

## Analysis

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People battle a blaze in an agricultural field in the town of Qahtaniyah in Hasakeh province near the Syrian-Turkish border on Monday. — AFP

## Cousins in command seal family rule over Iraq Kurds

The succession of two powerful cousins to the top government posts in Iraqi Kurdistan has sealed the Barzani family's "monarchic" rule over the autonomous region, analysts say. With his son and nephew at the helm, veteran leader Masoud Barzani is expected to remain the region's "real boss," despite no longer holding a formal government position. Yesterday, the region's parliament named Masoud's eldest son Masrour Barzani, 50, as the region's new premier after seven years as its top security official.

He succeeds his 52-year-old cousin Nechirvan - sworn in as president the previous day. Their party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), was founded by the cousins' storied grandfather Mustafa - and while the clan's domination of the KDP was long apparent, their rise through democratic means clinches its control over public institutions. "The Barzanis were already strong enough within the KRG, but now they are becoming even stronger," said Kamal Chomani, a Kurdish analyst with the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. "They know it is not possible in Iraq and the Kurdistan region to legally establish a monarchy, but they have established one practically," he told AFP.

Iraqi Kurdistan has been split for decades between the KDP and its rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In Oct 2017, the KDP spearheaded a controversial independence referendum that prompted Baghdad to reoccupy large swathes of Kurdish-held territory and led to Masoud's resignation as president. But a year later, the party made a resounding comeback in regional elections, winning 45 of the 111-seat Kurdish parliament. It could therefore comfortably elect Nechirvan as president in late May despite a PUK boycott, and Masrour's nomination sailed through a few weeks later.

### The 'real boss'

With the cousins in command, analysts expect the KRG's decision-making process - and the policies themselves - will be increasingly influenced by family politics. Megan Connelly, a doctoral candidate at the State University of New York and analyst on Kurdish affairs, said the grandiose Barzani family home would rival government bodies as the centre of gravity for policymaking. "The assertion of Barzani headquarters as this alternative institution is becoming quite apparent right now," she said.

As a result, Connelly told AFP, the presidency as an independent institution would "definitely be weaker, and Nechirvan will struggle to step out of Masoud's shadow". Indeed, the first speech after Nechirvan's swearing-in on Monday did not go to the new president but to his uncle, Masoud. And in a March interview with Al-Monitor, Nechirvan admitted Masoud remained "the real boss", describing him as "the one person who cannot be removed from the scene".

The elder Barzani would also likely have a role mediating any dispute between his son and nephew. "Nechirvan and Masrour Barzani will remain united in the face of external challenges facing their family and the KDP," said Chomani. "However, their internal conflicts over power and resources, as well as monopoly of the market, will intensify."

### 'One, big, warring family'

The phenomenon of family rule is not limited to the KDP, with the PUK, too, dominated by the Talabani family. One of its founders, Jalal Talabani, served as federal president of Iraq from 2006 to 2014 and his son, Qubad, served as the KRG's deputy premier and could return for another term. The Barzanis and Talabanis have been bitter rivals for decades, fighting a civil war in the mid-1990s that left thousands dead before Masoud and Jalal signed a peace agreement. Now, said Connelly, the older generations "sit across the table and they bring their sons and their grandsons. This is almost one, big, warring family".

The familiarity has sparked bitterness among opposition parties, including the New Generation movement, founded in 2018 to channel public anger at the region's elite. "Bringing Masrour as PM is the final step towards establishing family rule in Kurdistan through democratic means," said Sarkawt Shamsaddin, a New Generation MP in Iraq's federal parliament. He told AFP the muted public reaction showed residents were "demoralized." "They are tired of KRG politics, party politics and polarization. The situation has been normalized, which is really dangerous," said Shamsaddin.

In the short term, the formalization of family rule would likely stymie opposition parties' attempts at affecting change, he said. But it may sow the seeds of long-term activism if party members unhappy with the domination of a single clan splinter off into new factions. "This is how I think change will come," said Shamsaddin. — AFP

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## Kurds and Syrian regime battle for wheat

Gazing over his wheat field in northeastern Syria, farmer Adel Othman expects a bumper crop this year, but two rival authorities squabbling over his harvest have dashed his enthusiasm. After successive droughts and eight years of civil war, both the local Kurdish authorities and the Damascus regime are desperate to buy up his region's produce to feed their people and maintain the peace. In a country where millions depend on bread as a staple food to survive, both want the wheat grown in the country's northeastern breadbasket region of Hasakeh.

Farmers in the Kurdish-held region like Othman have been caught up in the middle, with only two potential buyers, neither offering a satisfactory price. Our "livelihood should not be transformed into a political bargaining chip," said the 55-year-old, his sky-blue shirt streaked in places with dry earth. The regime is offering a better price, but the Kurds have said no wheat can leave the region under their control. "We'll sell our crop to the highest bidder," Othman said in Kurdish by his field in the area of Amuda. "In the end, a farmer needs to make a profit," he said, his short black hair slightly unruly above a thick moustache.

