

The KRG's Referendum on Independence: Domestic and Regional Dynamics

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Abstract: The Kurdistan Regional Government's announcement that it would hold a referendum on independence on September 25 this year has revived the Kurdish issue in Iraq amidst ongoing anti-ISIS operations. Despite opposition from many Iraqi figures as well as regional and international players, the KRG government have insisted that they will persist with the plan. The region has suffered from severe political and economic crises over the last couple of years, and the independence referendum is being used as a means to unify society. Bringing up the referendum now, even if it is eventually postponed, could be a useful tactic for extracting political and economic concessions from Baghdad in the context of a difficult financial position. Sooner or later, however, the fate of the Kurds in Iraq will bring the political future of the country into the balance. No-one believes that the possible referendum will settle the issue instantly on September 25, but if it takes place it will certainly represent another important milestone on the road towards possible independence.

THE HISTORY OF FRAUGHT RELATIONS BETWEEN Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurds took a new turn recently, with Masoud Barzani promising a referendum on the independence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq on September 25, 2017. Although it is believed that there is widespread support among the Iraqi Kurds for independence, there were also some critical comments from Kurdish figures about the timing of as well as the intent behind the referendum. The signals coming from other segments of Iraqi society and from the political leadership have not been very positive either. In addition, regional and international players do not look favorably upon demands for independence. In the light of these factors, let us try to analyze the likelihood of this referendum being held in the light of the interests of different Kurdish political actors in Iraq, other Iraqi political players, as well as regional and international powers.

Kurdish demands for independence go back to the dissolution of Ottoman Empire and the emergence of Iraq as a state under a British protectorate. From the 1930s on, rebellious Kurdish movements caused trouble for the central governments during both the kingdom (1921-1958) and the republican period (1958 onwards). With each major political change, including coups and consecutive presidents, there were hopes among the Kurds and promises from political figures that they would secure more rights, including an invitation to Mustafa Barzani to return to Iraq from the Soviet Union. Due to the differences that emerged over the scope of these rights, tensions remained high between Baghdad governments and the Kurds for many decades. After the toppling of the Saddam regime in 2003 an atmosphere emerged in which the Kurds found themselves powerful enough to carry out most of their aims, as a result of developments that had begun in the post-1991 period. With a security force, a regional parliament, and important political posts in the

Iraqi central administration, Kurds had many rights short of independence. Iraqi Kurds also benefited from very advantageous conditions after 2003, with the Iraqi President being a Kurd, posts in the national parliament, and widespread support for the Peshmerga forces. The nature of the relationship began to deteriorate, however, with the centralizing policies of Baghdad beginning to chafe against the decentralizing aims of the Kurds in the latter half of the 2000s.

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Over the last couple of years, there have been several differences of opinion between Baghdad and Erbil, especially over issues of budget share, security forces, and oil exports. Relations started to feel the strain in particular after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011. With the KRG demanding to be able to export its oil independently of the Iraqi government, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki froze the KRG's 17 percent budget share in 2014; this was described by Barzani as "as bad as the gassing of Halabja".¹ Kurds played the independence card against Baghdad in their bargaining over these issues, while the Baghdad government used the budget as a card against independence. With the emergence of ISIS and its takeover of Mosul, these issues were postponed for some time given the urgency of the fight against ISIS.

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Regional Government. The regional parliament has not been in session for the last two years, and its speaker cannot even come to Erbil from Sulaymaniyah. Meanwhile, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Goran have faced internal succession problems. PUK leader Jalal Talabani is seriously ill and there are disagreements within the party between the Talabani family and other influential figures such as Kosrat Rasul and Barham Saleh. Under these conditions, the declaration by Masoud Barzani to have a referendum on independence has led to diverging opinions about it among the KRG opposition.

The Domestic Dynamics of the KRG

Among the Iraqi Kurds, no group directly opposes the KRG's right to hold a referendum on independence. The declaration that the independence referendum would be held came from Masoud Barzani, the current president of the KRG. It is thought that he wants to play a historic role in achieving independence before the end of his tenure. He believes that there will never be a perfect time for independence and he wants to die under the flag of an independent state.² His party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is in control of several bureaucratic structures in the region and he has widespread support among the KRG population. His party is the leading force behind the idea of a referendum.

