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Middle East

Iraq Kurdish Independence Faces Threats from Outside and Contradictions from Within

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With a victory of the “yes” at over 92% in favor of the independence and a participation rate reaching 72%, the results of the referendum are clear and confirmed the popular enthusiasm of the vast majority of the Kurdish population seen the weeks before the vote.

Popular scenes of jubilation have also taken place among the Kurdish populations in neighboring countries to celebrate the results of the referendum. Residents of a number of cities, mostly populated by Kurds in north-western Iran, including Marivan and Baneh, challenged the threats of repression by the Iranian authorities and celebrated the victory of the “yes” by dancing in the streets and singing slogans praising the Kurdish nationalist movements. Clashes between demonstrators and security forces took place in the cities of Mahabad and Sanandaj. In Sanandaj, the crowd waved the prohibited Kurdistan flag in Iran. As a reminder, the Kurdish majority populated areas have been severely repressed in the last decades by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and many Kurdish activists languish in prison, often sentenced to long prison terms or death.

Similarly, in Syria, in the territories controlled by the PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, many popular demonstrations commemorated the victory of the “yes” in several cities such as Qamishli, Amouda and Derik (Malakiyya).

Threats and acts of hostilities against the Kurdistan Regional Government

However, regional and international pressures and threats have escalated against the authorities of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), headed by Massoud Barzani. In an attempt to coax the Iraqi government and neighboring countries and calm the pressures on the Kurdish autonomous region, Barzani wrote a letter to the Baghdad authorities saying that the referendum did not mean an immediate announcement of independence or the imposition of a status quo on anyone. He added: “We are ready to wait for two years during which we can communicate through a deep and constructive dialogue to discuss all the problems and subjects that can make us two partners in building a future for our two nations, without any de facto imposition in any zone.” This was not enough to reassure the authorities in Baghdad and neighboring states.

Since the announcement of the victory of the “yes” in the referendum, the Iraqi government has multiplied threats and hostile acts against the Kurdish autonomous authorities. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi set as a condition of any negotiations the cancellation of the results. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani also declared his opposition to the secession of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Members of the Iraqi parliament voted in favor of the closure of border posts outside the authority of the Iraqi state and asked the Prime Minister, as head of the armed forces, to take all necessary measures to maintain the unity of Iraq. They also reiterated their demand for a dispatch of security forces in “disputed areas”, including the multi-ethnic and oil-rich city of Kirkuk. These contested areas include the province of Kirkuk (north), but also parts of the provinces of Nineveh (north), Dyala and Salaheddin (north of Baghdad). Most of these territories were conquered by the Kurdish peshmerga fighters in 2014, as a result of the chaos after the offensive of the Jihadist movement of the Islamic State (IS). I’ve written about the [background here](#).

In the city of Kirkuk, tension continues to mount. Members of the Shi’a fundamentalist militias of the Popular

Mobilization Forces, Hashd al-Sha'bi, have allegedly positioned themselves as "civilian," but are heavily armed. They are also present in some localities of the governorate of Nineveh.

On 29 September, the authorities of Baghdad imposed an air blockade on the Kurdish autonomous areas to force the KRG to relinquish control of its airports and cancel the outcome of its referendum on independence, to which the KRG refused. Flight connections between Iraqi Kurdistan and foreign countries have therefore ceased.

Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran react violently

Turkey, Syria and Iran, three neighboring countries with significant Kurdish minorities, have all condemned the referendum and called for the unity of Iraq against any division plans.

Turkey and Iran are the most vehement in their rejection of the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan and the intimidations of these governments have proliferated against Erbil. The Turkish Parliament had already extended the mandate allowing for the deployment of Turkish military troops in Iraq and Syria before the referendum on 23 September. This is a clear threat to the Kurdish authorities of Erbil. Ankara had already threatened military and economic measures in retaliation for the holding of the referendum.

Following the announcement of the massive victory of the "yes" to the referendum, the Turkish government reiterated its threats against the KRG, while announcing the cessation of military training of the Peshmerga forces in northern Iraq. Turkish President Erdogan also said that Iraqi Kurds "would pay the price" for their decisions and would soon be lacking everything, including food by "going hungry," if his country closed the borders and hence truck and oil traffic. Hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil every day are sold through pipelines from northern Iraq to Turkey, linking the region to world oil markets.

Tehran has pledged on its side to stand by Baghdad and Ankara against the outcome of the referendum for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. Ali Akbar Velayati, the chief adviser of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared that "Muslim nations will not allow the creation of a second Israel." The conservative press in Iran described the referendum as a "Zionist plot" to destabilize the region.

Similarly, Hezbollah, the Shi'a fundamentalist Islamic movement in Lebanon, through its leader Hassan Nasrallah, said that the Iraqi Kurdistan independence vote marked a first step towards the partition of the Middle East and would lead to internal wars and it was necessary to oppose it. He described the referendum as a US-Israeli plot to sow chaos in the region.

