

Two steps forward, one step back in Kurdistan



Robust Pragmatism and Internal Reform

Report of APPG Kurdistan Region in Iraq fact-finding trip to
Kurdistan and Baghdad, May 2018



Parliamentary disclaimer and funding sources

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Delegation

The delegation consisted of APPG Chairman, Jack Lopresti MP and his parliamentary secretary, Matthew Dent, Vice-Chair Robert Halfon MP, and APPG Secretary Gary Kent. Some points were informed by Liam Allmark, who accompanied the delegation as an observer from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

Who we saw

We met the Assistant Head of the Department for Foreign Relations, the Minister of the Interior / Acting Peshmerga Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Governors of Erbil and Slemani provinces, the Secretary of the Kurdish Parliament and a cross-party group of MPs, plus senior representatives of the three main parties. We met the UK Deputy Consul-General and colleagues plus UK service personnel at the British military base, and visited the Jaguar Land Rover showroom in Erbil. We visited St Joseph's Cathedral and the commendable House of Volunteers project in Erbil. Robert Halfon visited the universities of Slemani and Kurdistan-Hewler. In Baghdad, we met the Iraqi President, the Senior Deputy Foreign Minister for Bilateral Relations, and the UK Ambassador to Iraq and his colleagues.

Note on language

Kurdistan refers to the Kurdistan Region in Iraq for brevity while Kurdish rather than Kurdish illustrates that Kurdistan contains many religious and ethnic groups.

Front photograph. The 'Hamilton Road', Rawanduz Gorge. In 1928, the engineer A.M. Hamilton was commissioned to build a road from Erbil through mountains and gorges to the Persian frontier. It passes through some of the most dramatic scenery in the Middle East including numerous waterfalls and caves, with local legends of ancient buried treasure. Cover photographs by Richard Wilding, a London based photographer, filmmaker and writer. Since 2012, Richard has been Creative Director of Gulan, a UK registered charity formed to promote Kurdish culture. www.richardwilding.com and www.gulan.org.uk

Key recommendations

- We urge the UK Government to set an early date for a visit by the Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister to meet the UK Prime Minister.
- The UK should organise an official trade mission to the Kurdistan Region after the scheduled elections in September and the formation of a new government.
- The planned Kurdish APPG on Britain could be a useful partner for the APPG on the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and be a pathway for training of MPs and the encouragement of youth and student participation in civil society. We ask the UK government to discuss with us how it can facilitate these links.
- The UK Government should further review the visa application system for Kurdish citizens wishing to visit the UK.
- The UK and international community should continue encouraging and supporting religious pluralism in Kurdistan.
- UK policy should be firmly based on the need for Kurdish rights in Iraq to be copper fastened by the constitution and not given or taken at the whim of Baghdad.
- We ask that the UK continues its valued and valuable training and mentoring programmes for the Peshmerga.
- We continue to argue that the UK should provide free places at our specialist hospital in Birmingham for the most seriously wounded Peshmerga.

Summary

The Kurdistan Region in Iraq has taken two steps forward and one step back in recent years, but has survived and could thrive if it adopts robust pragmatism in transactions with Baghdad and accelerates internal reform.

The jury is out on whether the referendum was a strategic error or one that could yet gain dividends. In any case, Kurdistan is a vital entity that deserves concerted assistance to boost its capacity and play a positive role in the Middle East.

Britain has a special place in Kurdish history, for bad and for good. Many Kurds are disappointed by the UK government's honourable opposition to the referendum but the fundamental relationship is good and can be improved by an active programme of official and voluntary efforts to help the Kurds stand on their own feet. And that is in the UK's interests too.

The 2017 Referendum and the right to self-determination

Kurdistan's right to self-determination was first exercised in 2003 by rejoining Iraq. APPG members backed the right to self-determination in a parliamentary debate in July 2017. We then officially observed the referendum in September 2017 in Erbil, Kirkuk, and Slemani and noted that it was a joyous, colourful, and peaceful vote.

We were horrified by Baghdad's vicious and violent reaction to a peaceful vote of intention rather than immediate breakaway, as was widely signalled before and after its official announcement in June. The violence makes a mockery of the first article of the Iraqi constitution which insists that Iraq is a voluntary union: the Kurds can check out but never leave, it seems.



The delegation with British military officers at the UK base in Erbil

Jack Lopresti MP, Chairman APPG on the Kurdistan Region and Gary Kent issued this statement from Erbil immediately following the referendum: "The 93 percent Yes vote on a high turnout demonstrates the settled will of the Kurdish people for eventual independence. The high vote follows years of broken promises by leaders in Baghdad who have done little to persuade the Kurds they are respected and valued. The outbreak in Baghdad of belligerent bullying and a probable blockade is further evidence of that. Kurdish leaders of all persuasions have told us they will not be subordinates in Iraq and that the referendum is a mandate to negotiate a new settlement with Baghdad over years rather than UDI, and does not diminish their contribution to fighting Daesh...."

There had been amicable discussions between Kurdish leaders and their counterparts in Baghdad and Turkey as well as Baghdad's involvement in August/September in the demarche led by the US, the UK, the EU and the UN. This offered negotiations on all outstanding issues

between Baghdad and Erbil, and the suggestion of a later referendum. Kurdish leaders would have preferred international neutrality and saw negotiations with Baghdad as an internal matter.