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There are criticisms of Barzani in terms of power-sharing within the regional government, and his not allowing the return



of the speaker of the parliament to Erbil or the election of a new president of the region. It might be said that his call for a referendum is a pragmatic move, designed to distract attention from everyday problems and improve the negotiating position of the Kurds within the federal Iraqi government over the allocation of resources, especially oil revenue. His term as president expired on August 19, 2015, but the Kurdistan Consultative Council decided that Barzani may stay in office for two more years.³ The criticisms of the speaker of the parliament, Yousif Mohammed Sadiq from Goran, led the KDP-controlled Peshmerga to bar him from entering Erbil. Current economic problems and allegations of corruption also damage Barzani's position. Some say that the independence referendum is also a way of playing the nationalism card to unify the society behind a common aim and overcome some of the criticisms rather than solving the political problems of the region.⁴

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The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), is in disarray due to the health conditions of its founder Jalal Talabani and disagreements among the influential party figures over its future. The decline of the party's appeal in society over recent elections has led to the success of the dissenting party Goran, which mainly emerged from the ranks of PUK. In the past couple of years, some believed that Kosrat Rasul and Barham Saleh were about to leave the party and start their own political movement.⁵ Although we did not see a complete break from the ranks of the

PUK, these disagreements about the future direction of the party and leadership remains as an important hurdle on the way to the party's success in political processes. PUK representatives also refer to the right to an independence referendum but questions its timing and the way it has been handled by the KRG administration so far.

Goran representatives have argued for a timetable to first bring institutions in the KRG back to a functioning state, then gain a parliamentary mandate and take other decisions leading up to this big decision. Goran has the second most seats in the parliament and aims to benefit from current discussions about the referendum to restart sessions there

As for Goran, they also claim that they are not against a referendum, but say that such a decision requires the mandate of the regional parliament. Goran representatives have argued for a timetable to first bring institutions in the KRG back to a functioning state, then gain a parliamentary mandate and take other decisions leading up to this big decision. Goran has the second most seats in the parliament and aims to benefit from current discussions about the referendum to restart sessions there. Lacking a Peshmerga force to support the party, Goran has had to rely on existing institutions to compete with other political parties in KRG. As a result of this stance, Goran did not join the referendum committee composed of several Kurdish parties which went to Baghdad to announce their intentions.⁶ With the passing away of Noşirvan Mustafa, the party's founder, Goran also went through a transition, and now has a new leader, Omar Sayed Ali. They are critical of the administration in the KRG, saying that the region must be reorganized to answer the challenges it faces. Among the Islamic parties in the region, the Kurdistan Islamic Front is closest to Goran's stance, standing against



the idea of a current referendum, while other Islamic groups have come out in favor.

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When we look at the stances of different political actors in Baghdad, we see nearly a unified stance against an independence referendum. Different Shia-dominated parties reject this idea. Prime Minister Abadi was against it but more diplomatic in its tone.⁷ He has opted not to launch a jeremiad against the referendum so as not to unify different Kurdish figures in favor of it, and has instead aimed at widening the differences among them, especially given the strains of the fight against ISIS and the upcoming elections next year. Leading Shia cleric Mokteda Sadr has also asked Barzani to cancel plans for a referendum given the challenges the country is facing at the moment.⁸ The Turkmen community of Iraq is also against this referendum, especially given the desire to hold the referendum in governorates like Kirkuk, where there is a sizeable Turkmen community. The KRG administration wants to hold a referendum not only within the official borders of the KRG but also in other areas where the Peshmerga is in control. The main arguments behind this demand on Barzani's side is that these lands were liberated with the blood of the Peshmerga and that there are Kurdish people living in these areas. On the other side of the coin, however, the desire to hold a referendum in these areas is also related with the fact that natural resources in these areas will be crucial for the economic self-sufficiency of a possible future independent state.