### 'Food crisis'

Farmers are especially eager to sell their crop to make up for poor harvests in previous years, but also to save them from fires - some claimed by the Islamic State group - that have ravaged fields in the region. Long marginal-

ized, Syria's Kurds have largely stayed out of the eight-year civil war, instead setting up their own institutions in areas under their control. But they did lead the US-backed fight against IS in Syria, and are now hoping that will give them leverage in retaining a degree of autonomy in the northeast.

"The Kurds do not want to let wheat out because the production is barely enough to feed the local population," Syria expert Fabrice Balanche said. "If the wheat went off to Damascus because of the higher price, it would cause a food crisis," he added. According to the World Food Programme, 6.5 million people in Syria are "food insecure", or do not know where their next meal is coming from. This year Syria is anticipating an ample crop yield after abundant rain, following a wheat harvest last year that was the worst since 1989.

The Syrian government is expecting 850,000 tonnes of wheat from Hasakeh. The head of the Damascus government's agriculture office in Hasakeh, Amer Sello, told AFP he expected to snap up most of the province's harvest. "Government cereal reception centres will see growers flock because of the attractive prices," he said. The Kurds last month increased their buying price for a kilo of wheat from 150 to 160 Syrian pounds (\$0.37), but that is still not enough to compete with the regime's offered 185.

The Kurdish grain authority chief, Salman Bardo, accused the regime of announcing its higher price "to sow discord between the people and the autonomous administration". The Kurds would not permit the regime to ferry

the cereal to other parts of Syria, he said. "We will not allow it to leave northeast Syria," he added, without providing further details on how this would be achieved.

### 'Wheat weapon'

Syria's war has killed more than 370,000 people since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests. After successive Russia-backed victories against rebels and jihadists since 2015, President Bashar al-Assad's regime today controls some 60 percent of the country. But Syrians in these areas are struggling to get by in an economy ravaged by war, as well as facing fuel shortages the regime blames on international sanctions.

"Assad needs access to cereal crops in northeast Syria to prevent a bread crisis in the areas of western Syria that he controls," Syria analyst Nicholas Heras said. But in the almost 30 percent of the country they control, the Kurds and their US ally also need to cling on to the wheat as a trump card in ongoing negotiations. Damascus and the Kurds have started talks to discuss the future of the northeast, but so far without success.

At a national level, endless rounds of UN-brokered peace talks have also failed to end the war. "Wheat is a weapon of great power in this next phase of the Syrian conflict," Heras said. And the Kurds and their US ally "have a significant stockpile of this wheat weapon", Heras said. "It can be used to apply pressure on the Assad regime, and through the regime on Russia, to force concessions in the UN-led diplomatic process." — AFP

## In Alabama, an increased blurring of church-state line

In Alabama, look up - almost anywhere - and you'll see a church. In this state already ranked as one of the most religious in the country, the traditional separation between church and state has been increasingly blurred. Soon, classrooms in Alabama's public schools may be allowed to hang crucifixes and other religious iconography on their walls; and the religious conservatives who dominate the state have been a potent force in the heated debate over abortion rights.

As a largely religiously driven push to outlaw abortion nationwide gains steam - with two Supreme Court justices

appointed by President Donald Trump seen as likely to approve such a reversal - Alabama this year passed one of the country's most restrictive laws, banning most abortions even in cases of rape or incest. It will take effect in November unless blocked by legal challenges.

The religiosity of Alabamians is undeniable. Eighty-two percent of Alabama's 4.8 million people say they believe in God "with absolute certainty," according to a 2016 Pew survey. Compare that to the 40 percent in Massachusetts who say so. Some secular-minded Alabamians say they find the pervasive influence of religion repressive, and Americans elsewhere see events in that state as part of a growing threat to the long unbreakable line separating church and state. "I shouldn't have to follow the rules of a belief system that I don't belong to," said 25-year-old Margaux Hartline. Growing up in Alabama, she was taught that a young girl had to remain a virgin until marriage. She is now a lesbian activist and a fierce defender of abortion rights in this southern state deep in the country's "Bible Belt". Hartline and Amanda Reyes, a spokeswoman for the

nonprofit Yellowhammer Fund, which subsidizes abortions for low-income women, say the state's deeply conservative values lead to a neglect of women's needs.

