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Subject :

Northern Iraq is currently going through significant political and military developments. These are related to the situation within the two major parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, their relationship as well as their movement towards forming alliances in preparation for the next Iraqi legislative elections. The developments are coupled with the growing military and political role of Iran and Turkey in the region, as well as pressures placed by the two countries on the two Kurdish parties to achieve their own strategy in Iraq's northern region and the country as a whole. Re-uniting the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The recent developments undergone by the party can be outlined as follows:

1. An attempt to overcome internal rift: Rivalry continues between the two leading figures who co-chaired the party. One of them is Lahur Talibani, a nephew of Jalal Talibani founder of the party, who reshuffled the leadership following a deep rift that caused his influence to decline in recent years. Qubad Talabani is the son of Jalal Talibani. Disagreement between the two figures caused a rift within the party's leadership and the politburo. Pressures placed by the old generation party leaders on both figures eventually forced Lahur to give up his co-chair position in favor of Qubad. He put one condition for the concession: that the top ranks of the party make the decision at a meeting. He took this stand to preserve the cohesion of the party ahead of the coming legislative elections.
2. Dwindling influence of the partisan historical leaders: After exiting the major partisan institutions, the historical leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan lost influence on the decision-making process. A large number of them retired for health reasons, while others were forced out after they were charged with corruption. Unlike the old generation, the new-generation partisan driving forces that emerged hold no allegiance to the historical leaders but have ambitions that go beyond narrow partisan connections, which means that the coming period might well witness a reconstruction of the party.
- 3- Gorran re-joining the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan: By rejoining the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Movement for Change, the second most influential party in Sulaymaniyah, bolstered the party's influence, ahead of the coming Iraqi and Kurdish legislative elections. Despite this, the Movement remains a cohesive bloc within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and its base and institutions have not blended with those of the bigger party. Gorran's comeback to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was aimed at countering the influence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party on the Iraqi Kurdistan Region over the past years, as well as to allow leading figures from both allied parties to return to the political scene both in the region and Baghdad. The Barzani's Dominance on the Kurdistan Democratic Party: Masoud Barzani and his son still have tight control on the party, evidently:

1. Partisan cohesion: The structures and institutions of the Kurdistan Democratic Party continue to be consistent under the influence of Masoud Barzani, the party's historical leader, and his son Masrour. Although he stepped down as President of the Kurdish Regional Government, Masoud continues to be the party's main de facto source of authority. His son Masrour's influence grew significantly in the past two years. In addition to heading the region's government, he leads the region's intelligence agency as well as the party's several security and intelligence departments.
2. Nechirvan Barzani's dwindling influence: President of the autonomous region Nechirvan Barzani is the nephew and son-in-law of Masoud. Kurdish sources, however, cite growing concern over Masrour's growing influence as well as silent competition with Nechirvan. But Masoud makes sure that this rivalry does not eclipse the party and its institutions, while also keeping the movements of both sides under control in order to ensure the party's continued dominance on the Kurdish politics, most importantly in Erbil and then in Sulaymaniyah. Controlled Tension between the two Parties: The internal developments in within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party influenced their relationship, therefore:

1. Cooperation without integration: Over the past years, the two parties made sure to contain any disagreements that may arise between them. In this symbiotic relationship, the leading figures of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan are acquiescent of the Kurdistan Democratic Party's growing influence, due to the rift within the Union's leadership and its declining electoral weight. The Democratic Party took advantage of, and benefited from this situation.
2. Two Kurdish lists for the federal elections: Due to the success of the top leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in overcoming their differences and restoring Gorran's bloc, the rivalry between the two major parties is likely to return. This is evidenced by the fact that the two parties did not agree on a unified Kurdish list of candidates for the coming legislative elections, which means they are likely to run with two separate lists.
3. Expected disagreement on government positions: It is also likely that the two parties will disagree about shares of the main positions in the regional government and the Iraqi federal government, i.e. the positions of President of Iraq, President of Iraqi Kurdistan Region and Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region. No dialogue has been held yet between the two parties about this issue, and as the Kurds seek to keep the position of Iraq's President, the two parties will have to agree on a candidate, and form political alliances with influential Iraqi political forces to ensure that their candidate will be elected in the next parliament. Turkey's Support for the Kurdistan Democratic Party: Turkey places its bets on its relationship with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, while at the same time places pressure on the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Here is why:

1. The Kurdistan Workers' Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan are common enemies: The Kurdistan Democratic Party takes a tough stand against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is labelled by Turkey as a terrorist organization, with military headquarters in Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq. One of the causes of enmity between the Workers' Party and the Kurdistan Democratic Party is that Masoud Barzani wants to

be the central Kurdish figure to replace Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Workers' Party. Collaboration between the two sides took shape in joint military actions against the Workers' Party in border areas controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Additionally, Turkey established a military base in Qandil Mountains under an agreement with the Democratic Party. Moreover, the Kurdistan Democratic Party stands against the Kurdistan Democratic Party's of Syria which controls the Kurdish majority area in the neighboring country and maintains strong relations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party of Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party. This common enmity to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan helped prepare the stage for collaboration with Turkey.

2. Common economic interests: The Kurdistan Democratic Party and Ankara maintain expanding common economic and political interests. Some 1500 Turkish companies are operating now in the Kurdistan Region, while the annual volume of trade between the two sides reached about USD12 billion in 2019.

3. Turkey's pressure on the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan: Turkey is placing pressure on the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah, an incubator for logistic support to the Workers' Party in Qandil Mountains. It opposes Lahur Talibani's bid to take over the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan because he maintains a strong relationship with Mazloun Abdi, leader of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the military wing of Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria, an ally of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey. Several US-brokered meetings were held in recent months between Lahur and Abdi. Kurdish sources assert that Lahur's withdrawal from the party's co-chairmanship spared the party and by extension the region from expected Turkish pressures.

Iran ratchets up Pressure on the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Recently, Iran escalated its military operations to expand beyond its border with Northern Iraq and into Sulaymaniyah. Using artillery and drones, Iranian forces attacked the bases of Iranian Kurdish opposition parties and assassinated a number of Kurdish opposition commanders in a number of the region's cities. Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, asked the Iraqi prime minister, who was on a recent visit to Tehran, to curb the influence of elements and leaders of the party and prevent them from operating from their strongholds inside Iraqi territory. Iran maintains evident influence inside the province of Sulaymaniyah in particular, as well as intelligence activities in Erbil. Its growing military influence against Iranian Kurdish opposition parties is consistent with Turkey's policy in the region. But both Turkey and Iran are aware not to allow conflict between each other's expanding influence.

Expanding American and French Influence's The Kurds have concerns over withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, which would include the troops stationed at Erbil military base. Despite an agreed reconstruction of the military presence at the base, withdrawal of US military forces, which can be followed by withdrawal of the international coalition's troops, the Kurdish region will lose a military cover that is much needed to counter the Iranian and Turkish expansion. The United States continues to directly support the Syrian Democratic Forces and indirectly through building relations between the militia and the Kurdish political forces, especially the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Sulaymaniyah. To date, it is evident that France will be keen on maintaining military and political presence in northern Iraq or the whole country. Therefore, France's influence is likely to grow in the coming period and come into competition with Iran's and Turkey's expansion into Iraq. In conclusion, it is safe to say that the volatile situation in northern Iraq allows Turkey and Iran to expand into the country and consequently influence Iran's national security. Despite the inter-Kurdish divisions, the willingness of Iraqi political blocs to forge electoral alliances with the two major Kurdish parties after the next legislative elections makes the Kurds a balancing force as well as a weighting factor, especially if the two parties maintain their coordination.