

Q&A: Bafel Talabani, President of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

The PUK leader discusses deteriorating political rivalries within Kurdistan and their impact on both gas development and impending negotiations with Baghdad over oil rights.



PUK President Bafel Talabani in Baghdad on Nov. 28, 2022. (LIZZIE PORTER/Iraq Oil Report)

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BAGHDAD - Few individuals are as important to the development of the Kurdistan region's gas sector as Bafel Talabani, the president of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which controls the territory in Sulaimaniya province where the most prolific fields lie.

Talabani is also a central actor in the ongoing struggle between the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), its longtime rival and nominal partner in the Kurdistan region's governance. Their deteriorating relationship has left the regional government hamstrung as it navigates renewed tensions with Baghdad that threaten its ability to continue independently managing its oil and gas sector.

In an interview with Iraq Oil Report at the Baghdad residence of his late father, former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, the PUK leader criticized the KDP for withholding funding from Sulaimaniya. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is currently “very politicized,” he said — “a de facto twin administration, because Suli is expected to fund Suli.”

One casualty of this antagonistic atmosphere has been the KRG's plans to build new gas pipelines to bring additional feedstock to power plants in both PUK and KDP-controlled territory — a network that could also be used to facilitate future exports to Turkey. After the KRG Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) awarded the contract to the Iraqi-Kurdish company KAR Group, which is close to the KDP, security forces controlled by the PUK prevented the company from accessing key territory, effectively putting the project on ice.

Talabani confirmed he is personally opposed to the project, arguing the contract was granted KAR Group with “no process” and “no tender.”

“Kar Group was not awarded [the contract]. Kar Group was given it,” he said. “It is an insult to the people of Kurdistan and Iraq for these things to happen.”

Talabani said he wants to be involved in strategic decision-making about the energy sector but claimed the KDP has frozen its political rivals out of the process. Absent a viable partner in Erbil, he suggested, cooperation with Baghdad looks increasingly attractive.

“I do not understand the unwillingness to work with Baghdad,” he said. “Basra is 1,000 times richer than the entirety of Kurdistan. Just Basra. And if the prime minister came to me and said, ‘Hey, Bafel, put your little teapot on this table, and you can be a part of the huge table, including Basra’ — to me, that sounds like a bloody good deal.”

A full transcript of the interview is available below for Iraq Oil Report subscribers.

Lizzie Porter: I want to ask you firstly about the KDP-PUK relationship, which has been a bit difficult recently.

Bafel Talabani: Yes.

LP: How have things reached this stage? How did we get to where we are?

BT: You know, the historically the PUK and the KDP, we're different political parties. So we have different agendas, we have different outlooks, we have different ideologies. Even the structures are not very similar.

But what we have seen is a degeneration in the relationship, and also a different kind of M.O. — modus operandi — from the KDP, if I can be honest with you. I'm not sure the genesis of it.

But the reality is that, I like to think that the PUK side has really tried with the KDP. After our troubles in the PUK, we had a really good outreach program. I mean, just in the last year, I've sent my Politburo several times to see theirs; I think they sent their Politburo to Suli once or twice. And with regards to myself, I've been to see Kak Masoud probably 15, 16 times in the last year. Obviously, you don't get a visit back from Kak Masoud. I've been to see Kak Nechirvan lots of times, been to see Kak Masrur the same. Not really getting any interface back. I think the problems started with the change of government.

LP: Right. So, Masrur —

BT: Yeah, Masrur's government, but not necessarily Masrur. I have to make this clear: not necessarily Masrur. This government is very different from the other governments that we've had. This government is very politicized. This hasn't had a good effect.

Yesterday, actually, by coincidence, I was sitting with one of my ministers in Erbil. And he said, "When I was a director-general I really looked forward to becoming a minister. And in this Cabinet, I became a minister and I, frankly, I wish I hadn't bothered." And it's all because of the extreme politicization of the entire process, and more centralizing of everything. Everything has been more centralized.

If you go back to the boom years in Kurdistan, it was exactly the opposite. There was a very decentralized system of government. Each governorate was competing with the other governorate to make projects and move things forward and accelerate the financial sector. And that was the boom years. And as the opposite has happened, I think the opposite has happened in the region.

So really, I think this politicizing of the government — and there seems to be just a complete and utter lack of urgency to do anything, to do absolutely anything — to make services, to make reforms, to make anything. I mean, we are four years into the Cabinet. It's a caretaker government now. We still have positions in the PUK, in the government that we still haven't been able to fill — positions that we were supposed to fill at the beginning of the government. And I think it's the same for Gorran — I don't want to speak out of turn. I think it's the same for Gorran.

And there seems just like a wall between us and the prime minister. You want to change a director general, you can't. You want to change a deputy minister, you can't. A minister wants to resign? No. It's just very, very, very difficult.

There's a huge discrepancy between what's happening in Erbil, what's happening in Sulaimaniya. The amount of projects that take place in Erbil — all the projects in Sulaimaniya have stopped. The amount of companies that have gone out of business in Sulaimaniya and not in Erbil. The amount of funding that comes to the region, medicines to the hospitals, student pay, salary pay,

Peshmerga services, Peshmerga food, pay, etc, etc. It all happens on one side, and nothing happens on this side.

So, in effect, it's a de facto twin administration, because Suli is expected to fund Suli. And the other areas are expected to fund the other areas.

And so this brings me to — again, I'm not a financial expert by any stretch of the imagination, but I like to think I'm quite logical. So we're expected to compete with that side. And there's just physically no way we can. We have a border with Iran. One border with Iran. We have a couple of points, but it's basically one border with Iran.

LP: Parwezkhan or Bashmakh?

BT: Both. But it's just that border. So Parwezkhan and Bashmakh have taken huge hits, because of Munzhariya. A lot of the smuggling trade has gone to Munzhariya. But that takes the legitimate trade with it. And then on the other side, you have Haji Omran, on the KDP side, and they have a new transit deal with Iran. So everything's going from there anyway.

Plus, there are some unscrupulous people in the government that are not giving permissions, on time, for people to trade through our borders. And then magically, somebody turns up and says, "Well, if you do want to trade, you can come from Haji Omaran." So this border has taken a huge hit.

But let's say it hasn't, let's say it's doing really well. And everything is fine. You still can't compete with the biggest border in Iraq, which is the border with Turkey. And it's not just the border for Kurdistan. Please remember, it's the border for Turkey for all of Iraq. And then they also have the border of Iran. And then there's the secret border that nobody knows about.

LP: The Syria border.

BT: The Syria border. Nobody knows what comes from there, what goes from there. Well, we know what's coming from there and going from there, but none of this is coming into the coffers of the government. None of this is coming into any kind of overview or overwatch. And then we have what I call ghost oil fields.

