 fifty calibre heavy machine guns as well as military training.

The Peshmerga can hold its territory but also play a supportive role in the liberation of Mosul where hundreds of thousands of people are enduring cruel rule by Daesh and whose capture is essential to their ultimate defeat. There is Kurdistan wariness, however, of their forces inflaming Kurdish/Arab tensions in Mosul.

3,000 Peshmerga soldiers are guarding the strategic Mosul dam, which is in a state of disrepair. If it collapsed or were destroyed by Daesh, the floodwaters would overwhelm Baghdad but not affect Kurdistan. The Peshmerga and the KRG would like Baghdad to install its own forces to do the job.

The British gift of 40 heavy machine guns was welcome but, given greater contributions by the German government and others, is relatively small. But the rounds for these guns were depleted five or six months ago, according to the KRG.

There is a the discrepancy between the British belief that Baghdad is not obstructing arms

shipments and persistent KRG views that they are not receiving the weapons they need. Talabani said that 'we are not getting the weapons in time' and mentioned a hold-up in proffered supplies from Jordan. The Kurds feel they are, as Talabani said, being 'spoon-fed' to limit political options.

The British government should urgently clarify the reality of arms supplies. If the system cannot be made to work, direct and transparent supplies of weapons to the KRG should be embraced.

The KRG needs a variety of basic equipment such as gas masks - chemical weapons are being used by Daesh - helmets, body armour, winter protection night vision goggles and continued and increased demining expertise.

The Peshmerga have lost 1,300 soldiers and over 7,000 injured - some very seriously. This is a very high proportion of injuries in modern warfare terms. Many injuries would have been avoided fifty years ago in the British Army and are due to insufficient battlefield medical treatment. The UK government should provide Peshmerga force with mobile clinics and also to explore with the KRG the possibility of paid medical treatment for the most severely injured Peshmerga soldiers in specialist British hospitals and to overcome any visa problems.

There is an urgent need for the Peshmerga to end its political divisions. There has been progress towards putting the Peshmerga under the command of the KRG rather than the KDP and the PUK. Former British military leaders have globally recognised skills in organising military structures and men like Sir Simon Mayall, himself a former UK Security envoy to Kurdistan, are in a good position to lend their skills. The strategic asset of Sandhurst could play a role in helping professionalise the Peshmerga.

The KRG should not be excluded from regular international meetings of the coalition against Daesh. Iraqi Prime Minister Al Abadi claims that he and he alone should represent all Iraqis but failed remarkably to even mention the Peshmerga in his key note address to the UN

General Assembly in September 2015. It would be a fairer reflection of the Peshmerga's role and of the pluralism of Iraq if the Iraqi government allowed KRG representatives to join such meetings. The UK government should make this very clear to Baghdad and encourage other members of the coalition to do the same.

The British government should recognise the scale of the economic crisis affecting Iraqi Kurdistan. The UK played a useful role in helping establish the KRG Ministry of Interior's Joint Crisis Coordination Centre in Erbil. It issued a statement in September 2015 alerting its partners to the scale of the crisis. It made it clear then that "It is the regrettable conclusion of the KRG that without a drastic increase in funding from the international community and financial transactions from the GoI [Baghdad], the Region will neither be able to cope with the current crisis, nor respond to anticipated new displacements. As humanitarian partners formulate contingency plans, it is paramount to recognize that the Kurdistan Region has exhausted its response and absorption capacity and is at risk of total collapse."



*In an IDP camp near Erbil*

Its more recent report, in January, asks a pertinent question. If the KRG had not hosted the mass influx of IDPs and refugees where would they have gone, and also if the KRG's economic and security situation were to collapse, where would they then go? Therefore, the report concludes, 'it is the time for the international community and the Iraqi government to shoulder their part of the



humanitarian responsibilities by providing direct financial assistance to enable the KRG to at least avert imminent collapse and contain the current crises.' The report specifically focuses on the humanitarian part of the equation of crisis later.