The reaction by Baghdad included closing the two airports to the world, except via Baghdad, and banning global financial transfers. Baghdad mooted many measures to turn the officially recognised entity of the KRG into mere northern provinces. The Kurdish share of national revenues has been slashed.

We strongly condemn Baghdad's violent reaction which led to the deaths of about 100 Peshmerga at Kirkuk in October 2017, as well as the exodus of many thousands of Kurds in the face of extortion, looting, arson and murder by Shia militia. The Governor's house, where we had lunch on referendum day in 2017, was occupied by Shia militia who plastered the walls with posters of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Several rearguard engagements between Peshmerga and Iraqi Army personnel and Shia militia (hastily incorporated into Iraqi state forces), apparently aiming to breach the borders of undisputed Kurdistan, halted the Iraqi offensive. There should have been no deaths and casualties given the Iraqi constitution bans the use of the army to settle internal conflicts.

The breaking of the diplomatic blockade by France, Germany and the Holy See combined with representations by the UK and others to persuade Baghdad to halt its attempt to suffocate and diminish the Kurds.

Lessons of the referendum

That the world was unwilling last year to accept Kurdish statehood means that the Kurds are stuck in Iraq but that need not be permanent. The settled will of the Kurdish people is to control their own destiny and defence, very understandable given decades of discrimination, forcible resettlement and genocide against the Kurds in Iraq.

But that's for the long term and many Kurds are now more worried about their economic prospects. However, if Kurdistan is allowed to develop within the Iraqi constitution and Iraq fully accepts the advantages of a strong Kurdistan then independence could again become a long-term dream.

There will be time for considered reflection about how mistakes by many actors encouraged an opportunistic attempt by Baghdad to subordinate the Kurds in the belief it had carte blanche to do so, regardless of the constitution, whose neglect by Baghdad over many years provided the impetus to the referendum.

Blame does not just belong to Kurdistan, where some accept that the timing was mistaken while the (Kurdistani) Iraqi President argued that the external reaction would have been softer if Kirkuk and other disputed territories had been excluded from the vote.

Others argue that it was right to include these lands and their people although accepting that internal boundaries need to be finalised through the mechanisms outlined in Article 140 of the constitution, stalled for over a decade since it was due to have been conducted.

Realistic lessons need to be drawn from the referendum and we are sure that books and theses will uncover the precise sequence of events that for many of us took a surprising turn in the final stages of the referendum process. It is, however, clear that the KRG's lack of unified institutions allowed the Iraqi Army to quickly take Kirkuk, and then other disputed territories.



The delegation with the Assistant Head of the Department for Foreign Relations.

Robust pragmatism

We took the first available opportunity to return to Kurdistan and, for the first time, to Baghdad to get the lie of the land. We are relieved that the illegal attempt to subordinate Kurdistan failed, that the KRG remains intact, and that, as Mrs Siham Mamand, the Assistant Head of the KRG's Department for Foreign Relations told us, Kurdistan/Iraq relations are "gradually returning to normal."

Normalisation must be constitutional rather than capricious. UK policy should be firmly based on the need for Kurdish rights in Iraq to be copper-fastened by the constitution and not given or taken at the whim of Baghdad.

We suggest the Kurds adopt robust pragmatism in seeking businesslike transactions with whoever forms the next coalition government in Baghdad. They can use their relatively larger presence in the Iraqi Parliament and in leadership and ministerial positions to protect their rights in Iraq, and finalise deals on fair revenue-sharing, oil and gas exploration and exports, and the status of the disputed territories - all according to the constitution.

The Kurds could be forgiven for thinking this seems like *deja vu* all over again. They were enjoined to do this after 2003 when they successfully translated agreements with Shia opposition

parties before the liberation of Iraq into the 2005 constitution which enshrined democracy, federalism and pluralism, and Kurdish leaders played a pivotal role in government formation and political stabilisation in Iraq.

But Shia parties only reluctantly accepted federalism because it was a precondition of the Kurds participating in post-Saddam Iraq. Binational federalism does not easily fit with the Sunni or Shia Arab conception of a centralised Iraq state and federalism was whittled down. The Deputy Foreign Minister in Baghdad told us that the Kurds were necessary to the Iraqi transition to democracy after 2003 but many in Iraq had no idea what federalism was.

He further acknowledged the incomplete implementation of the constitution with the failure so far to establish a second Chamber, while an oil and gas law has been stalled for 11 years. He acknowledged that it is not in Iraq's interest to isolate Masoud Barzani, the former President who led the referendum campaign, and leader of the largest Kurdish party.

There could yet be a continuing and long-term standoff, sometimes warmer and sometimes colder, unless Shia and Sunni parties accept that federalism remains the condition of voluntary rather than enforced Kurdish participation in Iraq.

And there are many advantages in a reset based on robust pragmatism. Kurdish leaders have acquired substantial expertise and their pivotal geopolitical position makes it more necessary they are enabled as a coherent force for stability.