LP: Ain Zalah.

BT: Exactly. Ain Zalah. So Ain Zalah is a ghost oil field. Ker-chonk, ker-chonk, ker-chonk, machines are working. But where's it going?

LP: Yeah, we've always found that a bit of a black spot, in terms of knowing what's going on in the oil sector.

BT: Yes. Well, we know what's going on there, but I think we're all too polite to say. I think if we're honest with each other, I think everybody knows what's going on there.

So just look at the logic of that. How can we compete with that?

And then they talk about taxes. So I think there's 30,000 or 31,000 companies that have the statute to pay significant tax. Okay. Now of those, I believe 7,000 are in Sulaimaniya region. Okay? Of which 4,000 of them are no longer working.

LP: Why?

BT: Because either their projects have stopped or they've gone bankrupt. So I have 3,000. The numbers do not add up. And this is the thing, it isn't a case of having to be a financial genius. It's it's basic mathematics.

LP: So your contention is that revenues are not equally shared with Sulaimaniya. Why aren't they being shared equally?

BT: Because for some strange reason, instead of [like] every other country in the world, where all the border money, all of the tax money goes into a pot, and then it's divided — that's not what's happening here. The pot from there is different from the pot from here, which is different from the — and it's just an illogical system. It doesn't happen in the UK. You don't expect Birmingham to look after Birmingham, and everybody else puts their money together. It is just, unfortunately, it's beginning to look frankly, like a financial sanction.

And we thought maybe it was a financial sanction, because there was a disagreement on the subject of the President of the Republic of Iraq. I mean, heaven forbid, that there be a post, and two different political parties have a candidate for that post. I still don't understand why that was such a big deal. That's kind of normal, you know, growing up in the UK, that's kind of normal, you know — there is a race for prime minister and the Conservatives and Labour both want a shot at it. But here apparently, no, no, you know, Labour Party has to sit down, you're not allowed to have — it's this kind of illogic.

And I thought that after [the election of the president], things would get better. I thought that that had become a stumbling block, and it becomes something that was taken personally. And I was hoping that after that, there would be a good opportunity for things to calm down. But unfortunately, I don't see that at all. I see, if anything, an escalation, an increase in difficulties, and an increase in stubbornness and just, inability to work together. I mean, the government's never been like this.

I remember my brother [KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani] in the hots of the Daesh fighting, in the peak of the economic crisis — there was still a sense of teamwork in that government, you could go into a Cabinet meeting, and you wouldn't really know who was Gorran and who was PUK and KDP, unless you knew the personalities. But now you can go in there, and it's blatantly obvious to a five-year-old that this person is not the same as that group, and that group is not the same as this group.

And it isn't a PUK-specific thing. I mean, if you look for the first time, in the history of Kurdistan, perhaps, look at all these groups that want to leave Parliament. Look, all these independents that have had enough and want to leave Parliament, or the Islamic groups that want to leave Parliament; the PUK, that's frankly frustrated to the nth degree. Is this a coincidence? Or has something happened? Is there a catalyst? I think we have to ask ourselves these really difficult questions.

And I think logically looking at it, with all this build-up of tension, all this build-up of discomfort, it's obvious something is happening. I mean, it's not me.

LP: So can we say that the 2007 strategic agreement between the KDP and the PUK for management of the Kurdistan region is dead?

BT: Well, apparently, it's dead anyway. According to the KDP, when when Mam Jalal died, that agreement died, which seems to be a bit strange. It's not the way I would have put it, but, you know, that's their opinion. And obviously, they're free to hold their opinion.

LP: So you said you've had a lot of meetings with various KDP officials. Have you come to any mutual understanding with them over the Suli finances?

BT: No, not at all. Not at all. It's promise after promise. Promise to make a committee, promise to look at it, promise to re-evaluate the system, etc, etc. No, nothing really.

We've tried to be extremely accommodating. I remember, in a meeting with Kak Masrur — I'd spoken to my brother about some concessions we could make, to show that we were genuine, to show that we were serious. There were a couple of issues that I think were really important to Kak Masrur. And we just gave them to him, just as a show of good faith, as an olive branch.

LP: What were those kinds of things?

BT: One of them was that he wanted to make changes in the Oil and Gas Council. So we completely agree to that, without any negotiation, after three years of vetoing it. And I really thought that would be something that would make him see, look, these guys are serious, they really want to help us.

Another one was an agreement to push forward the mineral law. So we concede and concede and concede, and, unfortunately —

Let's just try to be a little bit polite about it, and say it's an extremely politicized government.

For a coalition government, for me to change your director general — not even me to change your director general, for Kak Qubad to change a director general in Sulaimaniya, who has been caught with corruption — why would you not allow that?

There's a deputy minister that has a corruption case against him. Well, I didn't put that corruption case against him. Masrur's government did. He's been found guilty now, and we want to remove him. They won't remove him. It's just, it's the kind of pressure.

And that's not the good way to work with Kurds, because just like the KDP won't bow to pressure, I don't think the PUK or the other parties bow to pressure. I don't think it's necessary to escalate every little thing to such a degree.

And another thing that disappoints me, really disappoints me, is everything stops. And this was one of the things I really tried to push with Kak Masoud, I said, "Look, Kak Masoud, if we have 20 problems, if two of them we can't fix immediately, let's still work the others, then it becomes easier to fix those two." But currently, the KDP is not really thinking like that. It's if one thing goes wrong, then everything stops, the entire machine comes to a stop.

LP: You've talked a little bit in the past about dual administration.

BT: I've talked about a solution, and a form of divorce. I don't think I've specifically said a split of the *herm* [region] or necessarily two administrations. I mean, it's a federative system; there are many federative systems we can look at.

We believe in the unity of Kurdistan, we fought for the unity of Kurdistan. I think we're the architects of the unity of Kurdistan.

But what do you want the government for? What is the purpose of a government? It's to serve the people, it's look after its population, it's to look after its old people, its martyr families, its students, its religious figures, its mosques, etc, etc. And when the government doesn't do that, you have to ask yourself very serious questions, then, why is the government not doing that? And what benefit is there to such a government?

LP: So have you been talking in Baghdad about different solutions? That's what some people inferred from your recent interview with Rudaw, when you talked about different solutions to this situation.

BT: I think that we've been talking to everybody regarding different solutions. And perhaps we have three or four different ways of doing it, all the way from an amicable divorce to just the old tribal, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you," three times in the mirror, or whatever it is. Yeah.

LP: You talked a little bit there about students. There are protests again at the moment — Halabjah, Sulaimaniya. They haven't got their stipend again this year.

BT: They won't get it.

LP: Why? Because of cost?