### **The Erbil/Baghdad axis**

The common link is that the UK continues to cleave to the notion that Iraq should remain a unitary state, although Baghdad sometimes behaves as if it would like Kurdistan to leave Iraq. What Talabani described as the 'Shiacentric' government in Baghdad has no votes to win or lose in Kurdistan.

The UK and others see the Kurds as essential to the viability of Iraq and think it would be unwise to contemplate independence. One can say that this is a form of interference in the internal affairs of Iraq and it remains the right of the Kurds to exercise their right to self-determination, as they did in rejoining Iraq in 2003.

The Foreign Affairs Committee report of January 2015 is a well-argued guide to the new situation in Iraq. The relevant conclusions are: 'We agree with the UK Government that for the time being it is far better that Iraq seeks to recover its unity and strength in order to defeat the common enemy of ISIL. It is also rational to be concerned about the possible consequences of Iraq's break-up.



*At the Citadel in Erbil*

But the Kurdistan Region's desire for increased self-governance, or even independence, is itself

rational, given its economic potential and demonstrable capacity for effective self-governance, and also understandable, given its recent history. We do not judge that independence is imminent, but it is a medium-term possibility, depending in large part on the Kurdistan Region's energy export strategy, for which the UK Government should be prepared.

It is for the Iraqi people to decide their future, but it appears to us that a looser federal model, permitting greater self-governance by its diverse mosaic of communities, offers best hope for Iraq remaining united and sovereign. Highly centralised rule under a "strongman" in Baghdad will never work.

If the Kurdistan Region is to become independent, it should be with the consent of the rest of Iraq. But the UK and its international partners should stand ready to help ensure that any clear expression of will in favour of independence, and on reasonable terms, is accepted and respected.'

The continued menace of Daesh is advancing these calculations day by day. The rise of the organisation was facilitated by the brutal marginalisation of Sunnis by both Baghdad and Damascus. 75% of the Sunni tribes in and around Mosul have declared their allegiance to Daesh. If the choice is Daesh or a return to centralised and sectarian rule, they will have little incentive to break with Daesh and crush it.

### **Oil and gas politics**

The Kurds have sought to make federalism in Iraq work over the past 13 years. However, in February 2014 Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki completely cut all budget payments to the Kurdistan Region. His successor concluded a deal in December 2014 but it only lasted a month, according to Dr Ashti Hawrami, the KRG Minister for Natural Resources.

The KRG then decided to rely on independent oil exports from June 2015, with increasing success although low oil prices mean that current exports cannot cover the current budget

and its large monthly deficit. Additionally, Dr Hawrami also told us that Baghdad forces the KRG to sell at a discount which in turn forces Iraq to follow suit - a 'vicious circle,' as he put it.

The KRG argues that the decision on 29 October of the United States district court in Texas to dismiss the lawsuit filed by the Iraqi Ministry of Oil means that no legal obstacle remains in the United States or elsewhere to the KRG's exercise of its right under the Iraqi Constitution to market and sell oil. We urge the British government to encourage the federal government in Baghdad to recognise the legitimacy of independent energy exports by the Kurdistan Region.

Dr Hawrami also mentioned plans to increase gas exports to Turkey and the ambition of becoming a net exporter by 2019/2020. Such supplies could also reduce the dependence of Eastern European nations on Russia. This would be a valuable gain for Western foreign policy and energy security.

Dr Hawrami said that the KRG is owed \$14 billion from 2014 alone and has only received a third of its entitlements since December 2014. It is important to note that this has nothing to do with falling oil prices - the entitlement is a share of the budget.

If Baghdad fails to support Kurdistan when it is such an important player in fighting Daesh why should anyone believe that it will do when Daesh disappears? This raises profound strategic considerations.

Comments made by two former senior foreign policy-makers in Britain and America are very pertinent. Former British Foreign Secretary, William Hague wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* that 'the UK and our allies should signal their openness to new solutions. The borders of Syria and Iraq were largely drawn by two British and French diplomats in 1916.



