

Anxious to keep lid on Iraq, Obama woos Kurds
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WASHINGTON, April 18 — President Barack Obama, facing a damaging election-year problem if Iraq's political crisis worsens, has launched an urgent behind-the-scenes push to ease tensions between the Baghdad central government and the Kurds.

Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurds' semi-autonomous regional government, paid a quiet visit to the White House on April 4 and left with backing for two long-standing requests that could help build the worried Kurds' confidence in US support.

Barzani's heated criticism last month of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has fanned concern the country could splinter, potentially setting off a fresh civil war.

Reuters has learned that to demonstrate US support, the White House and Congress agreed to lift a designation that treats Kurdistan's two main political parties as if they were terrorist groups, complicating members' travel to the United States. In addition, the US consulate in Arbil will begin issuing US visas before the end of 2012.

President Obama in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, April 17, 2012, with his mind very much on oil and petrol. He's announcing a plan to crack down on manipulation in oil markets. With him (left) is Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner. — Reuters pic

Since withdrawing the last US troops in December, Obama has, at least publicly, put little focus on Iraq, and critics view the latest gestures as not much more than damage control.

But Obama still has a lot at stake in Iraq. If violence explodes, it could tarnish Obama's bragging rights with US voters for concluding the unpopular war.

And worsening relations between the Shi'ite-led central government and semi-autonomous Kurdistan could thwart White House efforts to lower petrol prices. The Kurds halted oil exports to Baghdad on April 1, citing a payment dispute.

Civil war

Barzani last month delivered a sharp denunciation of Maliki's government and suggested he could seek a referendum of some kind on the Kurdish region's relations with Baghdad — although he stopped far short of breaking a taboo by making explicit reference to independence.

Analysts say the probability of the Kurds declaring independence is low, although not zero.

"If Kurds were to declare independence in the near term there is a very high likelihood that that would provoke a war with Baghdad," said Kenneth Pollack, a former CIA analyst.

The White House promises to the Kurdish president "constitute useful takeaways for Barzani but they are probably about the absolute minimum that he would have found acceptable",

said Pollack, now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution's Saban Centre for Middle East Policy.

The goal of the Washington meetings in early April, both the White House and the Kurds said, was to recommit to a relationship that both value. Obama dropped in on one of the meetings that Vice-President Joe Biden hosted for Barzani that day.

Biden assured Barzani of US backing for the Kurds, but he also cautioned that Washington could not pick sides between Kurdistan and Baghdad, a senior administration official said.

"Neither relationship can come at the expense of the other relationship," the official said. "A red line for us is that all this must be done in a way that is consistent with the (Iraqi) constitution."

Energy security

Iraq boasts some of the world's largest oil reserves and could provide essential extra production capacity to help stabilise world oil markets, at a moment when petrol prices are one of the most pressing issues for US voters.

And while foreign policy hasn't yet been a major factor in the US presidential campaign, both parties are likely to sharpen their focus on it ahead of the one-year anniversary of Osama bin Laden's killing by US commandos on May 2.

Qubad Talabani, son of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and the representative for the Kurdistan Regional Government in Washington, said the Kurdish delegation was happy with Biden's words of support to Barzani.

"The reaffirmation of the commitment to Kurdistan and the Kurdish people went down very well," he said.

"For us, we're naturally an insecure people, and given the history that we've had, we're expecting at some point or another to be let down again," he said.

The Kurds, severely persecuted under late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, have become increasingly nervous since US troops left.

Indeed, the troop departure was followed almost immediately by a political crisis sparked by Maliki's demand for the arrest of a Sunni Muslim vice-president, who fled to Kurdistan, where Barzani defied the prime minister by granting him shelter.

See no evil

Critics of Obama's Iraq policy complain that the White House is primarily concerned with keeping a lid on events until after the November 6 US election.

"I think the administration is of the mind-set of 'see no evil, hear no evil' and it wants Iraq to be invisible for the political debate in the United States," said Ned Parker, a visiting fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

To encourage the Kurds to remain within Iraq's political process, the administration is bowing to their long-standing plea to amend the status of the main political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Under the US

Immigration and Nationality Act, members of the groups are deemed to be engaged in terrorist activity.

This is not as severe as being designated as a terrorist organisation by the US State Department. But it means that members of these organisations must get a government exemption to visit or stay in the United States.

An aide to Senator Joe Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, said Lieberman was working on legislation to remove the designation.

In addition, the US decision to begin issuing visas from its consulate in Arbil from the end of 2012 will save Kurds who want to visit the United States the expense and hazard of journeying to Baghdad to get a visa or travelling to a US consulate outside of Iraq.

State Department spokesman Michael Lavalley confirmed this move, which had been long sought by the Kurds, but stressed in a statement that it was part of a broader effort to "work with the government of Iraq to continue to normalise our consular services throughout the country".

Oil safety valve

US officials also offered to help the Kurds in talks with Baghdad to resolve the oil payments dispute and get the exports flowing once again, the Kurds said.

The amounts involved are modest — around 50,000 barrels per day from Kurdistan compared with Iraq's national output of some 2.6 million barrels, according to published 2011 estimates by the US Central Intelligence Agency.

But the dispute highlights the country's ongoing failure to agree to a national oil law, potentially dampening the willingness of big foreign oil firms to make the investments necessary to exploit these resources.

The Kurds at present have no independent export route for their oil outside of the central government.

"They have a lot of potential," said Ben Lando of the Iraq Oil Report. "There are substantial oil and gas reserves but there has not been a qualified number put on that and in many places exploration is still ongoing." — Reuters

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