

President Masoud Barzani as a Kurdish National Reference: Political Influence and Mediation Efforts in Western Kurdistan (Rojava)

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Abstract: As the crisis in Syria has continued since 2011, it has become a leading political and strategic region in the Middle East, Western Kurdistan (Rojava). This paper analyses the contribution of the Kurdish politician, President Masoud Barzani to the formation of the political agenda of Syrian Kurdistan based on the diplomatic activities, mediation efforts, and Kurdish political pluralism of the Kurdish people. It emphasizes the attempts of Barzani to unify Kurdish forces through the major compromises like Erbil (2012) and Duhok (2014), and his consistent intervention in Kurdish political balance amid the conflicts in the region and international interferences. The paper finds that Barzani is a key Kurdish political interlocutor in the Rojava situation, mainly, due to his political legitimacy and extensive regional and international diplomatic networks, President Masoud Barzani has long been regarded as a central reference point of Kurdish nationalism, representing a historical and political legitimacy that continues to shape Kurdish strategic thinking across the region and skill to survive among complicated geopolitical demands.

Keywords: Masoud Barzani, Western Kurdistan, Rojava, Syrian Crisis, Erbil Agreement, Duhok Agreement.

Introduction: Western Kurdistan Between Major Transformations and the Need for Political Leadership



Figure (1): President Masoud Barzani meeting with Mazloun Abdi.

Since the eruption of the crisis in Syria in 2011, Syria has gone through a period of history that has never been experienced before and it has radically changed the political, military, and social life of the country. The disintegration of state control in many areas resulted in the creation of a vacuum of power that allowed the rise of both local and foreign political and military actors, both local and supported by regional and international powers. As a part of this larger change, one of the most delicate and strategically important spaces in the modern Middle East studies has turned into the northern part of Syria, especially the Kurdish-plurality regions that have become politically known as Western Kurdistan (Rojava) (Abboud, 2018; Tejel, 2009).

The Kurdish question in Syria was not just an internal prolongation of the Syrian conflict but quickly turned into a regional and international problem with many dimensions, one of intra-Kurdish conflicting interests, Turkish and Iranian security interests, and the policies of the world powers, the US and Russia. Also, the geopolitical role of the region has been intensified by the political and demographic complexity of northern Syria in which Kurds are coexisting with Arab, Syriac, and Assyrian groups (Allsopp, 2015; Phillips, 2016; Tejel, 2009).

In this regard, the political course of Western Kurdistan would require an investigation of powerful Kurdish regional forces specifically the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Masoud Barzani is one of the most notable Kurdish political leaders in the Middle East who has remained one of the actors among others. His influence is also based not merely on his extensive time as the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and his ability to shape the political experience of the Kurdistan Region, but also on his ability to operate as a regional political figure whose influence can be felt even outside of Iraq (Gunter, 2016; McDowall, 2004).

The dominance of Barzani was more noticeable in Western Kurdistan as the dominance in the political initiatives and unity agreements, the support of Kurdish political pluralism, and his efforts to strike a balance between Kurdish ambitions and the limitations of the region. These moves were especially apparent in the significant mediation processes like the Erbil Agreement (2012) and the Duhok Agreement (2014) both of which sought to integrate the Kurdish political front in Syria (Syrian Memory Archive, 2014).

Based on this, this article, offers a political analysis of the role of Masoud Barzani in Western Kurdistan and also looks at how he has continuously worked to bring Kurdish political forces in Syria together and achieve a sense of strategic equilibrium against inner fragmentation, and regional conflict trends.

Methodology

This paper will take a qualitative approach of political analysis to explore the role played by Masoud Barzani in Western Kurdistan (Rojava) and his attempt to facilitate Kurdish political unity after the eruption of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The study is mainly based on descriptive-analytical approach and the developments of Kurdish politics in the North of Syria and the relationship between the main Kurdish forces and especially the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

It is also based on case-study approach, where major political initiatives sponsored by Barzani, including the Erbil Agreement (2012), the Duhok Agreement (2014), among others, are analysed to determine the political relevance and why they still do not bring about cohesion to the Kurdish.

Additionally, the study takes the comparative political lens through the juxtaposition of two opposing Kurdish political models in Western Kurdistan, namely the nationalist model, which is related to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the ideological revolutionary model, which is connected with the political vision of the PKK.