*View from the Citadel*

They should not be considered immutable. If the leaders of either country cannot construct a state where all communities can live together, it will be right to consider international support for their partition. Kurds have shown their ability to run their own affairs. A subdivided Syria might now be the only one that can be at peace.'

### **New solutions?**

Separately, in *the New York Times*, the former US Ambassador to the UN, John Bolton argued that 'Today's reality is that Iraq and Syria as we have known them are gone. The Islamic State has carved out a new entity from the post-Ottoman Empire settlement, mobilizing Sunni opposition to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the Iran-dominated government of Iraq. Also emerging, after years of effort, is a de facto independent Kurdistan.'

He concluded that 'rather than striving to recreate the post-World War I map, Washington should recognize the new geopolitics. The best alternative to the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and western Iraq is a new, independent Sunni state.'

Bolton added that 'The functional independence of Kurdistan reinforces this approach. The Kurds have finally become too big a force in the region for Baghdad or Damascus to push them around. They will not be cajoled or coerced into relinquishing territory they now control to Mr. Assad in Syria or to Iraq's Shi'ite militias. The

Kurds still face enormous challenges, with dangerously uncertain borders, especially with Turkey. But an independent Kurdistan that has international recognition could work in America's favor.'

There is no appetite in Kurdistan, or indeed in any other Kurdish area, for a Greater Kurdistan carved out of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Dr Hussein noted that 'each Kurdistan has enough problems' of their own and the KRG will not interfere in the internal affairs of neighbouring states but will support Kurdish rights. There may be scope for a virtual Kurdistan, given familial ties, trade, internet connections across the borders.



*Chai near the Citadel*

Major change is increasingly probable and necessary if the roots of Daesh's popular base are to be undermined. Kurdistan leaders acknowledge that Daesh will be defeated politically more than militarily as it is a by-product of political failure. Without political action, Daesh 1 could be replaced by further iterations just as Daesh replaced Al Qaeda after its defeat in the 2007 surge in Iraq.

The centenary of Sykes-Picot will focus minds on such possibilities. A broad international consensus needs to be sought with the great powers committing to sustaining any new settlement.

### **Fundamental fiction**

It is increasingly difficult to ignore the growing possibility that a unitary Iraq state and a fully-

fledged federalism are fundamental fictions that obstruct thinking on effective action.

Recent history and current practice tend to bear this out. The Kurds exercised their right to self-determination by agreeing to 'remarry' Iraq in 2003, despite it having been an abusive partner for decades. They then sought to make the federal government work and played decisive roles in brokering the 2005 constitution and the formation of a government under Maliki, after a standoff of many months. Leading Kurds hold senior positions in government in Baghdad, including two holders of the largely ceremonial Presidency. But the promises of the constitution, on disputed territories and budgetary matters, have not been honoured.

Talabani said the Shiacentric federal government focuses only on Shia areas where it can win votes. He added that there are very few truly pan-Iraqi politicians left, that politicians and Iraqis are used to sectarian politics and that parts of Baghdad and Basra are in a poor condition. He said that Sunnis had stuck to a centralised model of governance rather than embracing devolution, that this allowed the Shias to cement their authority and to refuse to reward the Sunnis for their part in defeating Al Qaeda.

There is little doubt about the depth of Kurdistan alienation from Baghdad. Dr Mustafa told us that Iraq was originally an artificial state and it was wrong to expect the Kurds to balance Shias and Sunnis. The Kurds had never been treated as equals but were always subordinate. He clearly expressed a common view when he said that 'nothing ties me to the Iraqi flag, I am not an Iraqi.'

The KRG also warned about the rise of Daesh and offered to send troops to Mosul but were brushed off by Maliki, who then appealed for support when it was too late.

Iraq ceased to exist in all but name when one third of its territory was taken by Daesh overnight on 9/10 June 2014. One third of the country and its second city was taken by a small force and the Iraqi Army fled. Its disarray is



illustrated by the fact that its soldiers left the keys in roughly 2,000 armoured American Humvees.