BT: They're just not giving it to them. It's a handful of million dollars. They're just not giving it to them. They're doing it on purpose so this happens.

Luckily, now, we've — completely independently of the government — we were able to spend an extraordinary amount of money and resources on repairing their dormitories and repairing their buildings and providing them with basic services that for years have completely been ignored by the government.

And at least now we're able to talk to the students and agree with them on where to demonstrate, how to demonstrate, when to demonstrate, etc, etc. Apart from other groups inside the students — very small groups that, with evidence, [are] politically motivated and directed, which I think is quite disgraceful. But hey-ho.

LP: The KDP would say it's Sulaimaniya's job to pay them their stipends.

BT: But I explained why that's not possible.

LP: Because you're not getting the cash.

BT: Exactly. And it's very disingenuous.

I mean, you wake up one morning and the most active, the most professional, the best trained special forces unit in the entirety of Iraq — they're still out weekly doing hits against Daesh, against terrorists — you wake up in the morning and their budget has been cut, again. There's no legal precedent for this. It's one person waking up one morning and saying, "Oh, I know how to pressure the PUK, I'll do this." It's disingenuous, and the reality is it doesn't help.

If I wanted to be strong in Erbil, politically stronger, I wouldn't starve Erbil. I'd do the opposite. In this very house, I remember sitting with Mam Jalal, Kak Masoud, and His Excellency, Kak Kosrat. And I remember Mam Jalal saying to Kak Masoud, we have to do something that makes Erbil as nice as Suli.

But look how the barometer has gone so far one way. I joke with Qubad, that we're still waiting for a road, and Erbil are about to send a manned mission to Mars. And you know, I want a Kurdish astronaut, but can I please have my road? Can my students have their stipend?

LP: So clearly there's an impasse in the government now, and Qubad hasn't been going to Cabinet meetings for a couple of weeks.

BT: No.

LP: Are the other PUK ministers?

BT: No.

The Qubad thing is two-fold – three-fold, actually. Let's say multi-fold. This is first of all Qubad's decision, and I support it completely. We send people to the meeting, just to monitor and make sure if there's any crazy decisions made, we can at least have an input. Those people are selected every week by Kak Qubad. But Qubad won't go back to these meetings until these matters are taken care of, until there's some kind of justice, you know, there's some kind of justice to the proceedings.

And also, you know, the PUK is really annoyed about the security situation in Erbil. You know, when an outcast from PUK land gives himself the authority to mobilize forces 200 meters from my brother's house.

LP: Azji Amin.

BT: Yes. It's unprecedented. It's unprecedented and completely unacceptable. And it shows the patience of the PUK, it shows our willingness not to just retaliate, not be drawn into these stupid, stupid mistakes.

Can we imagine that happening in the UK? You know, we have a coalition government and the prime minister's lackey prepares a force and sends it to the house of the deputy prime minister? It's so beyond the realm of any kind of that reality that I've experienced. And I've experienced some strange realities, as you can probably imagine. It's so beyond that, and there's no explanation for it.

LP: I'm playing devil's advocate here: they say, after the Hawkar Jaff assassination, you brought Wahab Halabjay to meetings in Erbil, even though he's got an arrest warrant against him in Erbil. That's provocative.

BT: That is not comparable to mobilizing forces to attack the deputy prime minister.

And the Hawkar issue — we have flat out denied — we've called for a joint investigation, we still call for a joint investigation. But the KDP don't want to do that. Rather, they would busy themselves with a ridiculous Bollywood movie, that we've completely torn apart by the mistakes in the — etc, etc.

And regarding Wahab Halabjay — Wahab was going to Erbil with me to visit the family of one of our wounded soldiers. And this has happened many times before. This is the thing that is extremely disingenuous. Many times before we've done that. Political arrest warrants, we've never taken seriously. Wahab was brought from the airport, officially, with me. He wasn't smuggled into Erbil. I didn't drive him through checkpoints. I could have taken one of my warbirds and landed in the middle of the Politburo with Wahab and nobody would have known about it.

And regarding the arrest warrant, I have the same arrest warrant, and so does Qubad. So is there a law? Or is there not a law? Because if there's a law, then I shouldn't have gone to the meeting in Erbil and Qubad shouldn't be working. And yes, then perhaps Wahab should not have gone to Erbil, but I'm used to perhaps a strange idea. I would like people to be tried in court, not maybe on television, but I don't know if we think now we're going to take it that way. That's a slippery slope that we'll end up trialling people on TikTok soon. So I think perhaps the whole — [sighs]

I don't mean to be disrespectful to the KDP. But I don't really acknowledge nonsense. I just don't acknowledge it. And I see that as nonsense.

LP: Wahab Halbjay is the head of counter-terrorism units in Sulaimaniya. Do you think it's going to be possible to heal the rift with the KDP if he remains in such an important position?

BT: I think that some of the people in the KDP will say that. But my response is, frankly, you can say that 'til the cows come home, because, again, there has been no investigation. Let's have a joint investigation — even with foreign intervention, or hands on, or eyes on. Why not do that? If you're so confident in your beliefs, why not do that? I'm not going to show any disloyalty to my men, I'm not going to show any disloyalty to heroes of Kurdistan, like Wahab, just because somebody in the KDP woke up one morning and decided to make some wild accusations that we completely and utterly deny.

LP: As in, you deny his involvement in the assassination of Hawkar Jaff?

BT: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

And you know something ironic? Strangely, everybody I've spoken to — even in the KDP — not one single person can give us a reason why they think we did that, or what the benefit was for the

PUK, what the benefit was for the KDP, what the benefit was for the CTG, or any other three letter organization in Kurdistan. Not a single human being that I talk to, even my accusers, cannot give me a single reason as to why we would do this. What was the advantage, after a year and a half of running back and forth to Kak Masoud to fix the relationship? Who woke up one morning and thought, oh, this will help!

LP: In your Rudaw interview recently, you alluded to the fact that the Kurdistan region relies on Sulaimaniya for the gas supplies from Khor Mor, and many of the other gas reserves in the region are also under PUK control.

BT: Actually they're not under PUK control; they're under PUK geography. Otherwise, not really, PUK is not really involved in any of these gas deals and whatever.

LP: To what extent are energy-related issues a factor in KDP-PUK disputes?

BT: Not to the extent that perhaps you think.

I am very disappointed in the oil policy. I do not like the oil policy, I do not think it's an effective oil policy. And I do not understand the unwillingness to work with Baghdad.

I'm not a financial expert, but I know that Basra is 1,000 times richer than the entirety of Kurdistan. Just Basra. And if the prime minister came to me and said, "Hey, Bafel, put your little teapot on this table, and you can be a part of the huge table, including Basra" — to me, that sounds like a bloody good deal.