They are a bridge between Europe, Turkey and Iraq. They could again be a magnet for investment and through that to the wider market in Iraq, which is seen as less safe and stable as well as more corrupt. Erbil and Duhok could be a base for those reconstructing Mosul. Kurds in Iraq could help ease antagonism between neighbouring governments and other Kurdistans.

Internally displaced people

Many IDPs have now been able to return home, supported by the commendable efforts of local religious groups, civil society, and parts of the international community.

However, thousands of IDPs remain in Kurdistan four years after the advance of Daesh. We also heard that some people who tentatively returned home have since come back to Kurdistan, due to a lack of security or functioning infrastructure in liberated areas.

The safe return of IDPs is important for displaced communities themselves and for the KRG, which has shown commendable generosity during this crisis. However, return will only continue if areas devastated by Daesh are rebuilt and secure. The international community, including the UK, needs to offer appropriate assistance for sustained reconstruction efforts including the rebuilding of homes, infrastructure and businesses.

Furthermore the KRG and the Iraqi government need to work together to guarantee that everyone returning home enjoys safety, recognition of basic human rights, and a stake in society.

Religious pluralism

Throughout the visit it was encouraging to hear a strong emphasis from politicians of all parties on the importance of pluralism – recognising different communities such as Christians and Yazidis are not separate minorities, but citizens with an essential stake in society.

We witnessed this first hand in meeting parliamentarians, students and volunteers from all communities, playing an active and equal role in shaping Kurdistan. On previous visits we have also seen schools and social programmes run by different religious communities, making a valuable contribution.

This is all too rare throughout the Middle East and something which we should not take for granted. It is therefore important for the international community to continue encouraging and supporting religious pluralism in Kurdistan.



At the Grotto at St Joseph's Cathedral in Ankawa, Erbil

Continuing Daesh dangers

The respected Interior Minister, Karim Sinjari, who has done much to drive a commendably good security record in Kurdistan, told us that Daesh has many sleeper cells, is still active in Syria and parts of Iraq, and has not gone away.

We would add that the alienation of Sunni communities from Baghdad that helped fuel Al Qaeda and then Daesh could yet drive further ideological and military recruitment by Daesh or a successor organisation. This stresses the need for decentralised governance that reassures Sunnis and minorities.

Audit of needs and British assistance

We have begun an audit of longer-term Kurdish needs that can be met for mutual benefit by British government and other institutions. This accords with a recommendation of the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report: that the UK "supply and encourage others to provide capacity-building courses and training that equip [Kurdistani] policy-makers and others with the greater ability to promote political reform and economic reform and diversification."

British experience, expertise, goods, services and values are deeply respected in Kurdistan. Encouraging British connections can also repair any damage done to the perception of the UK at a grassroots level in Kurdistan.

Britain took an honourable position on the referendum but is blamed by some Kurds for the misery inflicted on Kurdistan. We reject the sadly common notion that British policy was determined by the prospect of an oil contract for BP, which resumed routine geological operations after Kirkuk was taken.

Military training and mentoring of the Peshmerga

We visited the British military base in Erbil to talk to officers and soldiers who have trained several thousand Peshmerga in recent years and trust that this vital mentoring mission will continue. The Peshmerga made huge sacrifices in resisting Daesh with nearly 2,000 martyrs and 10,000 injured, some very seriously. We continue to argue that the UK should provide free places at our specialist hospital in Birmingham for the most seriously wounded Peshmerga. They fought to protect their country and way of life but it also boosted our collective security and the UK now faces far fewer extremists prepared to bomb and maim us.

