

Is the potential independence of Iraqi Kurdistan a threat to regional peace?

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Abstract

The determination to achieve Kurdish independence has been a rollercoaster, with different stakeholders in the region differing in opinion. What are the implications going forward and why are some forces in the region desperate to ensure that the goal is not achieved? These and many other questions have emerged after the referendum was carried out. While some analysts have hailed the referendum, which was held in last September 2017, as a bold step, others have criticised it for raising tensions (or expect that tensions will be raised in the region), citing some of the demonstrations against it. Regardless, the voice of the people ought not to be ignored. The situation in Kurdistan region in Iraq is delicate and requires thorough negotiation, absolute patience and wisdom. This article analyses and makes a case in support of the Kurdish independence. It argues that independence per se is not a threat to the peace in the region or a distraction to the US-led coalition against the Islamic State (IS).

In general, history has been described as a tragedy and a romance¹. The history of the Kurds is not an exception. Federick described it as “fascinating and sometimes tragic”². This is axiomatic as history must fascinate at some point. What appears to be more predominant in the history of the Kurds is the pain and struggle associated with their quest for an independent state³. The Kurds are the largest but stateless ethnic group in the world⁴. A significant proportion of the Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian populations are made up of Kurdish people⁵.

The focus of this piece is on the Kurdistan Region, a constitutionally autonomous region located in Northern Iraq, a region, whose people have evolved through years of “struggle for

¹ Federick, J. T. (2016) ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’ <www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library> accessed 17 August 2017.

² Worthington, D. (2016), ‘History of the Kurds’ <www.newhistorian.com/history-kurds/2654> accessed 15 August, 2017.

³ Inga Rogg and Hans Rimscha (2007) The Kurds as parties to and victims of conflicts in Iraq, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 89(868).

⁴ Kelly, M. (2009) ‘The Kurdish Regional Constitution within the Framework of the Iraqi Federal Constitution: A Struggle for Sovereignty, Oil, Ethnic Identity, and the Prospects for Reverse Supremacy Clause’, *Penn State Law Review* 707.

⁵ Kelly, M. (2009) ‘The Kurdish Regional Constitution within the Framework of the Iraqi Federal Constitution: A Struggle for Sovereignty, Oil, Ethnic Identity, and the Prospects for Reverse Supremacy Clause’, *Penn State Law Review* 707.

the control of its own destiny”⁶. The focus of this article is to make a case for the independence referendum by examining arguments and counter arguments about it. The article examines several factors ranging from the regional opposition to the referendum to the role of the international community and the role of KDP and PUK in the pursuit of independence.

Iraq can probably be described as a counterfeit country. Although this is subject to debate, it is believed that the opinion of the Kurdish nation⁷, who have citizens distributed in various proportions among neighbouring cities and states was not sought before Iraq gained independence in 1921. They argue that the right thing to do was to seek the opinion of the Kurds, perhaps through a referendum to determine their opinion. That is history now, however, looking at the trends over the last century, the Kurds have had to endure a bitter experience with Iraq, ranging from chemical attacks under the Sunni rule and economic sanctions under the Shiite leadership. Looking back at the Iraq modern state, the history of Iraqi Kurdistan has been one of cultural and political oppression, underdevelopment, destruction, genocide and ethnic cleansing⁸. A deeper evaluation would reveal that the purpose of such heinous campaign against the Kurds was to eliminate all forms of resistance. On the surface, the purpose was to eliminate the region of “saboteurs” including active males through mass executions, identifying some villages and classifying them as ‘prohibited’. Perhaps, greater harm was done than reported, but this only a glimpse of what the Kurds have had to endure in the perilous times and one of the drivers of the pursuit for independence.

Recently, the agitation and question of Kurdish independence has been raised by third world countries, academics and even by Kurdish leaders, since the Kurds established a semi-autonomous region following the Gulf War in 1991. After Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, leaders in the region, Iraqi and Kurdish alike have diligently worked to maximise the control over the affairs in the North. Tensions between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad primarily steered by the distributions of resources and oil control over

⁶ Kelly (2009)

⁷ O’Leary, B., McGarry, J. and Salih, K. eds., (2006). *The future of Kurdistan in Iraq*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁸ O’Leary, C.A., (2002). The Kurds of Iraq: Recent history, future prospects. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 6(4), pp.17-29.

disputed territories have facilitated the further desire for distance between KRG and the Iraqi government⁹. This distance has been deemed necessary by Kurdish officials because they feel that KRG rarely gets its fair share of resources from Baghdad, which obviously has stimulated the desire to gain independence. Consequently, “the question of whether Iraqi Kurdistan may someday become a sovereign country is not merely theoretical; it is a very real possibility whose impact on regional dynamics should be assessed”¹⁰