And then that would make me ask, if you don't want to do that, why don't you want to do that? What's happening to your little tea pot? Where's the tea going? Because from a logical point of view, it's insanity not to do that.

And just the basic mismanagement — deals just being signed willy-nilly — X amount of years here, X amount of years there. Look at the numbers that Dr. Ashti gave us a few years ago, what he promised would happen in Kurdistan, and look what the reality is. It's just disingenuous.

And our only problem with the gas is — I just don't want it to be mismanaged like that. That's our only issue with the gas. Because it's the only resource we have left, apart from possibly minerals. And it would be a disaster for the region to completely mismanage this portfolio.

And you know, I'm going to tell you something that I haven't told anybody before. A few months ago, I made an extreme statement on purpose to get a reaction. A soundbite I think it is, yes?

LP: Yes.

BT: "Our gas will leave Kurdistan over my dead body."

LP: I was going to ask you about that.

BT: Okay. So that got the result I wanted. A little delegation came from Erbil. "Let's talk about gas." I got so happy.

So there's me thinking, we're going to sit down now, we're going to look at the situation logically, and we're going to say, how much gas do we have? How much do we hope to be able to create? And then what do we do with it, when we create it? You know, I'd like to think maybe first we can work on local business, and 24-hour electricity. And then whatever's left — we can think about exporting it — where would you export it? Well, Baghdad needs electricity and gas. Europe needs it, Turkey needs it. Perhaps we could do something. I mean, I don't know the feasibility of it, but it doesn't sound beyond the realms of logic to send gas to Baghdad in the summer when they need it and send gas to Europe in the winter when they need it. And this is the the kind of discussion I thought we were going to have. And we didn't.

We had a case of, well, how much percent for the PUK, how much percent for the KDP? And frankly, I just said, "Get out. That's not what I'm here to discuss." It's the same one-minded, you know, it's all about — and we can't.

The gas doesn't belong to the KDP. Gas doesn't belong to the PUK. Gas belongs to the people of Kurdistan and Iraq. It's human beings. It's not mine. You know, I don't own it, I don't have dominion over it. And this mentality has to change, where we can just wake up and there's some gas fields here, there's some oil fields, here — oh, Ain Zalah, I'll take that. Why? How dare you? By what right do you take that oil? It's the lack of institutions that allow this to happen, the lack of real institutions. And you will continue to have a lack of real institutions when you do not have the rule of law.

Let me tell you another story, documented by Asayesh with video. So there's a gentleman called Abdullah [sp?] Mubarak in Chamchamal. Some relatives of his, I believe — or somebody close to him, I don't want to get it wrong for legal reasons, but let's just say somebody associated with him — was involved in the killing of an Asayesh officer, and there's video evidence, I believe.

So what happened to his arrest warrant? Why wasn't he arrested? I'll tell you what happened to his arrest warrant. It got transferred to the court in Erbil. And then magically there was a tribal solution.

And it doesn't stop there. In the morning, he became a general. Overnight, the man was a tribal guy — arguably, a bandit, a highwayman, you know, stand and deliver — and in the morning he

became a general and his militia became an official part of the KRG security services. This is insanity. It honestly is utter insanity. First of all, it's a disgrace to our military structure. They have the audacity to talk to me about Peshmerga reform? This is Peshmerga reform? You get some highwayman, and in overnight, he becomes a general.

LP: Would you say this is the KDP trying to build security loyalty in PUK-controlled territory?

BT: They don't need to build security loyalty in PUK-controlled territory. They just don't need to do that.

In the worst time between me and Kak Masoud, when we were fighting tooth and nail over the presidency in Baghdad, there was a security problem around their area, and I called Kak Masoud, and said, "Sir, if something happens, I'd like for me and the CTG to go and take care of this problem, because I don't want people to think the Kurds are not united."

All I see happening from things like this is the opportunity for stupid people to do stupid things. All it will take is for one genius to take a shot at another genius and then that will be responded to somewhere else. And that will escalate, and before you know it the region's on fire. It's one of the reasons I will not retaliate for these things. It's very easy. There are tribes on the other side of Kurdistan that would kiss my hand for me to create a force amongst them. And I could very effectively do that. Off the top of my head, I can think of three right now.

LP: So in Duhok, Erbil —

BT: Absolutely. But I just think you don't answer stupidity with stupidity. So again, this is another thing — the PUK just is not going to play that game. I'm not going to play that game. And I think it's a bad game. And I think the KDP will realize eventually that this doesn't set a good precedent.

LP: People are worrying about whether we are going to return back to the 1990s, with the PUK and the KDP physically fighting each other.

BT: Over my dead body.

LP: Turning back to the gas pipeline, we understood that KAR Group was awarded a contract.

BT: No, KAR Group was not awarded. Kar Group was given. There was no process. It didn't go to the Oil and Gas Council. There was no tender. There was nothing. Somebody woke up one day and said, "KAR Group can have this." Who owns KAR Group? It's blatant and obvious corruption of the nth degree.

And everybody, we all sit here quietly and say, no, no, it's okay, for the stability of the region, for the KRG. For this, let's not say anything. It is an insult to the people of Kurdistan and Iraq for these things to happen.

It's got to the point — there used to be a fake process. Three or four companies would come forward and say, "Yeah, we're gonna get this." Now they don't even bother with that. They're so used to getting their way, they're so used to putting money in their pockets. They're so used to filling their coffers. They have the audacity to just wake up one morning and say, "Oh, KAR Group got this."

LP: So KAR Group was given a pipeline contract. What's happened with that since? Presumably you have opposed the granting of that contract.

BT: Yes. I have.

LP: How is that working now? What's happening?

BT: Nothing at all. Nothing at all is happening. I tried to negotiate with them, but I ended up having a negotiation over percentages, which wasn't my goal. My goal was to have a negotiation over strategy.

LP: It sounds like you've got a fairly different idea of how you'd want the gas sector to work.

BT: Yes.

LP: If you were developing Kurdistan's gas sector — and most of the gas is in areas that are geographically PUK areas — what would it look like, in theory?

BT: I'd like it not to look like that at all. This will probably surprise you. I'd like the government to do it. But I'd like to feel like the government was my government as well. And it didn't belong to just a handful of people. All you need is transparency. All you need is a fair legal agenda.

And also, this is complicated now, because of the judicial decision in Iraq [by the Federal Supreme Court]. We have to be careful about these things. So the first thing is basis of law. So let's actually see where we stand. And I think once we know where we stand, then perhaps we can make a correct decision.

What I'm certain of is burying our heads in the sand and saying, "No, this hasn't happened in Baghdad, everything's fine, let's just carry on" — I'm pretty sure that's not going to be a good solution.