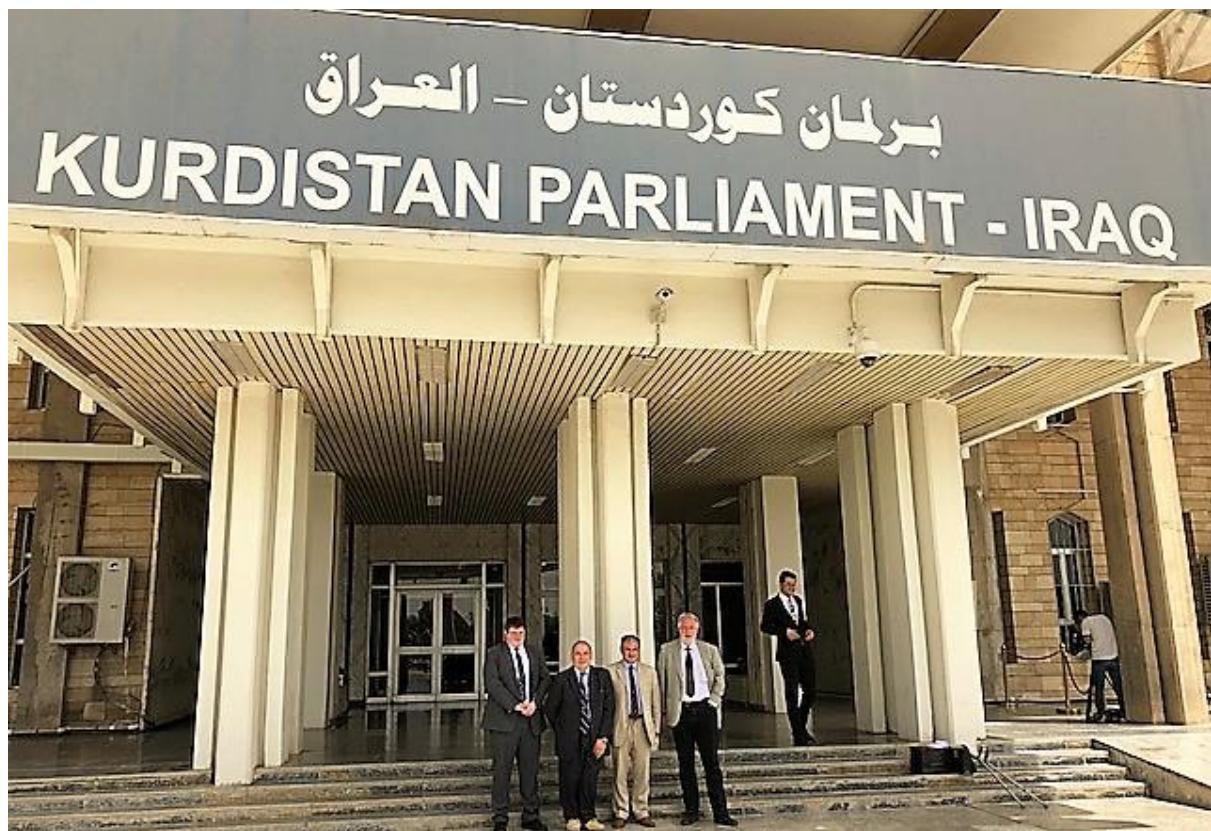
We met the outgoing British Colonel who was part of a vital joint British, German and American mission to improve the efficiency of the Peshmerga, including its unification as a professional institution subject to the central authority of the KRG. Britain's long experience in military organisation and its training facilities in Kurdistan and here are of immense value to this relationship. We ask that the UK continues its valued and valuable training and mentoring programmes for the Peshmerga.

Parliament

The Kurdish parliament was established in 1992 as a symbol of a commitment to democracy but has yet to be a major cockpit of political debate and was suspended for two years due to deep disputes between the parties. Many MPs are not sure of their role and scrutiny, while checks and balances, transparency and accountability are at an early stage.

We met the Secretary of Parliament, Mrs Begard Talabani and MPs from different parties, including those holding seats reserved for Kurdistan's different religious and ethnic communities. They are setting up an APPG on the UK which can partner with the APPG here on the Kurdistan Region. It is a singular honour that this is the first such APPG in the Kurdish Parliament.

The APPG can directly provide some training but maybe mainly a point of entry to UK political structures, including Commons Committees, think tanks, and civil society bodies. We aim to convene a seminar to discuss how the UK can help after the scheduled parliamentary elections in September in Kurdistan.



Outside the Kurdish Parliament

Education

We also commend the British Council's involvement in projects funded by the EU to boost the performance of primary and secondary schools and in providing quality qualifications for English in a place where English is the

second language.

The number of two or three shift schools has declined but there are still too many while higher education has soared since the Kurds took control in 1991. University entrance has been reformed so that those with higher grades are not automatically enrolled on medical and legal courses but can choose. Education is a major employer and the key to a nation's prosperity and ability to adapt to major changes in data, automation, and more. It needs combining with an equally valued technical education sector. We aim to make education provision the subject of a future delegation to explore this in more detail.

The former KRG Human Capacity Development Programme financed graduate and postgraduate places overseas as part of developing future leaders and expanding expertise in Kurdistan. It was a great honour that the vast majority of Kurds chose the UK. Having Kurdish students in our universities and British universities operating in Kurdistan would be good for all and we will seek to help make that work.

Youth and students

Robert Halfon spoke at question and answer sessions in universities in the two major cities. He found students willing to critically explore British policy on Kurdistan while others in previous years have found them to be over-deferential.

This is a good sign in a country where a large proportion of the population is under 35. Their questions don't always comfort British or other visitors but their questioning is a sign of rude health and needs to be nurtured.

We are particularly keen on encouraging the blossoming of youth and student organisations and we will seek to find ways to encourage exchange programmes with peers here and their organisations to help boost the participation of youth in Kurdish politics. We were struck by the enthusiasm of those who have recently established the House of Volunteers in Erbil and hope this is the first of many such initiatives.

Cars and films

We also continue to encourage British companies to set up shop in Kurdistan, whose economy is improving after it was consigned to limbo by the closure of the airports. We visited the Jaguar Land Rover showroom in Erbil as a symbol of the British commercial footprint and wish them the best of British.

We encourage a film industry. The Kurdistan Region could be a popular location for films but that requires a film production sector and that in turn could allow more Kurds to make their own films and better tell the Kurdish story to the outside world.

The UK should organise an official trade mission to the Kurdistan Region after the scheduled elections in September and the formation of a new government.

UK visas for Kurds

One consistent issue in Anglo-Kurdistani relations is the difficulty for Kurds obtaining UK visas. The APPG successfully encouraged reform so that visa applications could be completed in country rather than Kurds having to travel to Amman or Baghdad.