The sources of data and information include political statements, developments of the past, literature, and secondary sources containing the information about the Syrian conflict, Kurdish political movements, and regional interests of powers. This paper will seek to make a

disinterested analysis of the role of Barzani by identifying the strengths and weakness of his influence to the larger region.

Limitations of the Study

The reason for this is that in the conflict zones, direct field data is unavailable, therefore, this research mainly depends on secondary sources and open-source reports on politics and analyses. The analysis will therefore be based on the documented evidence available and not the primary data that can be collected through the interview.

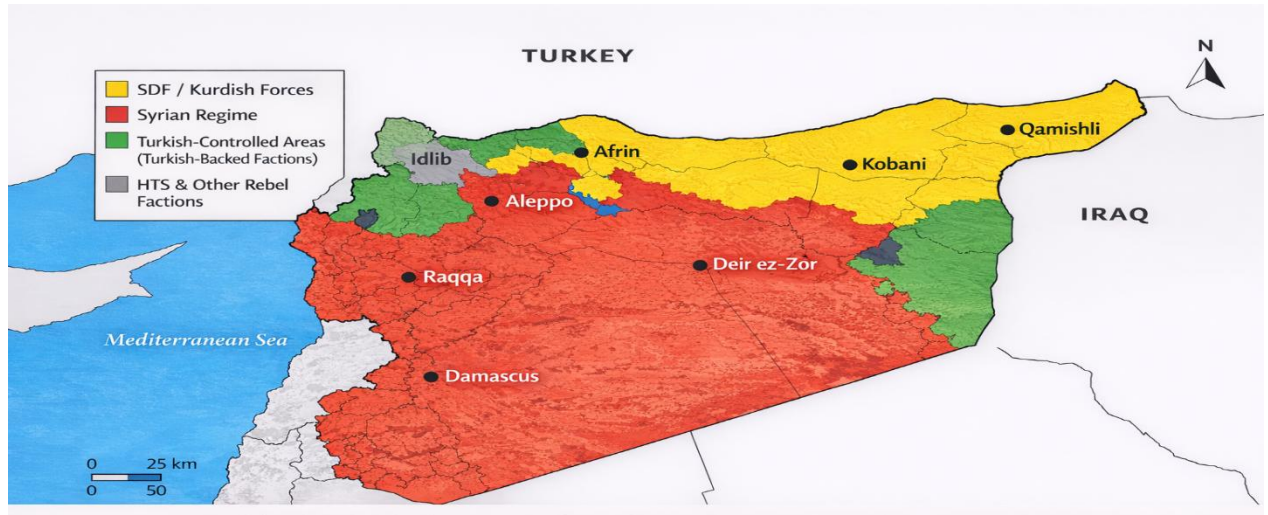


Figure (2): Political and military zones of control in Northern Syria (Rojava) (as of 6 February 2026).

Source: Prepared by the author (Lecturer Dr. Zirak M. R. Palani) based on open-source conflict mapping reports.

1. Western Kurdistan and the Political Change since 2011.

Kurdish majorities in Syria had suffered systematic political and cultural marginalisation before the outbreak of the Syrian uprising. Ever since the formation of the modern state of Syria, Kurds were often treated as a group of people that should be suppressed and absorbed, instead of being treated as a separate national group. There were policies that embodied this marginalisation consisting of denial of citizenship to tens of thousands of Kurds, the denial of the use of the Kurdish language in public, and the denial of political activity by the Kurds (Tejel, 2009; Yildiz, 2012).

The unfolding of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and the gradual deterioration of the central authority provided the Syrian Kurds with an opportunity in history to reform their political reality and promote the long-repressed needs of recognition and representation (Abboud, 2018; Allsopp, 2015).

But such opportunity was not easy and simple. In the political and security vacuum, which appeared in northern Syria, two powerful Kurdish forces appeared. The former was the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which enjoyed a powerful organisational framework and military strength via People's Protection Units (YPG) and was propagated by a significant ideological project in which Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was closely associated. The second was the Kurdish National Council (ENKS/KNC), which was formed as a coalition of Kurdish political parties, which had political support of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, specifically, Masoud Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Allsopp, 2015; Tejel, 2009).

Since then, political competition between the Kurds in Syria had turned into a struggle of legitimacy, representation and the identity of the Kurdish political project. This dispute was not only a partisan contest but also a clash between two different models: a classic nationalist model

that is similar to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and an ideological one that was based on the idea of the Democratic Nation formulated by the PKK (Allsopp, 2015; Federici, 2015).

