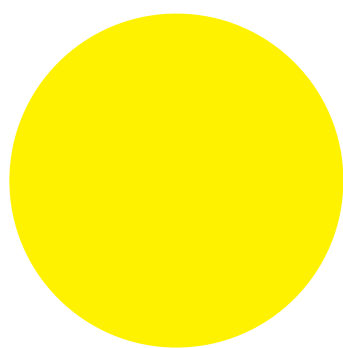


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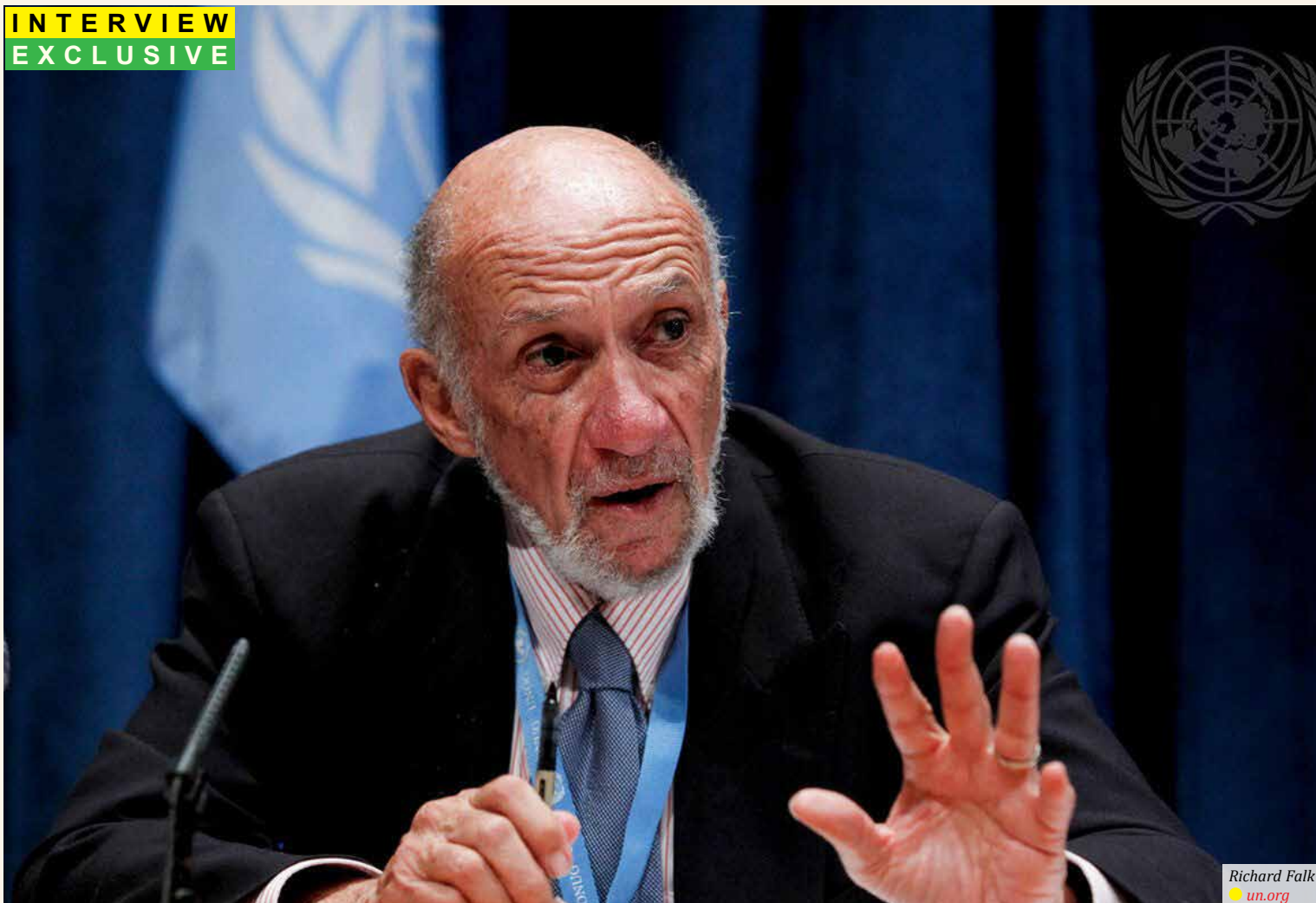
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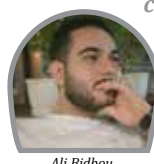
Richard Falk
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Influential Shia figures offer Iran best bet against Kurdish separatists

