

Debate

Kurdish referendum

Why blame the Kurds?



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Both regional and internal factors are pushing the Kurds to have a referendum but it does not necessarily mean that independence for the Kurds will be declared immediately after, nor does it mean that the road ahead will be easy especially in light of a huge obstacle called Kirkuk.

In Iraq, Iran got what it wanted. The regime in Iraq now is sectarian and it's no secret that its backbone is the Iran-backed sectarian militias of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). So, what can the Kurds do in these circumstances especially when the central government in Baghdad needs every dollar of the oil revenues?

The Iraqi Kurds have slowly lost any power they had within the central government. At some time, Jalal Talabani, former president of Iraq, had been able to secure a minimum of Kurdish participation in the central government in deference to the man's personal political history and also to his personal relations with Iran. There was also Hoshiyar Zebari as Foreign Affairs minister during Talabani's term. But Talabani had to leave office because of illness and Zebari was

pushed out of office.

In Iraq, everything has been dispersing at all levels. The city of Mosul had been handed over to the Islamic State (ISIS) then was recaptured in 2017 in highly obscure circumstances. It turned out that the objective of the Mosul campaign was not to just recapture the city but rather to destroy it to ascertain the legitimacy of the PMF with the blessings of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

The thing about Kurdish independence and the future of Iraqi Kurds is that no agreement will be possible without first settling the question of Kirkuk and its underground sea of oil. There is also the question of the Turkmen who are settled in Kirkuk. The Kurds, however, have the advantage of lessons learned from the tough experiences of their recent past including the open confrontation between the two major Kurdish nationalist parties. The post-2003 experiment of an Independent Kurdistan Region was rather convincing. The semi-independent region provided a safe haven for all Iraqis fleeing sectarian hegemony. Christian Iraqis, Yazidis, and even Sunni Arabs found refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite everything, the region was

pretty stable.

Independent Kurdistan was an interesting experiment because there were people who were thinking about the future rather than ruminating on the past. There were projects for cosmopolitan cities where all Iraqis would be welcomed regardless of their sect or ethnicity. There was thinking about having reasonable relations with Turkey and about building decent schools and universities for Kurdish children and for all Iraqis for that matter.

If the Kurds are adamant about having their independence referendum it's because nobody in the region or internationally has offered them an alternative project which would preserve their right to exist as a unified entity on the region's political map. The Kurds exist also in Iran, Turkey and even Syria. But the real question is about the American position on the subject. The Kurds have given proof, especially during the war on ISIS, that they are reliable partners. So how far is the US administration willing to support Kurdish rights?

Until a convincing alternative plan comes their way, the Kurds have no choice but to go on with their planned referendum, despite

the threats coming from some sectarian militias. The issue of the city of Kirkuk will simply have to wait. The Kurds want to ensure their rights first because a unified Iraq has so far failed to uphold the rights of all of its citizens without discrimination.

If we want to speak about a post-2003 failure in Iraq, it'll have to be the failure of the successive Iraqi governments to offer an attractive and convincing solution in any domain whatsoever. The experiment of an Independent Kurdistan however had overall more positive aspects than negative ones. Notwithstanding some minor exceptions, it was and still is a step in the right direction towards establishing a civil state where corrupt officials or people with connections in Baghdad have no place.

Still, the question of Kirkuk and many other questions as well are still awaiting answers. Will the referendum ignite new strife in Iraq or will it constitute a chance for self-criticism? The real tragedy is that there is no one in Baghdad right now with enough guts to push for self-criticism, even among those who are accusing the Kurds of having old relations with Israel. So why blame the Kurds?

A Kurdish state: Reality or utopia?



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The emergence of an independent Kurdish state will continue to face serious hurdles and obstacles.”

Sheikh Ubaydullah al-Nahri, a prominent religious and tribal leader who is known as the grandfather of Kurdish nationalism, in 1880 established the Kurdish League, an alliance of 200 tribes, and launched a revolt in the Ottoman-Persian border area. He wrote letters to the tsar of Russia and the British government seeking help to establish a Kurdish state, arguing that Kurds were a separate people oppressed by the Turks and Persians.

His revolt united the two rival empires that crushed his movement. His tribal allies abandoned him because, while they respected his religious leadership, they did not share his nationalist beliefs.