Iraqi forces crumbled without a shot being fired in Mosul and in Kirkuk, which the KRG had to immediately reinforce to stop it also falling to Daesh. The Kurds will not move their forces from Kirkuk and other disputed territories, although they fear that Shia forces will seek confrontation there at some point - and there have already been clashes.

It certainly does not augur well for the future that Baghdad is obstructive and unhelpful at a time when the Kurds are playing such a central role in containing Daesh. Nor does that signal to Sunnis that they will be treated fairly if they turn on Daesh.

The Kurds may seek a referendum on the principle of independence in the coming year or so. But that is separate from the long and complex process of delinking and the Kurds know they need good relations with Baghdad and other neighbours as geographical and economic facts of life.

Prime Minister Barzani shared a stage with the Turkish Foreign Minister in Ankara on 5 November where the KRG flag was displayed in a highly significant symbolic signal. Barzani said: "If we exercise our right to independence we will do it through mutual understanding with Baghdad, not through fighting" but "Our priority is to fight IS."



## Independence?

Partition may well be the best way of making what is currently Iraq work best for all the peoples within its territories. The British government should be open to such possibilities. But the Kurds should realise they must manage their differences more efficiently and embrace thorough-going reform, which the UK should also do much more to assist, especially in technical assistance with public financial management.

Current Kurdish disunity on major issues has to be overcome and their political and economic institutions made match-fit, not least what Talabani called their 'bloated civil service.' Reform is necessary whether independence becomes a reality or Iraq somehow manages to stay together under a weaker central government as a federation of three or four smart regions: Baghdad, Basra (which also chafes at the centralised mindset in Baghdad), Kurdistan and a Sunni component following the expulsion of Daesh. Or if there is some sort of confederation.

## Conclusion

**2016 sees two milestone anniversaries that could become bookends in the history of the Middle East and profoundly affect British foreign policy. The first is the centenary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which was the first step on the road to the settlement that established Iraq and Syria, although the diplomats' original plans were changed in that longer process. The second is the 25th anniversary of the Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein which forced the Baathist regime to vacate much of Iraqi Kurdistan and allowed the Iraqi Kurds to build a society that was subsequently recognised after 2003 as an official autonomous region of Iraq.**



For much of that time, Kurdistan was a great success and enjoyed double digit growth, and rising living standards as well as conspicuous consumption - take a look at the number of high performance cars and SUVs on Kurdistan's congested roads. Reform was talked about but often kicked into the long grass as short-term imperatives were bolstered by high oil prices.

Kurdistan remains a beacon of peace, with very few terrorist attacks so far although foreign travel and that of external investors has nosedived. Domestic crime is low as seen in the common practice of shopkeepers simply throwing a sheet over their goods overnight.

Kurdistan is a model of moderation in an ocean of extremism and needs nurturing.

The battle with Daesh contains important military elements that the Kurds contribute to but is largely ideological, political and economic. A successful Kurdistan is a major antidote to Daesh. We have to trust their desire to seek an amicable divorce with Baghdad, if a viable federalism is unavailable - as is likely.

There is one tough message for the Kurds in Iraq too. They can all too easily fall prey to external interference and of their own accord be their own worst enemies. The historical record should show that the Kurds were not so much betrayed by the process unleashed by Sykes-Picot as let down by their own divisions. The heroic uprising against Saddam in 1991 was soon followed by a bloody civil war which caused many thousands of deaths and whose lines of fracture lie not far beneath the surface of modern Kurdistan politics. But Kurds also have a long tradition of resilience and innovation. They will need that in spades and the West needs to do more to help cultivate creative solutions to age-old problems.

This report was written by Gary Kent, the Director of the APPG on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq.