The negotiations for independence has received some boost in the last couple of years. In May 2017, KRG formally communicated its intentions to hold a referendum to the UN Security Council¹¹. Although this process formally began a year earlier when president of the region at that time, Masoud Barzani, made it known in February 2016 that a referendum would be held among the Iraqi Kurds on the issue of independence. The emphasis of the referendum was not to immediately declare independence of the Kurdistan people, but the aim was to reveal the wishes of the people regarding their fate in Iraq. With that knowledge, independence can follow at the appropriate time. Earlier, in 2005, an informal referendum was held in a vote that had 99% of members who participated vote in favour of independence¹². With this in mind, the leaders expected that a substantial majority of the Kurds, if not all would vote in favour of an independent state. However, should the referendum bring results other than a massive support as expected, the KRG’s bid is best be described as a pyrrhic victory. This is not to be as shown by the near total (92%) vote. This means that if the participation of the voters becomes low or the approval rate was below 80%, the referendum might have turned out to be an embarrassment for the government¹³. As Gurbuz¹⁴ rightly observes, the growing dissent among opposition in the region indicates that this could be a possibility.

⁹ Salih, M.A., (2016). Low Oil Prices Complicate Iraqi Kurdish Independence. *Middle East Institute Policy Focus*,7.

¹⁰ Nader, A., Hanauer, L., Allen, B. and Scotten, A.G., (2016). *Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan* (No. RR-1452-RC). RAND CORP ARLINGTON VA ARLINGTON United States

¹¹ Omar Sattar (2017). *Iraqi Kurdistan faces many obstacles to independence referendum*. [online] Available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2017/06/kurdistan-independence-iraq-iran-turkey.html> [Accessed 11 Sep. 2017].

¹² Riegl, M., Doboš, B., Landovský, J. and Bar, S., (2017). Kurdistan Region’s Quest for Independent Statehood: Trapped in Internal and Geopolitical Rivalries. In *Unrecognized States and Secession in the 21st Century* (pp. 153-168). Springer International Publishing.

¹³ Gurbuz, M. (2007). *The Independence Referendum: A Pyrrhic Victory for Barzani*, Arab Center Washington DC.

¹⁴ Gurbuz, (2007)

However, concrete steps are being taking to enhance the success of the independence referendum. To achieve the objective of gaining independence, the KRG took a three-dimensional approach in a way that generates and maximises support for the call for autonomy and independence¹⁵. The first level was to resolve the lingering internal crisis involving the various Kurdish parties. This was not an easy task, but a challenging one that can however be surmounted. It has been argued that despite the relative institutional emancipation within the region, the Kurdistan Region has had difficulties in bringing the different Kurdish parties together to reach vital agreement on many issues¹⁶. The second level was to negotiate with Baghdad in a process that will ensure a smooth and peaceful independence. This proved to be tricky. For instance, if independence was declared by the Kurdistan Region without prior and proper agreement with Baghdad, and there was no resolution about the legality of oil exports, there might have been a chance that uncertainty would have prevailed and could have affected the investment of major international companies.

The third dimension to the agitations for independence was to assure the regional powers that the interconnectedness within the region will not be damaged by the independence. Suffice to note that one of the major fears within the region, amid the possibility of a Kurdish independence is that other similar groups within the region may also follow the Kurdish path and seek independence and the assumption that an independent Kurdistan may truncate the bilateral relations and the pursuit of relative peace and stability in the region¹⁷.

Looking beyond these factors, KRG's determination to maintain stable relations with Iraq, the US, and neighbouring countries en route to its independence is also critical. This is because the independence of the Kurdish region is intrinsically linked to international legitimacy and foreign support, and the need for global and regional powers not to block the independence. As observed earlier, a referendum is a single step out of many. Kurdish officials know that it is beyond a call for referendum and supposing there is a 'yes' vote, due to the complex nature of negotiations, not only with Baghdad, but with neighbouring countries, including Iran and

¹⁵ Dahlman, C.T. and Moradi, S., (2017). Partition and National Fragmentation of Kurdistan. *Scaling Identities: Nationalism and Territoriality*, p.223.

¹⁶ Lindenstrauss, G and Cluzet, A. (2017) An Independent Iraqi Kurdistan? On the Prospects and Viability of a Future State, *Center for Security Studies*.

¹⁷ Gardner, H., (2016). *Averting global war: Regional challenges, overextension, and options for American strategy*. Springer.

Turkey, it could take years for the independence to be actualised. The whole process will take time and will not mean an immediate declaration of Kurdistan independence, but there would be a continued and expanded dialogue with Iraq, the US, Europe and Middle Eastern countries because they are relevant stakeholders in the pursuit of Kurdistan independence.