They point to a shortage of health care services and bemoan the schools' conservative approach to sex education. The high schools, Reyes said, teach that sex "should only be done in the context of heterosexual marriage." Is it acceptable, then, to use condoms or other contraceptive methods? "Oh no," she said, with a surprised laugh. "Oh my God, Mercy!" Sex education is not a required subject in Alabama. But if it is taught, teachers must follow the guidance laid out in a 1975 state law advocating abstinence - a stance backed by many religious conservatives. Under that law, abstinence is promoted "as the only guaranteed way of preventing sexually transmitted diseases and unexpected pregnancies," said Michael Sibley, a spokesman for the Alabama Department of Education. Local school systems do "have the ability to teach about contraception if their local board supports that policy" - but that is said to happen rarely. — AFP

## Freedom and fear: Kosovo remembers war, 20 years after

Twenty years ago tears were flowing in Kosovo - of joy or of despair depending which side you were on - as NATO troops rolled in, ending the war with Serbia. For Kosovo Albanians, June 12, 1999 was a day of liberation from Belgrade's repression. But for the Serb minority, it was a loss that ushered in a new chapter of fear and uncertainty. Today marks the 20th anniversary of that turning point. Kosovo's government will celebrate with fanfare, in a ceremony featuring a speech from former US president Bill Clinton, a core ally during his time in office.

NATO's three-month intervention ultimately halted the violence between Albanian separatists and Serb forces under the direction of strongman Slobodan Milosevic. But while the violence was ended, the two sides have never fully reconciled. Relations between Kosovo's Albanian and Serb communities remain fraught. Memories of June 12 trace that split. Shpresa Gashi, a 68-year-old Kosovo Albanian singer, recalls the "explosion of emotions" after news arrived that the international troops had entered Kosovo.

Over the course of a year and a half, the conflict had claimed 13,000 lives - the vast majority Kosovo Albanians. At the time, Gashi was one of the hundreds of thousands of people who had fled to neighboring states as war broke out. "It was the first time I saw joy among refugees from Kosovo," she recalled. Esat Rexhepi, a 72-year-old living in Pristina, also cherishes the memory of that "wonderful day". "I put on my best suit, put on a tie and went out to welcome NATO troops," he remembered, smiling.

For Edita Brajshori, a 40-year-old Pristina hairdresser, what lingers is the sound of music pouring out of apartment windows that had been shuttered for months. "It was possible to hear loud music in Albanian for the first time after so many years," she told AFP.

But fear and bitterness still dominate the memories of Kosovo's Serbs, a community caught up in the crossfire. Serbs have lived for centuries in Kosovo, a southern region considered a cradle of their Orthodox Christian faith. After the war, many were pressured to either flee or sequester themselves in enclaves. There was also a series of revenge attacks on their community, seen as score-settling after years of oppression suffered by ethnic Albanians under Milosevic. According to Belgrade, 200,000 Serbs ultimately left Kosovo to take refuge in Serbia. Around 120,000 remain, mainly in the north near the border. "I was crying... I watched our army withdraw and foreigners arrive," said Dobrosav Jakovljevic, a 73-year-old Serb who now lives in Kosovo's north, a poor region. — AFP

## Do you have the right people in your organization to defend your cyber interests?

The simple answer to that is probably no!

By Dan Dirienzo, Director, Global Cyber Solutions, Raytheon.

The (ISC)<sup>2</sup> workforce study notes there is a skills shortage of approximately 3 million professionals worldwide. The shortage of cybersecurity talent remains the single biggest challenge many organizations face and therefore, the key is to ensure talent have the right tools and skillsets to become future cyber defenders that can protect national cyber assets.



Digital criminals are likely lurking on your network right now. Forgotten systems with critical vulnerabilities offer unregulated access to key systems and data. That's why organizations, big and small, need to have the right cyber posture, whether it's through in-house cyber security capabilities or are working with an experienced third party that has the knowledge and capacity across the entire cyber domain.

Most importantly, organizations need to shift to a proactive security posture: to survive in today's digital ecosystem.

There are only two incident response approaches: those that include a proactive threat hunting program and those that don't. Therefore, organizations must work to identify signs of compromise as early as possible. Proactive cyber threat-hunting should be built into organization's incident response plan and can no longer be a reactive activity.

If you respond to cyber incidents after breaches are successful, you're already too late, according to experts. The aftermath of a cyberattack is what truly impacts an organization, and could be felt for

a few hours, days, weeks, months and even years that follow.

So how do you go about adopting a proactive cyber approach?

I share below the steps and guidelines to implement a successful, proactive hunting and incident response strategy:

### STEP 1: MAKE A PLAN

The first step to proactive cyber security is making sure you have a plan in place to respond to incidents should they occur.

### STEP 2: START SEARCHING

Thanks to the creation of modular, reusable malware, today's advanced cyber adversaries are able to bypass legacy security controls and extract critical data from even the most closely monitored enterprises.

By proactively hunting and having the right visibility and understanding of attacker tools and methodology, compromises can be identified in days instead of weeks and months.

### STEP 3: RESPOND AND AUTOMATE

The best threat hunters work smarter, not harder. Once a hunter has used the tools to identify a hidden threat, the incident response process kicks in.

### STEP 4: COMMUNICATE

The first step to developing and implementing an effective communications strategy is to engage your communications department. They will work with your team to develop a plan that engages the entire organization, from legal and HR to your supply chain. When an incident is identified, having an effective communications plan in place is critical to a successful response.

### STEP 5: PRACTICE

Practice makes perfect. Your organization should actively practice identifying and responding to incidents.