The collaboration between Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran has intensified against the KRG in recent days.

An Iraqi military delegation visited the border of Kurdistan on the Iranian side and then Iran deployed a dozen tanks supported by artillery at its border with Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region on October 2nd. The deployment at the Parviz Khan border point was part of joint military drills conducted by the Iranian and the Iraqi armed forces in response to the referendum. Joint military exercises between the Turkish and Iraqi military forces had already been conducted at the border of Iraqi Kurdistan on the Turkish side on the days following the holding of the referendum. A small Iraqi force was still deployed on the Turkish side of the border as part of joint drills with the Turkish army.

The Iraqi authorities also plan to take control of the borders of the autonomous region of Kurdistan in coordination

with Iran and Turkey, the Iraqi Ministry of Defence said on 29 September. In a similar fashion, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi suggested that his government would take control of the revenues generated by Kurdish oil exports.

The United States and Russia, or the maintenance of stability at all costs

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the United States does not recognize the independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan and calls for a halt to “threats of reciprocal actions.” Western countries repeatedly reiterated their opposition to holding a referendum, fearing that a victory of the “yes” of the referendum would lead to more regional instability, weaken the “war” against IS, and lead to unrest in disputed areas such as the multi-ethnic and wealthy city of Kirkuk.

Russia, which invested over \$4 billion in the Kurdistan Region’s energy sector, overtaking the United States as the largest investor, has been more cautious, saying considering “with respect the Kurdish national aspirations.” Moscow considers, however, “that the disputes between Baghdad and Erbil must be resolved by dialogue with the aim of finding a formula of coexistence within the Iraqi state.” The significant Russian investments in the energy sector might be one of the reasons why Turkey has not yet made good on its threats to shut down the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, so to not harm its Russian ally. Rosneft, the Russian state oil company, expects the pipeline to be open for business, and Moscow expects revenues from the KRG as a return on its investment. Without the pipeline, open borders or payments from Baghdad to Erbil, the KRG will go broke, a disaster for the Russian venture. This might however not last for too long as Turkish government is ready to escalate rapidly its sanctions against the KRG if no solution is found.

Israel’s support, or opportunism

Israel is the only regional state that had supported the independence of the Kurdistan autonomous region. A long historical political relation exists between the State of Israel and the Barzani family, going back to the sixties when the first Israeli special-forces aided Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his peshmerga rebels in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Massoud Barzani previously declared in a 2005 interview with the Saudi daily al-Hayat. “Establishing ties between the Kurds and Israel is not a crime, especially since many Arab countries already have links with the Jewish state”.

Moreover, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Mossad agents or former Israeli soldiers have been quietly training Kurdish security forces. The KRG has also sold large quantities of oil to the State of Israel in recent years through international trading companies and without the approval of the authorities in Baghdad. In this affair, this oil passed through an oil pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, on the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey, allied with the Kurdish government of Massoud Barzani, has facilitated this long-standing affair. Ankara opened an account for Erbil in the Turkish public bank, Halk and stored Kurdish oil waiting for buyers.

Israel does not support the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people genuinely or because they have been oppressed, but they view an independent Kurdish state under the reactionary and pro-western imperialist leadership of Barzani as a way to find a new ally in the region against various regional actors, especially Iran. Israel has for example rather been silent of the faith of Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iran. Prime Minister Netanyahu also said recently that Israel considers the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) a terrorist group, taking the same position as Turkey, the United States and the European Union. Israel’s also played a role in the capture of the fugitive leader of the PKK Abdullah Ocalan in early 1999 in Kenya by the Turkish state.

On the other side, the Barzani clan and some of the Kurdish bourgeois leadership tend to see Israel as a role model for an independent Kurdistan, a small nation surrounded by enemies and bolstered by a strategic partnership with the United States. This feeling has been nurtured by decades of oppression against Kurdish people by the central authorities in the countries they are present (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria). The lack of solidarity to the Kurdish issue among the populations of the regions, even among wide sectors of the left did not help. In addition to this, the various Palestinian leaderships organizations have generally stood alongside Arab authoritarian regimes against the Kurdish people. This situation was symbolized by the Israeli flag raised at several Kurdish rallies in Erbil and across Europe.

The internal problems of the KRG

The autonomous region of Kurdistan has experienced the worst economic crisis since 2003. It is clear, as I [mentioned previously](#), that the referendum was orchestrated by the leader Massoud Barzani to remain in power and divert the working and popular classes from socio-economic problems in the region. There must be no illusion about the bourgeois and authoritarian leadership of the ruling Barzani clan.