So I would encourage, first of all, some understanding in the KRG - let's save the KRG first, let's save this government. I was accused recently of wanting to destroy the government. I could destroy the government in five minutes by just saying, "PUK, come out." That's not my intention at all. The patience that the PUK has shown — I'm very proud of the patience that the PUK has shown. But people in the government are doing a damn good job of destroying their own government. They don't need us to help them. They're doing a fine job without us.

LP: And so have you got any plans to develop the gas pipeline network within PUK-controlled areas at the moment?

BT: Not at all. No. I'm not going to make the same mistakes that others have made. Whatever we do has to be legal, whatever we do has to be within the bounds of the law, whatever we do has to be transparent and accountable. If I wanted to do that, frankly, it was easy a few months ago to agree to some of the percentages that were bandied about. And I could just fill my pockets like everybody else. But I just think it's incredibly disingenuous to do that now.

LP: You saw Faiq Zaidan, I think, yesterday?

BT: I see Faiq Zaidan all the time. He's a very, very dear friend.

LP: Did you talk about the court's ruling regarding the Kurdistan region's oil and gas sector?

BT: Honestly? Not really, no.

LP: As I understand it, there was an agreement negotiated before the formation of the government: in exchange for Kurdish parties' support, Sudani said his government would ease back the legal pressures on Kurdistan's oil and gas sector that have built up since the Federal Supreme Court's decision. Have these pressures actually been reduced?

BT: No, not really.

This a legal decision and I think it depends on the KRG — if the KRG just says, "This decision is illegal and we will not acknowledge it," you're not going to get anywhere. So meet in the middle.

This is another huge frustration that I have with this government. They don't understand the basics of negotiation. You're selling your car for 10 grand, I want to buy it for five. Well, it's seven and a half. Everybody knows that. Yeah. But with KDP, it's 12 and a half.

LP: You sound like you would be in favor of more integration with the federal system, in terms of the oil and gas sector, and you'd like to build bridges with Baghdad a bit more.

BT: I want transparency. And whoever gives me transparency is where I'm going to go. I want transparency.

You know, Qubad has this great, great initiative that — this month, I believe — any civilian is able to go online and see every single cent and dollar. That's tax, border, etc, etc. On our side of the equation. Why? Because we want transparency.

And hopefully, when we instigate that, they'll do the same on the other side. And they'll do the same for Ain Zalah, and they will do the same for the Syrian border and etc, etc. Though, to be fair, I'm not holding my breath. But we're not going to stop with reforms.

LP: In the summer, we saw a lot of rocket attacks on Khor Mor.

BT: Yes.

LP: The companies working there wanted guarantees that that would not happen again.

BT: I'm not surprised at that.

LP: What kind of guarantees can you give?

BT: I don't think anybody can give any guarantees at this time that that won't happen again. I think as the government starts to work better and starts to have a better understanding of the situation, I think that we can move towards a position where we can give guarantees. But I'm loath to give a guarantee until we have a lot more detail on how these things happened and why these things happened.

LP: What brings you to Baghdad? You've been having a lot of meetings and the KRG also has a delegation here at the moment.

BT: Well, we have the the High Council meeting this evening, and I'm hosting it. So that's my reason for being in Baghdad, where all the parties that are involved in the government convene and we set an agenda of work. We discuss important matters — kind of like we should be doing in Kurdistan.

LP: So the Idarat al-Dawla, like the Iraqi government stuff.

BT: Yeah, that's what I'm here for. It's being hosted, tonight, at ours, at Mam Jalal's. And to see my friends — I like to pop into Baghdad and see my friends regularly. I like to see Faiq Zaidan and all my other friends.

LP: Is the PUK having negotiations with Sudani's government separately from the KDP over the oil and gas law and the budget law?

BT: No, but the PUK is informing the Iraqi government that we have different opinions regarding many matters and it would be important for us all to stay on the same page, I believe. Although again, this is something we should be doing in the KRG, but unfortunately the KRG is not willing to do this; the KRG would rather do the things I described to you.

LP: You talk about coming down here and seeing your friends. I think you've also seen Qais al-Khazali and Muthanna al-Sammarai.

BT: And Ryan [al-Kildani, of the Babyloniyoan Movement]. Lots of the ministers - I've still haven't done my congratulations of everybody. Yeah, I've see I've seen a lot of the ministers; I want to see all of them and congratulate them. My message to them is the PUK is here to support you, the PUK wants a successful government. The PUK encourages you to work hard against corruption, that the PUK encourages you to do services. The PUK encourages, encourages, and won't be a headache, frankly. The PUK doesn't want to be a headache. There's enough headaches. PUK historically has made a lot of sacrifices — for Kurdistan, for Iraq — and we're willing to continue doing this. And this is really the message we give. I try to not make problems, perhaps try to make things easier.

LP: How is your relationship with President Latif Rashid now?

BT: Very good. I was with him last night for quite a while.

LP: What have you been discussing with him?

BT: Everything.

LP: He wasn't your candidate, ultimately.

BT: Well, I think that someone shouldn't be punished for being smart and having two ideas when other people perhaps bet everything on one horse. I don't think planning ahead should ever be punished, I think planning ahead should be congratulated.

LP: Okay, so you're working with him now. You're not seeing him, as, "He wasn't our candidate."

BT: You know, I grew up with this man, right? That's why it's interesting that you even need to ask this question.

LP: He was in the UK, with you and Barham Salih.

BT: For years I lived with Latif. My aunt Shanaz, she raised us for many years. So I think it's strange that people ask this question.

LP: Well, I mean, he wasn't your candidate.

BT: Whose candidate was he?

LP: I mean, he's PUK, but he was also KDP's.

BT: Was he? Wasn't he? Was he really?

LP: It seemed he was sort of in the middle.

BT: Really? Is that how we see it? Or do we see that the KDP had absolutely no other option than to say that, to try to save face, and perhaps it was a good idea for them to save a little bit of face? And everyone just kept their mouth shut and let them save face. Mmm.

LP: They sort of gave up Rebar Ahmed, in the end.

BT: Of course they did.

LP: Rebar wouldn't have worked in Baghdad?

BT: No, I don't think Rebar — I think this was quite disingenuous to do that to Rebar. I almost thought he was a sacrificial lamb. When his name came forwards, I almost thought he was a sacrificial lamb. Not because he's not capable — he's a very capable man, he has an amazing story about how he's still with us. You know, by all accounts, His Excellency should have been killed, and he has the most amazing story. But he doesn't have the relationships in Baghdad. He doesn't have the experience in Baghdad. It was a strange choice for me.

And that gave me hope when they put forward Rebar's name, because I thought, "Ah, this will be the basis for some negotiation." Unfortunately, it wasn't. It seems to have been just a really strange decision.