Regional Players

Among the countries of the region, only Israel supports the independence referendum. Historically, relations between Israel and the Iraqi Kurds have been very positive and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has voiced his support for the independence referendum.⁹ Arab countries are generally against the idea of the referendum, since it may lead to the division of an Arab state and create additional political problems in an already turbulent Arab world. In the case of a secession, the remaining part will be dominated by Shia Arabs, and Iran's probable influence will create extra hurdles for the Sunni Arab countries of the region.

That Iranian-linked militia forces in Iraq are being used as an implicit tool against the referendum. Iran has more connections and leverage over Suleymaniyah and has contacted delegations composed of PUK officials and also other Iraqi figures, both in Suleymaniyah and in Iran to convey its message about the projected referendum

On the issue of the referendum, the most important regional players are Turkey and Iran. Both Ankara and Tehran have declared their opposition to the KRG holding a referendum on September 25. For domestic demographic reasons (given the Kurdish populations in Iraq, Turkey, and neighboring Iran) and also given the influence of Iran on Iraq as a whole, Tehran has made it clear that it is against the referendum.¹⁰ So Iranian opposition to the move has both domestic and external dimensions. It is said that Iranian-linked militia forces in Iraq are being used as an implicit tool against the referendum.¹¹ Iran has more connections and leverage over Suleymaniyah and has contacted delegations composed of PUK officials and also other Iraqi figures, both in Suleymaniyah and in Iran to convey its message about the projected referendum. There are some arguments that



Iran has used the water card by cutting off the water of the Little Zap River to deliver a message on the menacing referendum and Iran's response to it.¹²

Similarly, Turkish officials have also voiced their opposition to the proposed referendum at the level of the president and also the foreign minister.¹³ The official declaration by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stated 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".¹⁴ Turkish concerns about the future of Iraq relate both to the domestic policy ramifications and also the possibility of increased security challenges in the region, given the likelihood of the PKK using the situation in Iraq to its own advantage. From the Turkish point of view, the fate of Iraqi Kurds and areas like Kirkuk are additional points of concern.

Regarding the stance of the U.S. on the referendum, American officials have made it clear that their first priority is defeating ISIS and that nothing should distract from the fight against it. U.S. diplomats say that they support a unified, stable, democratic and federal Iraq but that they also respect the legitimate aspirations of the Kurdish people and urge all the actors in Iraq to engage for the future of relations between Baghdad and Erbil.¹⁵ When U.S. Defense Minister Mattis visited Erbil August 22, his message was that the KRG should postpone the referendum on independence.¹⁶ The signals from European countries have also been similar to those of U.S.

The Way Forward

In technical and financial terms, the KRG does not seem ready to hold such a referendum. Despite all of these criticisms and objections, Barzani and other officials have reiterated that they will continue with the proposed referendum. In addition to these arguments,

however, there are some signals from other Kurdish figures that they may agree to postpone the referendum if certain conditions are guaranteed. Accordingly, if a future referendum is guaranteed by the U.S. and international institutions, the budgetary share of KRG is paid by the Iraqi central government and Article 140 of the constitution is implemented, then the proposed referendum may be postponed for some time.¹⁷

In the light of all of these arguments for and against the proposed referendum, neither side seems likely to budge. The current KRG presidency aims to benefit from the unifying impact of the idea of independence, whereas their domestic rivals in the KRG aim to use the referendum issue to resuscitate the regional parliament

In the light of all of these arguments for and against the proposed referendum, neither side seems likely to budge. The current KRG presidency aims to benefit from the unifying impact of the idea of independence, whereas their domestic rivals in the KRG aim to use the referendum issue to resuscitate the regional parliament. Given the opposition to the referendum from other segments of Iraqi society and from regional players, the KRG administration aims to use its current position to make bargains over its future status, but at the same time for the region's economic benefit in an attempt to overcome the financial crisis hitting the KRG. Visits of representatives from global players such as the U.S. as well as regional actors to Iraq shows that negotiations over the referendum will continue up until the final days in an attempt to find a satisfactory solution for all stakeholders.



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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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