Yet the most recent figures show a high rejection rate. We believe that the computer process too often says no as obvious discrepancies such as exchange fluctuations are not identified in interviews.

We have called for re-establishing interviews and the ability for ministers and diplomats to intervene in the national interest. We will seek a dialogue with the government on practical means to make it easier for Kurds to obtain visas while guarding our borders.

This is important for Kurds wishing to visit their families, as tourists, and for purchasing medical treatment. It is also often vital to British trade and investment where UK companies wish to demonstrate their facilities or to train Kurds.

The Education Select Committee Chairman, Robert Halfon concluded from meetings at universities that "The students love Britain, learn about Britain, but question after question is: why is the visa system so complicated, and why can they not travel to Britain to study? I promise to raise this with the Home Office and Foreign Office, but I can't help thinking just how damaging it is having students as part of the migration target."

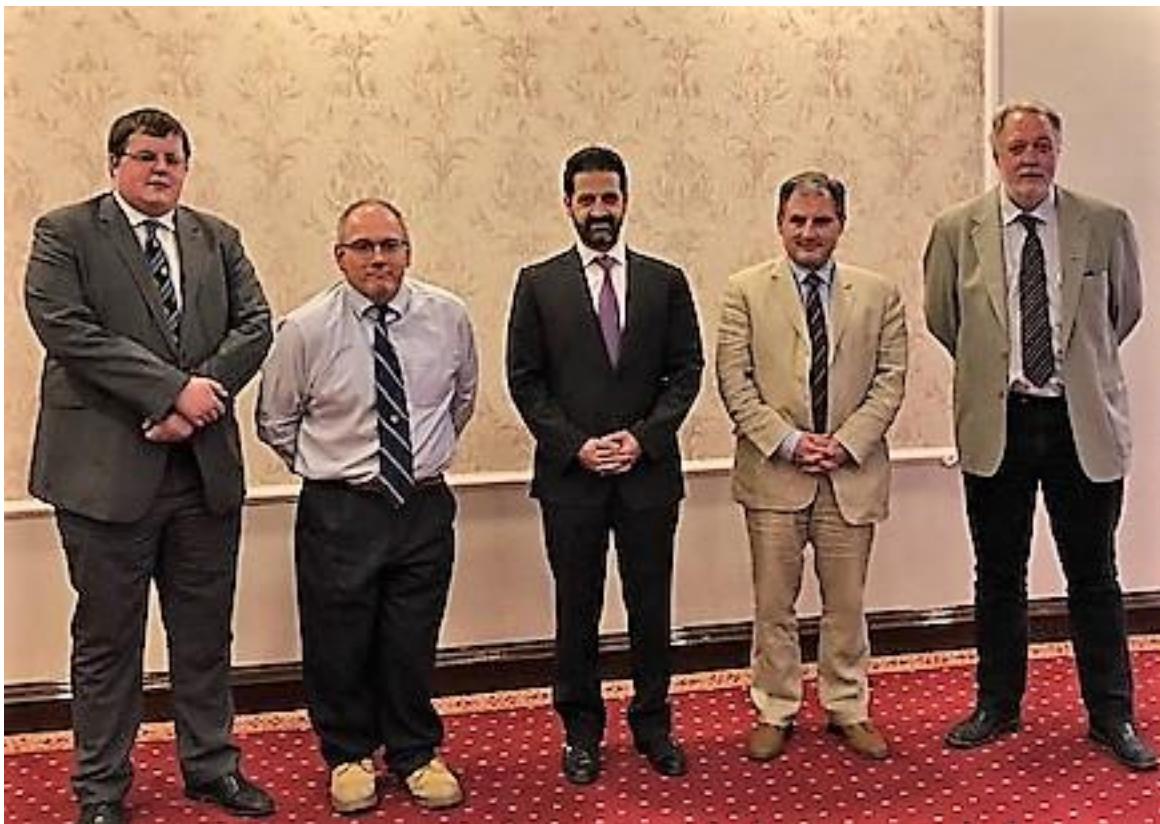
He added: "Here is a pro-western, pro-British nation, tolerant of all religions and backgrounds, whose view of our country is being negatively coloured by the behaviour of the visa bureaucracy, alongside a perception of a hostile environment from GB to foreign students."

Transcending the rentier state

The UK and other countries can do much to help build a strong KRG within a unified Iraq but it is imperative that Kurdistan undertakes thorough internal reform with greater urgency.

Reform requires Kurdistan transcending the traditional Middle East rentier state model by establishing a tax system that turns people from supplicants to citizens. To this end we salute plans to publicly shame ministries by process mapping the needlessly numerous steps in 400 transactions between the people and the state. The Deputy Prime Minister asked why it takes 17 steps to get a driving licence rather than a handful or why it takes 31 days rather than two hours to establish a private company.

Kurdistan needs to adopt a capitalist model with the balance between market and state and individual and collective rights suiting Kurdish needs. A new tax system could include a wealth tax so that sacrifices are shared more equally and funds are raised for a welfare state.



With the KRG Deputy Prime Minister, Qubad Talabani

Reshaping the economy

The main obstacle to international investment and domestic growth remains the dysfunctional shape of the economy, which has much in common with other Middle East countries.