LP: I want to ask about the recent Turkish and Iranian attacks.

BT: Yeah.

LP: The IRGC have repeatedly attacked Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in Suli, in Koya.

BT: I think we've had over 900 Turkish strikes. And we've had these accelerated Iranian strikes. You know, we condemn the attacks on Kurdish and Iraqi soil. And we want to find a solution. But it's difficult to find a solution.

LP: So let's talk a little about Turkey first. We've noticed in the past year there have been a lot of drone attacks in Sulaimaniya, in Kalar, in Chemchemal. What's your position on those taking place?

BT: We condemn all kinds of violence, especially extrajudicial violence, and people being killed without due process. We understand Turkey has a serious problem. We would encourage dialogue. You're not going to kill your way out of a problem. I just don't think that works. You're not going to kill your way out of a problem. People talk their way out of a problem. We would encourage all sides to dialogue.

LP: That has happened in the past, in the peace process, in 2013.

BT: Absolutely.

LP: So you would say we need a dialogue. How would that work? Is that Hakan Fidan talking to you guys, is that you guys going to Ankara?

BT: Well, I can't help with that. They need to talk to the PKK.

LP: Right. But would the PUK ever be a facilitator in that?

BT: We would help in any way we can. We don't encourage the killing of any Kurd. We don't encourage the killing of anybody. It's not something we encourage. And you know, it seems quite basic to me, that when you try the same thing for so many decades, and you keep getting the same response — if it was me, I would think perhaps I need to change tactics here.

LP: Does Turkey ask you to help them, to facilitate their attacks?

BT: We will never facilitate anybody's attack against any Kurd. Ever. And this is not specific to Turkey. It goes to anybody on earth. We will not facilitate anybody's attack. It's not my job.

LP: Turkey has recently launched another operation in Syria. And they also said, we're going to launch more in Sulaimaniya as well. What are you expecting?

BT: I expect escalation. I don't see this as a good, or a sustainable policy. I think talking to my friends here in Baghdad, they're extremely frustrated at the situation, and I don't blame them. They should be frustrated with the situation. I'd like to see more action. The only way we're going to get out of these difficulties is through dialogue. And my brothers in Syria, my heart goes out to them. They're the heroes against Daesh, and what's happening in Syria is not necessary.

LP: What would you do if you were Erdoğan? How would you talk to the PKK?

BT: I don't want to answer that question. I don't want to be Erdoğan. I like being Bafel.

LP: We've seen in recent weeks a lot of missile and drone attacks by the IRGC. So last week, Prime Minister Sudani said that federal border guards would be redeployed to the Iran-Iraq border.

BT: Great.

LP: This was one of Iran's demands in order to stop the attacks. But as I understand it, the border is already under the control of Kurdish federal forces.

BT: Well it isn't. It's massively understaffed. We have a 600 to 700 kilometer [border] with Iran. And we have one brigade looking after the entire border. So one of the things we discussed with His Excellency the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior was to create more — and hopefully they will. They've already okayed an entire new brigade. And we will try better to control our borders. I think it's essential to control our borders, in and out.

LP: Would they be Kurds?

BT: Well, I think logically they'll be Kurds, because you're not going to get people from Basra to go and work on the Iraq-Iran border [in Kurdistan]. So I think, yeah, logically they will be Kurds. I think it's a good thing. It helps with unemployment, it helps with that region. And I think it's a good idea.

LP: Iran might not accept that, because they want federal control of that border.

BT: But the border police are federal.

LP: There might be an issue with the units being Kurdish?

BT: No, I don't think there'll be an issue at all. I don't think their problem is nationality, or religion. I think their problem is not enough people on the border.

LP: The other thing that Iran says is they want disarmament of the Iranian Kurdish opposition groups.

BT: This has happened before, you know - this happened many years ago. There was a decree by the government, and groups were dissolved. This has happened before.

LP: But now they've got weapons.

BT: Ah, yeah. They've always had weapons. Everybody's got weapons.

LP: Iran is saying we don't want them to have weapons because they send them across the border, they smuggle them. We want them to be disarmed. They're a national security threat to us.

BT: Yes. Iran says all of that.

LP: So would you ever agree to the groups that are in Sulaimaniya being disarmed?

BT: That's not my decision. That's a government decision.

LP: Right. But presumably, the government would need your buy-in.

BT: Well, nothing else has needed my buy-in. So it would be nice to have some input, but I think that that's a government decision, and the government needs to decide whether this is something they want, or something they don't want. Either the government in KRG or the government here [in Baghdad], one of them will decide if this continues. The strikes are very different, you know that, don't you? The Iranians, when they do it, they give fair warning. They say, tomorrow at this time, yeah, yeah. They even tell the local *qaemmaqam* — mayor?

LP: Mayor, yeah. We always have trouble translating this word.

BT: But yeah, I think they even tell the mayor, they say look, you know, between these hours, civilians go, this, that and the other. At the minute that's happening. Whether it continues to happen, I don't know, but I do detect increasing frustration with the Iranians. It's one of the matters I discussed yesterday with the ambassador [of Iran to Iraq.]

LP: Yes, I saw that you saw him.

BT: They seem very serious on the matter.

LP: It's a very big issue for them. So, where does it go from here?

BT: Well, you know they have a security committee now with the KRG and I think they're trying to make plans through that.

LP: It's KRG, Baghdad, and Tehran.

BT: Yes, now it's Baghdad, also, you're correct.

LP: Is everyone on that security committee seeing eye to eye in a way that you're confident will stop the attacks?

BT: I think it might be too early to answer that question. Let's see what happens in the next meeting. I think a lot will be clear after the next meeting.

LP: I want to ask about the politicization of the security sector. Sheikh Jaffar said recently in an interview on KurdSat that the integration of the 70 and 80 units wasn't going so well.

BT: No, it's not.

LP: Why is that?

BT: I don't know. We're really pushing for this. It's something that I think is one of the things I was talking about earlier, when I said we need to strengthen our institutions. I think one side is trying to use it as an opportunity to have military dominion over the other side, and I think it's disingenuous. And again, it comes back to the politicizing of everything. Everything is being politicized. This is an idea that Mam Jalal had decades ago.

LP: Bringing them together?

BT: Yeah, and it's something that we're very keen to do. We've made some great progress with our American allies, with our other allies.

LP: So what needs to happen?

BT: Well I think this is also, it's another example of — you remember when I said that everything stops? This is part of everything, and it's kind of grinding to a stop.

LP: Even, the Americans, the coalition, they have a bit of leverage to say, "Hey guys, c'mon, if you want to keep our support."

BT: They should use more leverage. They should give us a little pinch, I think.