## **APPG Kurdistan Region, British Expertise International, Middle East Association and Pathfinder Trade and Invest. Joint memorandum on the availability of UK visas to citizens of the Kurdistan Region and the potential impact on our commercial and political relations with the Kurdistan Region.**

**T**he four organisations each seek to promote British connections including trade with and investment in the Kurdistan Region and have done so for many years. The APPG and its members make the case in Parliament and to relevant ministers and select committees. The three trade bodies organise regular trade missions and seminars in co-operation with the Kurdistan Regional Government. This memorandum is also supported by the UK High Representation of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The KRG has designated the UK as its 'partner of choice' and all four organisations know from their frequent visits to Kurdistan that quality British goods and services are sought by a government which has a deep historic affection for the UK and where English is the second language. Many skilled people who had settled in the UK have returned and will undoubtedly continue the connection with the UK.

One of the key issues constantly and forcefully raised over very many years by business people and ministers is, however, the difficulty in securing visas for visits to the UK as part of building business links, to purchase health treatment or tourism.

We acknowledge the very welcome introduction of the Visa Application Centre in Erbil. This means that applicants no longer have to travel to Amman, or Baghdad which is deemed unsafe by many, and stay there for maybe two weeks while their passport is held at the British Embassy in Amman or Baghdad, which are the nearest visa hubs.

However, we have often been told of a very high rate of refusal, which has now been confirmed by a recent parliamentary answer to

the Chairman of the APPG, Jason McCartney MP.

**'19 June 2015. Home Office. Entry Clearances: Iraq. 3343**

**To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how many people from the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (a) applied for and (b) were refused entry clearance to the UK in the last 12 months for which figures are available. Answered by: James Brokenshire on: 25 June 2015**

**The most recent figures available from 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015 show A) the number of Entry Clearance applications made via the Visa Application Centre in Erbil, Iraq to be 2,895 and B) the number of refusals 1,600.'**

**A subsequent parliamentary question from Danny Kinahan MP revealed the following:**

**Question: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, how many people from the Kurdish Region in Iraq (a) applied for and (b) were refused entry clearance to the UK in the last six months for which figures are available. (26302) Tabled on: 08 February 2016**

**Answer: Karen Bradley: Extract: The most recent figures available are from April 2015 to September 2015 and show A) the number of Entry Clearance applications made via the Visa Application Centre in Erbil, Iraq, to be 1790 and B) the number of refusals 1165. The answer was submitted on 18 Feb 2016.**

The first answer reveals a refusal rate of 55%. The second reveals a 66% refusal rate. We don't know the reasons for each refusal. The applications are processed by independent entry



clearance officers (ECOs) who only use the information on the form because there is no interview process.

In our experience, common reasons for rejection include a) failure to correctly complete the complex form with 120 questions, b) failure to provide sufficient proof that people have assets or jobs to which they will return. The ECOs have a wide latitude in making judgements and are able to claim that they simply do not believe the evidence presented. We have been told of cases where those with substantial sums to their name have been refused, as have senior government officials and those who have been invited to the UK on official matters.

The banking system in the Kurdistan Region is under-developed, many distrust banks due to their experience under Saddam Hussein - when many lost their savings - and since Baghdad's full and then partial blockage of federal government budget payments to the KRG since 2014, some cannot demonstrate regular salary payments. Indeed, salary payments continue to be several months in arrears for government employees, who form the vast majority of the workforce. Kurdistan is one of many essentially cash economies.

We have also often been told that entry clearance processes can sometimes be needlessly and counterproductively restrictive. We understand, for instance, that a Kurd who applied for a visa for a three day conference was questioned about why they wanted to stay a few extra days. People understandably take advantage of a work conference to take a break and do some sight-seeing, which increases tourism revenues too.

Travelling to Britain to meet business partners, see their factories, and receive training and buy health treatment, see relatives, and attend marriages all benefit the UK and Kurdistan.

It costs good money to apply for a visa and if people also think there is a high chance of refusal they will vote with their feet and go

elsewhere. American and other European applications under the Schengen scheme are much easier to compile. How can that be in the British interest? Our competitiveness is further reduced by the relative ease with which Kurds can obtain a Schengen visa. Many applicants refused UK visas, we understand, travel regularly to the USA and European Schengen areas without difficulty.