2. Political Muscle of Barzani in the Greater Kurdish equation.

In order to grasp the impact of Masoud Barzani in the Western Kurdistan, it is imperative to place him in the context of the Kurdish national movement. Barzani was not just a local leader, he reflects a historical Kurdish nationalist tradition of struggle that dated back to decades of struggle, which has been in the making since the history of Mullah Mustafa Barzani and the creation of Kurdish political autonomy in Iraq after 1991 (Gunter, 2016; McDowall, 2004).

Gradually, Barzani did a lot to turn Kurdistan Region of Iraq into a unique political and economic paradigm of the Iraqi federal system. He also developed intricate relations with the major actors in the region - most evidently Turkey - and held on to strategic relations with the United States and European powers. These political circles propelled him to be a Kurdish actor whose activity was not only limited to Iraqi Kurdistan but also to the overall Kurdish regional politics (Natali, 2010; Romano, 2013).

Upon the eruption of the Syrian crisis, Barzani realised that Western Kurdistan was a tactical Kurdish depth and an essential continuation of the Kurdish national issue. Meanwhile, it could bring very grave dangers in case it turned into a Kurdish domestic conflict zone or evolved into a political initiative that irritated the main regional powers, particularly, Turkey and Iran (Gunter, 2016; Natali, 2010).

In addition to his regional influence, Barzani has continued to strengthen his international diplomatic presence. His recent visit to the Vatican and meeting with Pope Francis reflects his role as a Kurdish political figure engaged in symbolic diplomacy and international outreach. Such engagements reinforce his political legitimacy and highlight his efforts to present the Kurdish cause as part of broader discussions on peace, coexistence, and minority rights in the Middle East.

This realization is why Barzani became deeply engaged in the Rojava file, trying to influence Kurdish political orientation in Syria by mediating, engaging in diplomatic relations and by taking an initiative of politically unifying and pluralizing Kurdish unity.

3. The Kurdish National Council and the Support of Barzani.

In 2011, the Kurdish National Council (ENKS/KNC) was formed to act as an umbrella organisation to various Kurdish political parties in Syria. KNC was a major advancement in the history of the Syrian Kurdish politics, since it sought to establish a framework of institutions that could speak on behalf of the Kurdish interests in both the domestic and international spheres of politics (Allsopp, 2015; Tejel, 2009).

Masoud Barzani was the evident contributor to the formation of the KNC in terms of political patronage and media support and saw it as a Syrian Kurdish political bloc more allied to the political vision of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Strategically, the promotion of the KNC by Barzani had several purposes, such as ensuring that the Kurdish political decisions are not monopolised by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), establishing a Kurdish negotiating force that will enjoy international legitimacy, and connecting the issue of Kurdish in Syria to the larger Kurdish national project (Gunter, 2016; Romano, 2013).

Nevertheless, this assistance also led to a structural dilemma in the Syrian Kurdish politics. Regional polarisation increasingly influenced the Kurdish arena as the KNC was commonly seen as an actor backed by Erbil, whereas PYD was commonly understood as an actor backed by Qandil because of its ideological and organisational connections with the PKK (Allsopp, 2015; Tejel, 2009).

4. The Erbil Pact (2012): A premature Step towards Kurdish Unity.

This section examines Barzani's early mediation efforts and evaluates the political significance of the Erbil Agreement. The Erbil Agreement of 2012 was one of the major political interventions of Barzani in Western Kurdistan. This was the result of the negotiations that took place between the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), which was led by the PYD. The pact was to create a collective Kurdish political leadership unit and an sharing administration structure in northern Syria as one of the earliest endeavours to integrate Kurdish stances in the setting of the Syrian revolt (Allsopp, 2015; Tejel, 2009).

The Erbil Agreement was generally considered as a historic chance of averting fragmentation and improving Kurdish political legitimacy as compared to the Syrian regime, the opposition, and international stakeholders. However, the agreement was not completely implemented because of various political and structural challenges. These were the profound ideological dissonance between the KNC and the PYD, the PYD military superiority on the ground in the form of the YPG, the lack of enforcement tools and indirect regional pressures, especially that of Turkey that was a firm opponent to having a PKK-linked Kurdish establishment on its southern border (Allsopp, 2015; Natali, 2010).

Although unsuccessful, the Erbil Agreement proved that Barzani could serve as a Kurdish mediator who could lead warring factions of Kurdish people in the negotiation table.