A stack of official reports from respected global bodies has outlined the basic problem. Oil and gas provide vital revenue but relying on one commodity often deters and defers diversification to produce a more sustainable economy that is less vulnerable to external shocks such as slumps in oil prices. Even if oil prices were reliably high, there is a strong case for reducing dependence on energy revenues, and building a sovereign wealth fund for diversification.

Kurdistan also relies too heavily on state employment, which flows from the days when the two main parties created jobs and sinecures for party supporters. The size of the state strangles independent private businesses. The spiral means that massive opportunities to develop agriculture, tourism, light industry and more have yet to gain traction.

Many are reluctant to pioneer opportunities in rural areas, which could then further encourage new roads and public and private services to accommodate their needs. That reflects the global trend of urbanisation and how this was accelerated by the destruction by Saddam of thousands of villages as part of his Anfal genocide campaign against the Kurds in the 1980s.

We were also told about a happy-go-lucky approach to the use of precious resources such as water and electricity. Water and electricity have long escaped price mechanisms that can ration

their use. Lights burn in great numbers whether needed or not, air conditioners are not maintained properly or turned into smarter systems, and water is wasted. The KRG is rightly seeking private sector solutions and smart meters to improve the efficiency of power and water distribution.

Workforce reform

Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani gave us an incisive tour d'horizon of the government's reform programme. He told us that an emergency austerity regime "to stop the bleeding" had balanced income and spending after Baghdad cut fiscal transfers and independent oil export revenues were insufficient. He recognised that this was necessary to reduce burgeoning debt levels and regain international credibility for Kurdistan.

But this is just the beginning to reshape the economy for long-term gain. They have nearly completely the process of subjecting all public sector employees to biometric checks because each ministry could not say how many staff were on the books and found 50,000 ghost workers who are no longer paid, saving about \$300 million a year.

But Talabani admits that eliminating the number of non-existent workers leaves the issue of those "who either don't show up for work or you wish they hadn't," or "wall shade people", as they are sometimes dubbed.

We are candid friends. The problem is not just elite corruption but the complicity of wider society. People have come to expect their entitlement to comfortable office-based jobs in the cities where productivity is astonishingly low and where a few dedicated and enthusiastic staff carry their colleagues.

But it is not politically possible to sack thousands of people and there has to be a transition to greater private sector employment, better education, training and retraining.

Conclusion

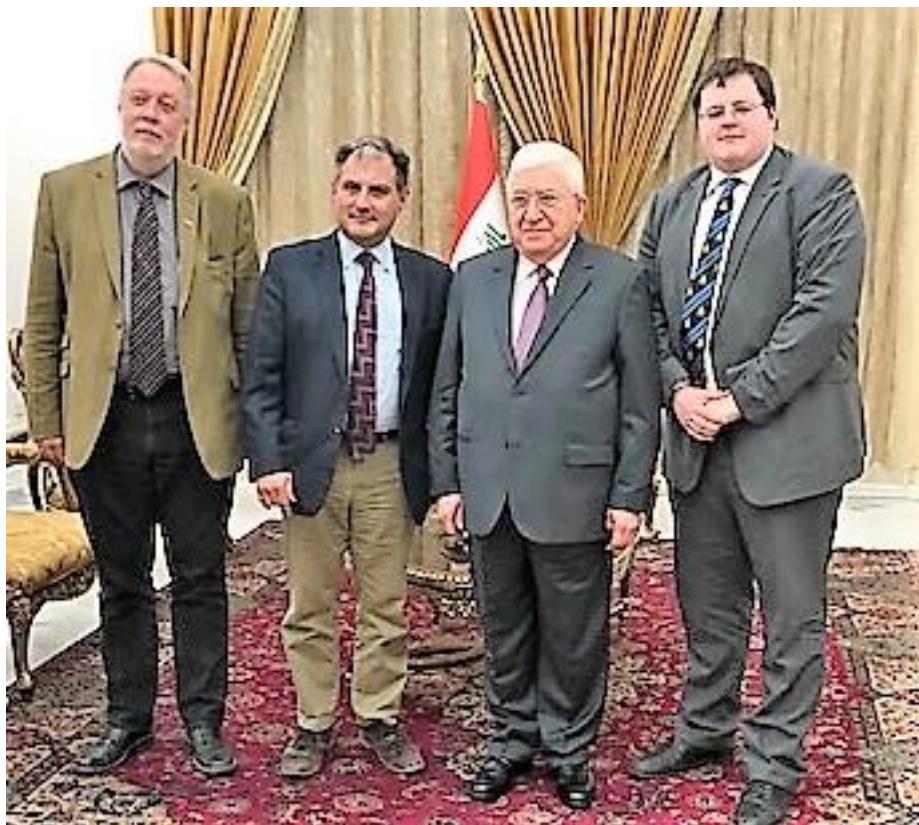
The last four years have been traumatic for Kurdistan with war, victory, hope, and Baghdad's needlessly harsh and violent reaction to the referendum. But the Kurds have once again come through and, as the KRG's Assistant Foreign Minister told us, things are getting back to normal.