LP: There is also a lack of trust between the PUK and the KDP.

BT: I think that's a very polite way of putting it. But we're Kurds — we're so easy to make up. It's so easy. It just takes a step. It just takes a step. It's easy.

LP: There was recently a case of a 17-year-old boy, Sahand Ahmed, who died in police custody in Sulaimaniya. His family said he was beaten; the police say he tripped and fell and died.

BT: I'm not going to comment on anything until the results of an official investigation come. I don't think legally it's wise for me to do that.

LP: Okay. On a different subject, we've recently seen a quite high number of ISIS suspects arrested in Sulaimaniya. There've been a lot of raids.

BT: Yes. They're continuing. We had some yesterday. The CTG was out late last night.

LP: Can you walk me through how they work? Does the federal CTS share intelligence? How does it work?

BT: I'd rather not go into any of our processes. But the reality is CTG works theatre-wide with all of our allies, and any target from anywhere that we think is viable, that our allies think is viable, we're willing to action. And we have done, we have lots of arrests that we've sent to the south, lots of arrests that we've taken care of, but I'd prefer not to go into the actual processes. But the generality is yes, wherever information comes from, we work, we work against terrorism, we work everywhere. There's no real boundary.

LP: Is there a rise in the number of Kurds joining ISIS? Or ISIS members feeling that they can hide out in the Kurdistan region?

BT: I think some of it's through necessity. Some of it's caused through the security gap between Iraqi security and our security, and both sides of that border are quite permeable. And this is one of the things I want to discuss with the defense ministry here [in Baghdad] is how better to integrate in those regions. I think closing down those gaps will help. I don't think we should take ISIS lightly. We shouldn't think they're finished and the threat is finished. It is not, it certainly is not. I'm hoping with this government, we can do that.

LP: There's been talks about these joint coordination centers in the disputed territories for years now.

BT: Yeah, our side is moving forward very quickly with that. We're moving forward quite quickly with that — even joint joint forces, etc, etc. We're up for anything like that, anything that increases the security of our region, anything that gets jobs for people, we're all for it.

LP: Are the joint brigades actually doing joint patrols together?

BT: Not yet, but hopefully they will be.

LP: My understanding is that that's where the sticking point is — how they get paid, who pays them.

BT: Yes.

LP: And so they're not actually able to do joint patrols, do joint work.

BT: I think they will be small things that will be easy to iron out.

LP: Okay, so when Iraq's 2023 national budget comes, they'll be paid for by the federal side?

BT: Agreed. I should bloody well hope so, because I don't expect the KRG to pay for them.

LP: You say ISIS isn't done. How much of a threat are they posing to Kurdistan region and Iraq's security?

BT: A lot of a threat. They will exploit any gaps. Let's not leave gaps. Again, there's that issue of the trust between not only KDP and PUK but between federal forces and and Kurdish forces.

We're working to make that better. And we're doing a great job. I think we had an interesting team here yesterday, they met a lot of their counterparts. Very promising. And they've seen, you see, this is the difference — for example, my CTG, and the SWAT, especially, those two units work very closely with Iraq, on targeting terrorists. You know, if you look at the amount of arrestees that we've had and sent to Baghdad, for example, if you compare them to other regions in Kurdistan, it's incomparable.

LP: Is that because there are fewer targets in other areas, fewer ISIS?

BT: No, it's because our security forces are superior.

LP: So there's also a significant ISIS presence in Duhok and Erbil?

BT: Oh, I'm sure, absolutely. Yes, of course. It's just, you know, I think that the men take this really seriously. It's what they live for. It's literally all they live for. We have a good turnaround rate. I'm very proud of our security services. They're good men.

LP: And they suffering as a result of the financial disputes? Are they getting paid?

BT: Course they are. Their budgets are cut regularly. Our intelligence service budget has been cut for years now. The CTG has just been cut, again, by quite a considerable amount of money. But, you know, I had a meeting with the men recently, and I tried to give them a pep talk. And they didn't need a pep talk. They looked at me and said, "Sir, do you think we do this for money?"

LP: Right, but they've got to feed their families.

BT: They need to live, they need to feed their families, and we'll try to help them in any way we can, like we always do. They're the backbone of the PUK.

But it does make me sad that these people instead of getting medals, instead of getting awards, they're painted out to be something they're not, purely for political purposes. I think it's very disingenuous. In other parts of the world, these people would be heroes. And they are heroes. They're heroes to everybody except for some personalities in the KDP. And that's their loss, not mine. It's very easy to take ownership of that: they're part of your government, you should be very proud of what they do.

You know, Wahab was the one that pushed really hard, after the changes in the PUK, he pushed really hard to do joint operations with the CTD, to do joint training with the CTD. Sheikh Jalal, my chief of Zanyari now, he's done the same thing regarding Parastin, wanting to work together. We find it ridiculous that we can work with our foreign allies but we can't work with each other. We have to pass information to each other through our foreign allies. To me, that's a form of humiliation. It's very embarrassing for me, but the KDP have no willingness, they have no process to do that. They're not interested in that. So again, it leaves gaps that the enemy can exploit.

LP: It's interesting, because in the past the KDP were always saying Lahur was the difficult one to work with. Now things seem to be at a low.

BT: Oh no, he's the good guy now.

LP: He's the good guy now?

BT: Yeah. He's their friend, and they love him. I'm glad that they have this love affair. I think it's probably better for stability in the long run.

I don't see myself as difficult or a bad guy. I think I'm really easygoing. But I have a job. And my job is to look after my people. My job is to make sure they're fed and they're clothed. And, you know, this isn't 1991 or 1992. The people, they don't want what they used to want. My youth, they want what your youth want in the UK. They want a job, they want security, they want heat, the normal services that a civilized country wants. And I want that. I want that for my people. And if it means having to be difficult — I don't like to be difficult, but I'm very good at it.

LP: I've heard KDP people say you're autocratic.

BT: I think that's probably the most incorrect statement that can be said about me.

I don't think I'm autocratic. I like discipline. I myself am a very disciplined person. I believe in order, and I believe in logic, and I believe in things that are systematic. I'm very methodical. I like to travel from step one to step two to step three. And I think that's the correct way. And if that's seen as autocratic, then it's not my loss. It's their loss. I don't think I'm autocratic at all — I'm very sociable. I don't have hang-ups. I don't hold grudges at all. It's something that's genetic from my father. I don't hold a grudge. I don't even hate anybody. When people say, "Oh, I hate this person," I've never understood that. I don't think there's a single human being I hate.

LP: It's a waste of energy.

BT: There's people I'm disappointed in. There are people that I think, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that," or "That's not the way to be." But hate, no.