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

INTERVIEW
EXCLUSIVE

As Iran and the United States exchanged fire over the past week, Iran repeatedly targeted positions belonging to Kurdish separatist groups in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region. Although such actions have a history, their coincidence with the conflict, along with previous reports of US efforts to win the support of some Iranian Kurdish groups during the war, has fueled speculation about a connection between the two developments. Ali Bidbou, an Iraq affairs expert, told Iran Daily that the Kurdistan Region is unwilling to fully and effectively confront such separatist groups. He said Iran's best option for resolving the issue would be to rely on influential Shia figures in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, including



Ali Bidbou

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, and to facilitate negotiations between Iraq's domestic groups and political parties in the Kurdistan Region.

IRAN DAILY: What position has the Kurdistan Region assumed in the current dynamics of the Iran-US conflict? Given the presence of US forces in the region and the activities of armed groups opposed to the Islamic Republic in northern Iraq, can the Kurdistan Region be said to have become one of the key fronts in the indirect war between Tehran and Washington?

BIDBOU: The regional government in Kurdistan is showing a reluctance to take sides in the conflict, but the internal parties do not hold a unified position. A few days ago, Bafel Talabani, the president of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, said that the region needed to purchase US air defense systems to counter Iranian attacks. Still, in one way or another, it is trying to get its message across: that, like the Iraqi government, it does not want to become a battleground for the parties to the conflict. In any case, Iraqi Kurds place their eth-

nic identity at the top of their list of interests. It is natural for them to place their Kurdish identity above their Iraqi identity, and they make decisions accordingly.

The main reason the agreement between Iran and Iraq was not implemented may be that the Kurds do not want to lose one of their key sources of leverage against Iran. The same thing has happened with Turkey. Naturally, they try to preserve the threat factor against both Iran and Turkey as much as possible, and they do not completely clamp down on the activities of these separatist groups.

Another issue is that the Kurdistan Region fears that confronting the Kurdish separatist groups based in the mountains of Sulaymaniyah could trigger an internal conflict in the region. At present, the Barzani and Talabani factions — the two ruling parties in Iraq's Kurdistan Region — are both making every effort to prevent an internal conflict from breaking out. Although the situation has come close to that point in recent months.

How significant is the possibility of a ground front emerging along Iran's

western borders?

This is a very serious possibility and it remains on the table. During the December-January unrest in Iran, there were also some efforts to facilitate the ground entry of Kurdish separatists into Iran, and Iranian armed forces confronted the issue at the time.

One point that needs to be taken into account is that many of the people belonging to these Kurdish separatist groups are based in the mountains of northern Iraq. Iran does not always achieve the desired result simply by firing missiles at them and targeting their bases.

In fact, one possible solution could be to rely on influential Shia figures in Iraq's Kurdistan Region, including Fuad Hussein, the Iraqi foreign minister, who is an influential and popular Kurdish Shia figure among Iraqi and Kurdish communities and also an influential figure among both the Barzanis and the Talabanis.

This could perhaps produce a result. Through negotiations between Iraq's domestic groups and the political parties in the Kurdistan Region, an agreement could be reached on the presence of these anti-Iranian separatist groups near Iran's borders.

Does the central Iraqi government have the ability and the will to control developments in the Kurdistan Region? Given Baghdad's commitments regarding the disarmament or relocation of groups opposed to Iran, while US forces and interests remain present in the region, can the Iraqi government prevent its territory from becoming an arena for direct confrontation between Iran and the United States?

Based on the evidence and precedents available to us, as well as the events that have taken place recently in particular, the Baghdad government has no authority or control over the Erbil government unless the decisions made in Baghdad have been approved by Erbil. Regarding the recent arrests connected to corruption cases in Iraq, some individuals had taken refuge in Erbil. Until the Baghdad government received permission from Erbil to arrest them, it could not return those individuals to Baghdad.

Therefore, the central government itself has no authority or control over the Kurdistan Regional Government.

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