5. The Duhok Agreement (2014): Fresh Start and More Failure.

Compared to the Erbil Agreement, the Duhok Agreement was more structured and politically detailed. The failure of the Erbil Agreement was followed by a second, more organized effort to bring Kurdish political unity in the Western part of Kurdistan, the Duhok Agreement of 2014. The accord featured clauses of political collaboration, institutional involvement, shared governing and ensured representation of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in the Kurdish-dominated government in northern Syria. It also touched upon the problems of military organization and political integration, which is the indication of the new attempt to institutionalise the Kurdish unity with the mediation of Barzani (Syrian Memory Archive, 2014).

The Duhok Agreement did not lead to sustained political integration however. Such failure showed that the crisis in Western Kurdistan was not only a crisis of agreements, but a more profound conflict based on two rival political projects. Although the KNC situated itself as a nationalist Kurdish political force to follow the pattern of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the PYD situated itself as a revolutionary movement to apply an ideological model according to the notion of the Democratic Nation (Allsopp, 2015; Federici, 2015).

Nevertheless, Barzani never gave up on dialogue and mediation overtures and believed that the fragmentation of the Kurds would undermine the Syrian Kurds and make them vulnerable to regional maneuvering and global trade-offs (Gunter, 2016; Romano, 2013).

6. The Regional Dimension: Turkey, Iran, and the Syrian Regime

These regional pressures significantly shaped Barzani's strategic calculations and limited the scope of Kurdish political unity initiatives. It is impossible to explain any local political project in the Middle East outside the realms of the local geopolitical environment. Western Kurdistan (Rojava) has been on the axis between delicate conflicts of Turkey, Iran, and the Syrian regimes all of which have defined the boundaries and opportunities of Kurdish political formation.

6.1 Turkey

The establishment of any Kurdish political group in its southern border is a significant national security issue to Turkey, especially when this group is associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Therefore, Ankara has become hostile to the PYD and its military, at the same time showing a relatively higher tolerance to Kurdish actors allied to Erbil, including the KNC (Natali, 2010; Romano, 2013).

In this respect, Barzani frequently played the role of balancing. At the same time that he continued to have strategic relations with Turkey, he was also promoting Kurdish political rights and trying to promote a Syrian Kurdish political system that would be less antagonistic and more diplomatically viable. This strategy, however, continued to be controversial with other Syrian Kurdish actors, who claimed that Turkish security interests are sometimes prioritized in the calculations of Barzani over Kurdish political interests in Roja (Gunter, 2016).

6.2 Iran

The developments of the Kurds in Syria have been closely monitored by Iran because of a fear that an empowerment of the Kurds may make the Kurdish political desires strong within the Iranian Kurdistan. Being a major patron of Syrian regime, Tehran has tended to oppose any form of autonomous Kurdish political initiative that has the potential to redefine regional Kurdish politics and encourage cross-border Kurdish mobilisation (McDowall, 2004; Romano, 2013).

6.3 The Syrian Regime

The Syrian government had a pragmatic stance on areas dominated by Kurds. It pulled out of a number of regions in the early phases of the conflict with no significant conflict, but it never explicitly acknowledged Kurdish political autonomy and constitutional rights. Rather, it viewed the Kurdish self-rule as a momentary fact, which could be later absorbed by political influence or military power (Abboud, 2018; Tejel, 2009).

In this regional context, Barzani insisted that Western Kurdistan could be invaded, coerced and blackmailed politically, unless the internal Kurdish unity and international legitimacy.

7. Meetings by Mazloun Abdi: Multi-Level Political Messages by Barzani.

Among the most prominent events that have indicated that Barzani had not lost his sway in Western Kurdistan has been his talks with Mazloun Abdi, who is the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There were political implications to these meetings besides symbolic diplomatization since they were an implicit acknowledgment of Abdi as a military commander and a political actor with a strategic impact in north Syria (Gunter, 2016).

The involvement of Abdi by Barzani could be considered as the modulation of the Syrian Kurdish project to less militarised and more inclusive political platform in terms of pluralism and common representation. Additionally, these sessions left a certain impression that the KNC cannot be left out of Kurdish political decision-making and the only way to achieve long-term stability is through a true collaboration between Kurdish groups (Allsopp, 2015; Romano, 2013).

Also, since the SDF is American-backed and Barzani has long-term ties to Washington, one might also consider such meetings a way to cater to the larger American interests of Kurdish unity as the source of enhancing legitimacy and stability in northern Syria (Natali, 2010).