I think a lot of it is my military background. And, frankly, my face. My face just looks like this. People look at my face, and they say, "Oh, look, he's so angry." I'm not. I'm constantly joking and laughing. It's just I have this face and I can't really help it.

LP: Do you see yourself in Kurdistan for the long haul?

BT: Yes, forever, absolutely. I can't leave now. When I go on a break, after two or three days, I'm itching to get back, which is why I don't go on breaks anymore.

LP: You don't go to the UK?

BT: I haven't been to the UK for two years. More, I think.

LP: Not just because of covid?

BT: No, not because of covid.

LP: I mean, it's a bit of a disaster there anyway.

BT: Why?

LP: I mean, have you seen the government? Three prime ministers!

BT: I don't think I'm in the position to criticize anybody's government. Have you seen my government, would be my reply to that. But yes, I have a special love for the UK, I really do. I see myself as a subject of His Majesty.

LP: Good use of His Majesty. I keep saying Her Majesty.

BT: I do, too. I've written a note, actually have a note there saying, "Say His Majesty," because I do the same thing. But yes, I am, I'm very proud of that. And they did good by us, you know, the UK did good by us.

LP: How do you mean?

BT: We were thrown out of our own country and couldn't speak our language. And our schools were burnt, and our house was burnt. And Her Majesty gave us a house, and she gave us an education. She gave us schooling and she gave us food. I don't think you should forget that loyalty.

There's a sort of new narrative now — as an immigrant, you shouldn't need to be grateful.

BT: You should absolutely need to be grateful. You should absolutely need to be grateful. Nobody owes you anything. Nobody owes you anything. I got up out of Iraq and ended up in a few other

countries nearby and it didn't work out, and we ended up in the UK and absolutely should be grateful. And I think you should integrate yourself into that society. I think that multi-cultures should exist in a society, but a country needs its own culture. So we all learned English, even my grandmother at that ripe old age learned to drive and she was driving to Sainsbury's. So yeah, I think that you should absolutely be grateful. Some strange ideas I hear now, but I'm old now, so maybe I do think differently.

LP: I have one more serious question.

BT: Just one?

LP: Yes. One more. This might not be your area of expertise, but I'd still like to hear your thoughts. There's been a big arbitration case in Paris that Baghdad brought against Turkey for exporting the Kurdistan region's oil. It seems to be like we're getting near to a ruling on that. How do you see that might affect the Kurdistan region's ability to export oil and therefore the financial basis of the Kurdistan region?

BT: My understanding is it will affect everything.

You are correct, it's not my area of expertise. This is by far more Qubad's field. But yeah, my understanding is that will affect everything.

LP: Is there any understanding to kick it down the road a bit, delay a ruling?

BT: I'll be honest with you. I've heard nothing either way.

LP: It's obviously a huge kind of bilateral issue. We've heard that Baghdad's claims are for tens of billions of dollars.

BT: It's quite a few quid.

LP: Turkey doesn't really have that kind of money at the moment lying around.

BT: It's a lot of money. I didn't realize it was quite that much.

LP: Yeah. I have heard figures as high as \$26 billion, \$30 billion. Given the bilateral relationship, you know, is there another way of working out a settlement, out of court?

BT: I'm disappointed to tell you that this is really not something I can answer, unfortunately. I simply don't have enough input. Qubad's the guy to ask for that.

LP: It seems like you and the PUK are much closer to Baghdad than the KDP. And I do wonder, you talk about these four solutions, you know, these scenarios? What are they

looking like?

BT: I think that's not why we're close to Baghdad. I think we're close to Baghdad, because one should be close to Baghdad. We are part of Iraq, whether you like it or not. And we think that one of the strengths of the PUK was its relations, both internationally and locally. And I think this, when the PUK had so many problems — after Mam Jalal, after Kak Kosrat got sick, after my mother got sick, after the other nonsense — these relationships were ignored. And I think we bring something to the table in Baghdad, and our friends want us to be more active in Baghdad. And I think this is just the PUK — rather than this being something strange, I think it's more a case of the PUK returning to its roots, and rebuilding its relationships with everybody. And we believe in that. And it's something I'm going to do. I'm going to spend a lot of time in Baghdad, I'm preparing a Politburo building here in Baghdad. Out of every two weeks, I will be here two or three days.

I promised Faiq Zaidan that I'd be more active in Baghdad yesterday, and some of my other friends, and it's something I want to do. I really think that maybe from Baghdad, we can help the people of Kurdistan and Iraq. I think PUK has got a lot to offer. I think that we have really good relationships. The game's different in Baghdad, it's the big chessboard. It's really interesting.

And strangely, the solution to Kurdistan and Erbil is probably going to come from Baghdad anyway.

LP: So are you talking to Baghdad about seeing Sulaimaniya as a different administrative unit? To receive a budget from the Baghdad rather than the KRG?

BT: Not necessarily. We're exploring all options. We're exploring all options. We're exploring all avenues, even legal routes. What we're trying to do is look at legal solutions for some of the issues we have with portions of the KRG — some of the security matters — and there's lots of ways through this problem. Look, why are we sitting together? Because you wanted to sit with me and I wanted to sit with you. If you didn't want to sit with me, we couldn't have this interview, no matter how much I wanted to get my opinion out. And this is the frustration with the KDP. We had these talks the other day, and 26 or 27 Kurdish parties came —

LP: In Dokan?

BT: Yeah. The KDP didn't come. Of course they won't come, because it's Kurdish unity talks and — I don't understand why they didn't come. But the KDP were invited, contrary to popular belief. I made sure the invitation went out. I saw it myself. But the KDP didn't come. This burying your head in the sand isn't going to solve anything. It's not going to solve anything. You need to — you know, my maths teacher used to say, "Pull your socks up." I think KRG needs to pull their socks

up. Problems don't just go away. They don't just disappear by ignoring them. They get compounded.

LP: So the legal solutions – is that lawsuits against the KDP?

BT: Oh, there's a whole spectrum of options, a whole spectrum of options. Frankly, none of which we want to explore, but a lot depends on what's happening. I'm hearing some optimistic noises from the KDP. I think the KDP has a prime opportunity now to reach out to all of the Kurdish parties. They've just had the Congress. With their new leadership, it's very normal for them to have a different agenda and a different way of dealing with people and encourage them to do that, and we like to remind them that we're willing, always have been, but the ball firmly is in their court. We've said everything we want to say, we've conceded everything that we can possibly think of conceding. And historically the PUK has always done that. The PUK has always done that, always willing to concede on our personal rights for the greater good, for the good of the region, for the good of Kurdistan, especially now with the PUK so united, I think that it's easier for the KDP to get on with the PUK. But they have to want to.

LP: And you're not sure that they want to?

BT: I'm not actually. I'm not sure that they want to.

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