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Iraqi Kurds split between Iran and US

By **Roxana Saberi**

Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraq's Kurds have found themselves in a delicate position since the US-led invasion of Iraq four years ago. They are trying to court good relations with their eastern neighbour Iran - without angering Washington.

This is a tricky balancing act because while Iraqi Kurds rely on the United States for protection, they also depend on Iran's goodwill to help maintain their economy and the relative stability they have been enjoying.



Compared to the rest of Iraq, Kurdistan is prosperous and peaceful

"The Americans helped us overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime so we respect them, but we're not indebted to them for everything," said Nasir Ghafoor Ramadan, a member of Iraqi Kurdistan's Regional Parliament.

"Iran has also helped the Kurds of Iraq a lot at various times so from this point of view, we also respect Iran."

Iraqi Kurds and Tehran have long maintained ties. They have often worked together to fight common enemies: most recently, Iraq's former President Saddam Hussein.

Dependency

These days, a large part of Iraqi Kurdistan's economy depends on imports from Iran.

"Around 30 to 40% of our imports come from Iran," said Zaher Mahmood Jalil, who heads an economics' program on Radio Zagros in Irbil. "Iraqi Kurdistan doesn't produce much itself so it has to import most of its goods."

Kurds here say if Iran were ever to close its border with Iraq, their economy would be hit hard. Iranian produce, appliances, and electronics flood Kurdish cities, and petrol smuggled in from Iran helps Iraqi Kurds keep their cars running.

“ We have become dependent on gas imports from Iran. If Iran tried to limit the petrol that crosses the border, we would face a major shortage, and it would cause a crisis ”

Jamaal Abdullah Hussein
Petrol seller

Jamaal Abdullah Hussein sells Iranian petrol for eight times its original price on the side of a road in Suleimaniya.

"We have become dependent on gas imports from Iran," he said. "If Iran tried to limit the petrol that crosses the

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border, we would face a major shortage, and it would cause a crisis."

If Iran closes its border, Iraqi Kurdistan would have to rely more on its other neighbours, like Turkey and Syria, for help.

That could lead to infighting among Kurdish political parties - those controlling areas bordering Turkey and Syria could gain an upper hand over the parties based near Iran.

Tehran, however, has said it plans to expand its economic ties with Iraqi Kurdistan - not curtail them - to help create stability in Iraq.

Porous border

So far now a steady stream of goods flows across the border. Travellers do, too. Some enter legally; others do not.

Amir, a 19-year-old Kurd who helps smuggle people across the border, said sneaking between the two countries is not very hard.

“ Iran and the US should take their disputes elsewhere ”

Nasir Ghafoor Ramadan
Kurdish Iraqi MP

"I know the path well," said Amir, who did not want to use his full name. "If guards are monitoring my regular path, I take another route. If they were to catch me, I could face six months in jail."

Amir's clients are not the only ones making illegal journeys into northern Iraq. Some Iraqi Kurdish officials accuse Iran of letting insurgents infiltrate the border.

"I don't have any specific evidence of this," said Buhari Hidir, a member of the Iraqi Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee.

"But it's natural for us politicians to think that Iran would use all its powers to create problems for the United States in the region, especially in Iraq."

Iran denies the charge. Instead, Tehran, which has worries about its own Kurdish population seeking autonomy, accuses Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government of failing to crack down on Iranian Kurd opposition groups in northern Iraq.



The border with Iran is a crucial frontier for Iraqi Kurdistan

Some, like the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, or PJAK, have launched attacks on Iran.

Others, like the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, or KDPI, say these days they turn to arms only for defence and instead focus on political activities.

Iraqi Kurdish officials have said their regional government allows groups like KDPI to operate in northern Iraq as long as they do not engage in military actions against Iran.

The officials have acknowledged, however, that it is

difficult to control PJAK, which is based high in the mountains.

Forced to choose

Complicating the picture is the Bush Administration's increasingly aggressive stance on Iran's involvement in Iraq.

In January, American troops captured five Iranians in Irbil.

Tehran says the five were diplomats. Washington claims they were agents plotting attacks against the United States and its allies in Iraq.



The raid put Iraqi Kurds in a difficult position, said Mr Ramadan, the member of Iraqi Kurdistan's Regional Parliament.

Without smuggled petrol from Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan would suffer shortages

"This was a big mistake by the United States," he said. "There was no evidence that the Iranians were intelligence agents. Iran and the US should take their disputes elsewhere."

Mr Ramadan said Iraqi Kurds would benefit most by having friendships with both the United States and Iran.

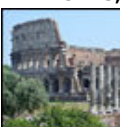
He realises, however, that the United States has not ruled out launching a military strike on Iran over Iran's nuclear program. If America one day decides to make that move, it may turn to Iraqi Kurds for help.

Then the Kurds might be forced to choose between Washington and Tehran.

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