The desire for referendum has been received with widespread scepticism and pessimism within the region. While the KRG officials do not expect an immediate support from the region, there are deliberate efforts to engage and dialogue with relevant stakeholders in the post-referendum process. The key regional players are Iran and Turkey, both of whom are opposing the referendum. Given that there are a number of Kurdish population in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, the opposition from Ankara and Tehran stems from demographic reasons. Considering the relationship and influence of Iran on Iraq, Tehran has made its rejections of the referendum explicit. This rejection has external and domestic dimensions to it. It has been reported that Iranian-linked militia in Iraq are being used as implicit tools to frustrate the referendum^{18 19}. There are also suggestions that Iran is using the water card by cutting off water supply from Zap River to discourage the referendum.

In the same manner, Turkish President and his Foreign Minister have been vocal and explicit against the referendum²⁰. For instance, the minister of foreign affairs, in response to the clamour for independence has declared that “the territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq is one of the principles of our foreign policy and there has been no change in this stance”²¹. Undeniably, their stance is driven by security and domestic reasons, with the assumption that security challenges in the region may increase after a referendum. They also think that PKK will use the events in Iraq to its advantage²². The fate of Iraqi Turkmens in Kirkuk and related regions is a source of worry.

What role does the US play in all these? Regarding the referendum, US has made it clear that their priority is to defeat ISIS. Whether that includes the independence referendum is yet to

¹⁸ Ali, 2017. Kirkuk, Iraq's Next War: What Options Does Turkey Have? *Insight Turkey*, 19(4), pp.29-42.

¹⁹ Stansfield, G., 2014. Kurdistan rising: To acknowledge or ignore the unraveling of Iraq. *Middle East Memo*, 33, pp.2-16.

²⁰ Sinkaya, B., (2017). The Kurdish question in Iran and its effects on Iran-Turkey relations. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, pp.1-20.

²¹ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı. (2017). *T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı'ndan*. [online] Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_40_-disisleri-bakanligi-sozcusunun-ikby-basininda-yeralan-haberler-hk-sc.tr.mfa [Accessed 11 Sep. 2017].

²² Marcus, A., (2009). *Blood and Belief: the PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*. NYU Press.

be seen. They however make it clear that nothing else should distract them from defeating ISIS and their diplomats have suggested that they support a democratic, stable and unified federal Iraq²³. They also make it known that they respect the aspirations of the Kurdistan people because their agitations are legitimate. They also recommend that all actors involved should dialogue and engage on matters relating to the future relations between Erbil and Bagdad²⁴. In a recent visit to Erbil, the defence minister of US called for KRG to postpone the referendum for independence. Signals from European countries have been similar to those made known by the US.

Another dimension which will obviously affect the results of the referendum is the unity between the two ruling parties, KDP and PUK, and the role they are playing in ensuring a smooth transition through dialogue for the referendum. The goal of Kurdistan is not to create divisions during the negotiations process, in fact, the independence referendum is a unifying factor that brings parties with different ideologies together, including KDP and PUK. This is a sign that shows the neighbours within the region how focused and determined Kurdistan is towards the referendum. Though there are numerous advantages that will accrue to KRG as an independent state and the development of a democratic institution in the region, KRG is not quite ready to hold the referendum on technical and financial grounds²⁵ but it happened. President Barzani and others have repeatedly reiterated their determination to proceed with the referendum, which they have done. If there was any possibility for a postponement, KRG officials would have depended on a concrete agreement with relevant parties in the region and the possibility of a binding referendum will also depend on the guarantee from US and the international community.

This article has tried to balance the views for and against the Iraqi Kurdistan region's independence referendum which was held on 25 September 2017. Undoubtedly, while it is obvious that neither of the parties involved are willing to budge, the referendum carry a unifying impact and there are inherent benefits. Whether the benefits will be worth the cost is what only time can reveal. Parties should engage meaningfully and dialogue with caution.

²³ Lewis, G. and Bartlett, C., (2017). An Independent Kurdistan: A Benefit to US Foreign Policy. *Philologia*, 9.

²⁴ Rudaw. (2017). *How critical is the new rift in the PUK?*. [online] Available at: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/05092016> [Accessed 11 Sep. 2017].

²⁵ Ozcan, M. (2007) The KRG's Referendum on Independence: Domestic and Regional Dynamics, *Expert Brief Regional Politics*.

In all the political tantrums, it is my desire that the wishes of the people be respected and whatever is achieved should be a product of a roundtable negotiation and mutual agreement. In conclusion, an independent Kurdistan will not jettison the historic and fruitful bilateral relations with neighbouring states within the region. It is fundamental to involve neighbouring countries if Kurdish officials wish to secede from Baghdad. In addition, explicit strategies and assurances must be made bare to allay the fears within the region.

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