8. Unity Efforts by Barzani: Between Obstacles and Realism.

In analytical terms, one can state that the approach by Barzani to Western Kurdistan could be viewed as political realism, but not emotional nationalism. This strategy is a manifestation of the realization that the Syrian Kurdish project cannot last long when it turns into a direct opponent of Turkey, cannot be sustained when monopolised by one political party, and cannot be long-lasting without any international validation and internal Kurdish consensus (Natali, 2010; Romano, 2013).

However, Barzani unity efforts have been continually hampered by chronic structural challenges, such as the organisational and military superiority of the PYD, abiding mistrust among Kurdish groups and the influence of outside forces on the maintenance of division. Additionally, inconsistent priorities have predetermined the division of the Kurds: whereas some groups focus on military safety and de-facto dominance, the politics of Barzani are always based on the idea of political legitimacy, institutional pluralism, and diplomatic balance (Allsopp, 2015; Federici, 2015).

9. The Analysis of the Role of Barzani, his Strengths, and Controversies.

The position of Western Kurdistan in reference to Barzani is an illustration of both strengths and contentious weaknesses politically. On the one hand, he has been one of the most outstanding Kurdish negotiators in Syrian Kurdish file, who always advocates political pluralism and opposes political monopoly. He also introduced the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a possible example of Syrian Kurds, even though the region and other international relations were useful in Kurdish politics (Gunter, 2016; Natali, 2010).

Critics, on the other hand, note that the Turkish security concerns have limited the approach that Barzani has taken and that he has been firmly in favor of the KNC, which has placed him, on some occasions, in a position of partisan instead of a mediator. Moreover, the recurrent failure of the unity agreement constrained his practical impact as opposed to the actual leadership the PYD had on the ground (Allsopp, 2015; Tejel, 2009).

10. The Future of Influence of Barzani in Western Kurdistan.

The future of the role that Barzani can play in Western Kurdistan will be determined by a combination of a few factors, such as whether or not the KNC will be able to restore political legitimacy and relevance, the future of U.S. policy towards the SDF and the Autonomous Administration as well as potential Turkish-American or Turkish-Russian agreements about northern Syria. Also, the capacity of Barzani to retain the role of unity as opposed to appearing to be a partisan will continue to play a crucial role in keeping him relevant in the Syrian Kurdish politics (Natali, 2010; Romano, 2013).

Provided there is a political settlement in Syria in the future with international legitimacy and international contact, the result will be influenced by players with international networks and legitimacy. In this sense, the long history of politics and the local ties enable Barzani to become one of the essential participants in the next phase of the Syrian Kurdish issue. Overall, the study finds that Barzani's influence has been strongest in the diplomatic and political sphere rather than in direct institutional control.

Conclusion

Since the onset of Western Kurdistan (Rojava) crisis in 2011, President Masoud Barzani remains the reference point for Kurdish nationalism. who have continued to shape the path of the crisis. His power has not been based on the direct military or administrative power in Syria but it has been based on the political legitimacy, diplomatic networks and the ability to act as a mediator of the whole Kurdish national movement.

This paper illustrates that the main strategic interest by Barzani in Western Kurdistan has been a safeguard of political monopolies, enhance Kurdish pluralism, and motivate Syrian Kurdish groups toward a single-party political model with the power to reach regional acceptability and international legality. His support of such meaningful projects like the Erbil Agreement (2012) and the Duhok Agreement (2014) was the evidence of the serious intention to institutionalize Kurdish unity and create a political balance between the Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the political project led by PYD.

But, the results also show that the attempts by Barzani has been hindered by consistent structural barriers, most notably the ideological and organizational superiority of the PYD, mistrust among the Kurdish elements, and the consistent interference of the regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, whose security interests have also greatly contributed to the restriction of the Kurdish politics in northern Syria.

Finally, the political opportunity and constraint are a complicated blend of political possibility and constraint of Barzani in Western Kurdistan. Although he has assisted in maintaining the discussion of Kurdish unity, the Syrian Kurdish space has not succeeded in unifying its goals and visions, as it is still divided by competing visions and incompatible regional interests. The political future of his influence will be mostly determined by whether or not the Syrian Kurdish

actors will be able to overcome partisan struggles and come up with a coherent political project that would strike the right balance between internal legitimacy and regional geopolitical realities.

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