Similarly, all measures aimed at creating a new form of oppression against ethnic and religious minorities in the Kurdistan autonomous region must be denounced. Since 2003, Kurdish Peshmerga forces have relied on “intimidation, threats, arrests and arbitrary detentions” to secure the support of minority communities and establish control over disputed territories, according to report published in November 2009 by the human rights organization Human Rights Watch (HRW). Some have spoken of a process of “kurdification,” by trying to create a form of allegiance on the part of minorities towards the KRG. In some areas, for example, opening schools where the students learn Kurdish and recruiting civil servants for administrations newly created by the KRG.

In the governorate of Nineveh, for example, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of (KDP), controlled by the Barzani family, replaced undemocratically the mayors of two important Christian towns in the Nineveh plain, Faiez Abed Jahwareh of Alqosh and Basim Bello of Tel Keppe (Tal Kayf), who both opposed the holding of the referendum in their localities. DPK affiliated members took their seats. Numerous popular demonstrations were organized in these localities to denounce these measures.

The official structures and councils of the governorate of Nineveh and the Sinjar region have gradually been dominated by members of the KDP through various clientelist policies and intimidation’s practices against members critical of KRG’s policies.

Even worse, Human Rights Watch revealed more recently that during the war against IS, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters also tore down with bulldozers Sunni Arab villages in disputed areas of the governorates of Kirkuk and Nineveh.

Nothing can justify these kinds of actions, although of course, it is necessary to recognize and denounce the campaigns of “Arabization” in the past led by successive Iraqi regimes, especially under the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, in these disputed territories. This policy of demographic change resulted at the time in the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, especially Kurdish populations, in order to install Sunni Arabs. This is the reason why the KRG authorities and large sectors of the Kurdish society in Iraq claim to have historical legitimacy on these lands.

But in these disputed areas, other ethnic and religious populations also exist, including Turkmen, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, Yazidis, Kakais, and Shabaks.

The authoritarianism of the Barzani clan did not stop during and after the referendum against the other Kurdish political groups. Throughout the period leading to the referendum, the KDP branded any questioning and criticism about the way the referendum was organized and the date chosen for it as a sign of treason on the part of its political rivals. The Gorran Movement, the Kurdistan Islamic Group (known as Komal), and sectors of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) initially, before changing their position, in addition to Kurdish activists, denounced the objectives of the Barzani clan through the organization of this referendum, including its willingness to divert the Kurdish population from the socio-economic problems, the monopolization of power by the KDP, and the closure of the parliament. These parties and activists had a long history of struggle for the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people in Iraq, but wanted to create the best conditions for holding this referendum and preparing for the independence process, for example by opening once again the parliament, to improve the socio-economic living conditions of citizens and to reach a political consensus on this process of independence. Komal finally expressed its support for “yes” on the eve of the ballot, while the Gorran movement did not give any official position, but its leader, Omar Said Ali, announced that he had voted “yes.”

Conclusion

The broad victory of the “yes” in the Kurdistan autonomous region is rooted in a long historical willingness by the Kurdish people to establish a state and also the consequences of a violent history of oppression of the Kurdish populations in Iraq by the various previous Iraqi nationalist authoritarian regimes. The massacre by chemical weapons against the Kurdish population of Halabja in 1988 by the Baathist regime is particularly remembered. About 5,000 Kurds perished in this massacre. This attack was part of Operation Anfal launched by the authorities in Baghdad during this period, which killed 182,000 people and destroyed more than 90 percent of the Kurdish villages.

The Iraqi referendum also demonstrated, once again, the failure of the models of the capitalist, chauvinist and centralized nation-states of the region, which have consistently repressed, erased, and/or denied the plurality of their societies by affirming the supremacy and/or domination of an ethnic group over others, a religious sect over others or both at the same time.

That is why we must support the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people in Iraq and elsewhere and denounce the foreign international and regional pressures to prevent the Kurdish population of Iraq from their right to self-determination.

This support must also go through a clear opposition to the Barzani clan that will bring no good to the Kurdish popular classes at the level of democratic and social rights. Similarly, it is necessary to denounce the attempts of the KRG to impose a new ethnic domination and it should leave the populations of the disputed areas the right to choose freely, which state they want to belong to, how they want to organize themselves and choose their political representatives.

The will of the Barzani clan to convince Western imperialist states of the utility of an Iraqi Kurdistan on the regional political scene, not to mention [links with Israel](#) and the Barzani family, must also be combated. However, these elements can't be used to justify the refusal of the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people, as did some chauvinist left in the region. As the revolutionary Russian [Vladimir Lenin said](#):

“The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another ‘Great’ Power in its equally imperialist interests should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous case of the bourgeoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example, in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.”

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This articulation between these two main different objectives (support for the right of self-determination to the Kurdish people and opposition to the Barzani clan) is a necessity for combining democratic and social rights in Kurdistan autonomous Region. We should bring our support to the most revolutionary and democratic sectors of Kurdistan autonomous region to build a progressive alternative.

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