We have between us been told of very many instances where people who could by any reasonable standard be deemed useful to the British political and commercial interest have been rejected. The most bothersome refusals are those who have impeccable letters of invitation – maybe from a British Government Department - or where the applicant holds a senior position in the Kurdish public or private sector. We understand that refusals have included KRG Ministers, which is seen as an egregious insult to representatives of a friendly, foreign Government. It materially jeopardises the export of UK goods and services to the region and undermines bilateral good will.

It used to be that British diplomats and politicians were able to influence visa decisions. That is no longer possible. A senior British foreign policy practitioner says that British diplomats and politicians should be able to recommend who gets a visa, based on their knowledge of local circumstances and their assessment of what is in the British national interest. This is not something a remotely based ECO could not be expected to fully appreciate.

We recognise the danger of corruption and are aware of the scandal at the French Consulate-General in Erbil where a member of staff was selling visas, although this problem is not unique to French missions or Erbil. However, we should be capable of establishing robust procedures that tackle such a possibility.

The UK has the right to control and patrol its borders and make sure that visitors are genuine and will return. Yet the very high refusal rate raises the distinct possibility in our view that many applications have been incorrectly refused.

We fear that this is tarnishing the image of British Diplomatic missions in Erbil and Baghdad as the visible local face of HMG as well as doing a great deal of damage to the UK's own interests in building myriad links with a friendly ally, which has considerable natural wealth and potential.

### **Recommendations**

1 We urge the Government to investigate the validity of the reasons for the refusal of so many applications by asking a suitable body within the British government to examine a representative sample of applications in the period covered by the parliamentary question.

2 A checking system prior to acceptance of applications could sift out errors and omissions. Many applicants would no longer lose money if the visa is not granted which further compounds unhappiness, and undermines faith in doing business with the UK. There is an argument for such a service being provided privately, but in close co-operation with the UK authorities. We ask the Government to quantify the cost of staff cover in Erbil for a new post in order to facilitate interviews, given the importance of building commercial and political links.

3 We also urge the government to relax its rule about the ability of our diplomats and politicians to recommend visas for those they think will serve the national interest.

4 We understand that visa applications are accompanied by explanatory notes in Arabic and English but not Kurdish. It would be a constructive signal if these notes were provided in Kurdish and that a clear and comprehensive checklist of all documents is contained on the website and all in one place.

5 We ask the form be simplified and reduced in size to American or other European length.

We stand ready to give evidence on the matter and urge relevant departments and select committees to review the operation of the visa

application system as regards the Kurdistan Region as a matter of urgency.

*Gary Kent, Director APPG Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Alex Lambeth, Director, British Expertise International. David Lloyd OBE. Middle East Association. Michael Thomas Executive Chairman Pathfinder Middle East.*

### **Letter on new US visa system**

**A**s friends of the United States, we accept it has good reason to protect its borders. However, a recent measure has the unintended consequence of making travel to the U.S.A. harder for those seeking to build relationships with crucial and joint allies such as the Kurdistan Region in Iraq.

Those who visited Iraq, and three other countries, in the last five years are no longer automatically considered for the visa waiver scheme. There are case by case exemptions for those who have visited for governments, humanitarian bodies, the media and for legitimate business purposes.

British parliamentarians have visited Kurdistan, an ideological and military bulwark against Daesh. Citizens have voluntarily provided vital medical operations. They may now have to spend time and money in securing American visas. We fear that this may discourage business people from seeking contracts in Kurdistan. None of this was the intention of the new rule and we seek to alert American opinion to this so that its Administration can review the rule.

**Jason McCartney MP, Nadhim Zahawi MP, Henry Smith MP, Dave Anderson MP and Lord Clement-Jones.**



*With KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and ministerial colleagues.*



*With Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani and colleagues.*