Kurds have the right in principle to leave a voluntary union although any departure and new and closer relations should be negotiated with Baghdad. But independence is off the agenda for now and the priority is to make Iraq work and help build a strong KRG.

Iraq should fully include the Kurds, and respect the constitution. Kurdish rights in Iraq should be copper-fastened by the constitution and not given or taken at whim. We also urge the Kurds to adopt robust pragmatism in their dealings with Baghdad.

And there are many advantages in such a reset in relations. Kurdish leaders have acquired substantial expertise and their pivotal geopolitical position makes it more

necessary they are enabled as a more coherent force for stability.



With Iraqi President Fuad Masum in Baghdad

They are a bridge between Europe, Turkey and Iraq. They could again be a magnet for investment and through that to the wider market in Iraq. Erbil and Duhok could be bases for those reconstructing Mosul. Kurds in Iraq could help ease antagonism between neighbouring governments and other Kurdistans.

And the Kurds should make their country match-fit for whatever history holds for them through a thorough reform of their economy and politics. The Kurds have long talked the talk but failed to walk the walk on reform with sufficient vigour in the years we have been discussing these matters.

The UK can do much to assist the process and our report outlines some areas of mutually beneficial co-operation.

The most exciting development is that the Kurdish Parliament is paying its own tribute to the relationship with the UK by forming their first APPG - one on the UK.

Our two APPGs can then work together and especially on training new Kurdish MPs in how they can better scrutinise policy, hold the government to account, and make laws.

It is in the interests of the world that Kurdistan survives and thrives for now within Iraq and one day maybe as a new state with good relations with Baghdad.

The UK and other countries should maintain high political, commercial and cultural engagement with Kurdistan so it can put the troubles of recent years behind it and become a dynamic reforming entity within the Middle East.

Iraqi parliamentary elections 2018

By coincidence, we visited Iraq and Kurdistan in the wake of the elections to the Iraqi Council of Representatives. The Gorran party claim organised vote-rigging by the two main parties, which deny it. We cannot judge these claims. We welcome the commitment given to us by the KDP's Hemin Hawrami, for international observers to be present for the scheduled Kurdish elections in September.

However, we express deep concerns about an incident in Slemani on election night. The Gorran charge is that a PUK Peshmerga commander shot up their headquarters and we saw the damage for ourselves.. The details are disputed but senior PUK figures accept mistakes were made. The incident is above the law and wrong.

Annex 1. Reflections from Liam Allmark - head of public affairs at the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

Our Bishops do not align themselves with any political group or party. However the Catholic community in England and Wales has a strong connection with the Christian community in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, so it was a welcome opportunity to accompany British MPs and join in some of their conversations.

Christianity has ancient roots in this part of the world and, despite the enormous challenges their community has faced, Christians continue to play an active role in society today. We met Christian lawmakers in the Kurdistan Parliament; attended a packed Mass in St Joseph's Chaldean Cathedral; saw the Church's university and the site of its new hospital; held lively conversations with Christian students (and of course shared culinary delights in Ankawa - Erbil's Christian Quarter).

The Chaldean Archbishop of Erbil, Bashar Warda describes his mission here "*to help my people not to survive but to thrive.*" We hope that anyone concerned with the future of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region can get behind this vision.

We know all too well how much Iraq's Christian community has suffered in recent decades because of conflict and political instability. As the leaders of churches in the Kurdistan Region stated last year: "*it is possible to say without any doubt that it is the Christians who continue to be the biggest losers in all of these fights, to which they have never been party and which, if continued, would render our people more intent on emigration, leading to their being wiped out from the surface of this land.*"

During this visit the delegation received fresh insight into those challenges facing the region's Christians, around 100,000 of whom fled to Erbil from their homes on the Nineveh Plains, escaping the advance of Daesh in 2014.

Things today are very different to my last visit a few years ago: almost half of the Christians who arrived in Erbil as IDPs have returned home and the Church's last IDP camp is about to close.

This is largely due to the phenomenal work of the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee, a collaboration between the Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox, and Syriac Catholic communities, which has so far renovated more than 4,000 homes, with support from the international community.

However, there are still tens of thousands of displaced Christians living in the Kurdistan Region who do not know what the future holds. Thousands of homes on the Nineveh Plains, along with vital infrastructure and farmland wrecked by Daesh forces, still need to be restored. The huge costs are even harder to meet against the backdrop of economic difficulties in Iraq.

Without opportunities to return home or rebuild their lives, many Christians will follow the thousands who have left for Europe or America. Iraq's Christian community has already shrunk exponentially over the past decade. If it continues to do so this will be to the detriment of the whole country.

We hope that going forward the UK will increase its support for reconstruction, job creation, and educational opportunities both in the Kurdistan Region and more widely, which will help give a meaningful future to this community that has experienced so much violence, displacement and destruction of their livelihoods.

Another critical issue is the security of people returning to the Nineveh Plains. During the visit we heard how instability on the plains, exacerbated in the aftermath of the referendum, has slowed down reconstruction and left many people frightened to return. It was also clear that Daesh remains a threat, despite losing control of territory.

When fighting broke out between Iraqi and Kurdish forces following the referendum, leaders of Churches in the Kurdistan Region appealed: *"the Plains of Nineveh should be maintained as a unified territory; it is critical to not divide it into parts. Care should be made not to involve the last remaining Christian land in political bargaining, as our vulnerable community cannot withstand further schism and division in addition to the ongoing political and sectarian fights. The Plain of Nineveh is a great symbol for Christians in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and the world."*

As political negotiations continue, we hope that friends of the region including our own politicians will work with both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Government to protect families returning to the Nineveh Plains, safeguard their land rights, and give them a proper stake in decisions about their future.

Above all, it is important that our government, politicians and diplomats continue to engage with Christians in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, promoting their position as citizens with essential rights and responsibilities; while engaging with the Church in England and Wales which continues to maintain close contacts with the Church across the region.

As Cardinal Vincent Nichols reflected following his own visit, the Christian community is *"an integral part of the country's societal fabric and essential for creating a more stable future. The community's deep commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation is especially important as Iraq strives to emerge from decades of conflict."*



Jack Lopresti MP presenting APPG report to KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani in November 2016.

Annex 2. APPG delegations 2008-2018

The APPG has encouraged stronger Anglo-Kurdistani links for a decade and helped put Kurdistan on the map by persuading Top Gear to film a programme in Kurdistan, which reached millions.

Fifteen APPG delegations since 2008 have allowed parliamentarians to witness the ebbs and flows in the fortunes of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, get to know key leaders and others, see for ourselves some of its beauty and hospitality (and international tourist potential), encourage deeper and wider links between Kurdistan and the UK, and report our periodic findings in parliamentary debates, and meetings with ministers and others.

We began our regular missions in the middle of what the Kurds call the Golden Decade when federalism was generally working for the benefit of the Kurds and Arab Iraqis. Kurdistan saw itself as "the other Iraq" - self-confident with a new energy sector, a new economic entente with Turkey that replaced what seemed like imminent hostilities, and rising living standards.

Independence was a distant dream when large oil revenues were distributed to Kurdistan, albeit less than the political agreement to an entitlement of 17% of Iraqi revenues.

However, we saw federalism fade massively between 2012 and 2014 when Kurdish leaders also warned us of a new extremist group emerging in Mosul, which was to smash its way into control of Mosul and a third of Iraq in June 2014.

An APPG delegation visited Kirkuk a fortnight after the fall of Mosul to meet its then Kurdish Governor, Najmaldin Karim who told us how the Peshmerga rapidly reinforced their positions and replaced the retreating Iraq Army. The Peshmerga saved Kirkuk.

We then saw the traumatisation of Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole by the fascist death cult of Daesh and the Peshmerga became the world's main frontline with Daesh.

The scale of the political, economic, military and humanitarian challenges faced by Kurdistan from early 2014 was massive: they were deprived of their share of the federal budget by Baghdad, faced Daesh over a 650 mile border, repelled attacks with the help of vital Western airstrikes, and looked after up to two million internally displaced people, mainly Sunni Arabs, in addition to about 300,000 Syrian refugees who have been there since the start of the civil there in 2011. We have visited many refugee and IDP camps and pay tribute to the generosity and efficiency of the KRG.

Other governments would have folded in the face of any one of these external shocks but the KRG got through this largely unscathed, although there were demonstrations and strikes about salary cuts, and some violence, and its parliament was effectively suspended for two years due to a long inability to find a consensus on the draft constitution.

In Kirkuk we saw the Iraqi and Kurdish armies initially failing to co-ordinate their efforts against Daesh in 2015. However, in Mosul before it was liberated in 2016 we saw new and historic co-operation between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Army, which was initiated by Kurdish leaders. We hoped that this military co-operation would make political rapprochement easier but it wasn't to be.

Annex 3. Kurdish Terrorism?

APPG Vice-Chair Mary Glindon MP told the British Prime Minister on 23rd May 2018 saying representatives of our firm and valiant allies in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq have raised concern about her use of the term "Kurdish terrorism.".

Mrs Glindon wrote: "We would not refer to Daesh/Isis as Arab terrorism, although the vast majority of its members are Arabs, but specify the organisation or use a general term of jihadist. ... You might have specified the PKK, which is proscribed by us. This would have eliminated any unintended ambiguity from your statement by making it crystal clear that it was a specific and not general categorisation that could be taken to include forces in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, which enjoys good relations with Turkey. I ask that you confirm that this was your intention and thereby reassure our allies in the Kurdistan Region that they are not included as our Kurdish friends and partners in the fight against Daesh are deeply distressed." APPG Chairman Jack Lopresti MP also sent representations to the UK Prime Minister.



Above. Yezidi shrine of Sheikh Adi, Lalish. The Yezidis claim to follow the world's oldest monotheistic religion, citing the antiquity of their calendar which they trace back 6,767 years. The beautiful wooded valley at Lalish is punctuated by white conical shrines, one of which sits over the tomb of the 12th century Yezidi saint Sheikh Adi. **Below.** King Sennacherib's aqueduct, Jernan. Constructed in 690 BC, Jernan is the world's earliest known aqueduct. It formed part of a canal to take water from the mountains in present day Iraqi Kurdistan to the palace and gardens of King Sennacherib's royal capital in Nineveh.