The Kurdish issue has found its way back into the headlines in recent years as a result of the wars in Iraq and the conflict between Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish government. More recently the assault by the Islamic State (ISIS) in northern Iraq and in Syria has led to US military involvement against ISIS and to more media coverage.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani announced a referendum, asking Iraqi Kurds to vote on an independent state.

Today, with Iraq and Syria facing terrorism and proxy wars, the establishment of a Kurdish state could be a major development emerging from the regional chaos. Such a development could have long-term consequences for the Kurds, their neighbours and beyond. As always, there are great opportunities and serious dangers.

Barzani has turned down calls from Washington, Baghdad, Ankara, Tehran and many other countries to cancel or delay the vote. Baghdad said the referendum is illegal. Its neighbours with large Kurdish populations see it as a threat to their stability and Washington and some of its allies see it as diverting attention from the war on ISIS.

It was not clear whether Barzani would move towards independence if most Kurds vote for it as expected or whether he plans to use the vote to strengthen his bargaining power with Baghdad and neighbouring countries.

Among the factors favouring the creation of a Kurdish state is the Iraqi Kurds' historic ability to create institutions, effectively admin-

ister their region and develop it. They have shown political acumen. In the past, internal divisions and overplaying their hand were disastrous for Kurdish aspirations. Some of the divisions remain apparent today but many experts said a clear majority will support independence.

Attracted by the region's stability, foreign investors have flocked to the area. The economy, relative to the rest of Iraq, appears to be thriving. The weakening of the Iraqi state and ongoing sectarian conflicts in Arab Iraq and other changes on the ground have presented the Kurds with a great opportunity to fulfil their dream of independence.

They were also able to maintain friendly ties with their neighbours, especially Turkey and Iran, which historically viewed the idea of Kurdish statehood with suspicion and hostility. The KRG has reached out to governments and businesses outside the region.

Public opinion polls indicate that most Iraqi Kurds favour self-determination. Most Kurds appear to have adopted a strong nationalist identity while many of their neighbours are reverting to older religious, sectarian, regional and tribal affiliations.

Supporters of independence argue that the

presence of "reformist" governments in Turkey and Iran and the geo-political developments in Syria and Iraq favour their argument. Turkey, some argue, needs to diversify its energy resources and is supporting Kurdish exploration and export efforts. Its economic and geopolitical interests will require its acceptance if not its support of the idea of a Kurdish state.

Some argue that the international political environment is sympathetic to Kurdish aspirations. If the Kurds maintain peace and stability in their own region, they said, the United States might be consider recognising their independence.

Many Kurds and Americans argue that the Kurds are potentially the most reliable US allies and partners in the region. Kurds say that, if they control the oil and gas resources of the Kurdish territories, Kirkuk and the disputed areas, they will have an economically self-sufficient and viable state. The KRG was exporting, via Turkey, 200,000-300,000 barrels of oil a day.

There are some in Baghdad who say, "Let the Kurds go their way if that is their wish" but they cannot take Kirkuk and other disputed areas in Diyala and Nineveh provinces. These areas, they argue, are not part of the historical Iraqi Kurdistan and include many other ethnic groups such as the Turkmen and Arabs who do not share the Kurds' nationalist aspirations.

The emergence of an independent Kurdish state will continue to face serious hurdles and obstacles. There is the problem of its neighbours. The Kurds live in a very rough neighbourhood. Iran and Turkey have much larger Kurdish populations than Iraq and, being concerned about their own territorial integrity, are not likely to support such a state unless they can control it.

A Kurdish state would embolden their own Kurds and encourage them to seek independence or a federal arrangement. Kurds in those countries would say: "If 5 million of our brothers and sisters in Iraq can have a state of their own, why couldn't 20 million-23 million Turkish Kurds and 10 million-11 million Iranian Kurds have their own state?"

Some experts say that such an outcome is likely to lead to more violence between Arabs and Kurds, Turkmen and Kurds and Sunnis and Shias. If the Kurds retain control over Kirkuk and the rich oil and gas field in the disputed areas,

this would mean that the Sunni area would be energy poor. It would be highly unlikely that they would accept such an outcome.

In addition, there will be battles over borders, water and other resources, leading to much bloodletting, ethnic cleansing and further interference by foreign fighters.

Furthermore, the Kurdish state will be landlocked and forced to rely on Turkey or Iran for exports and imports, which is likely to increase its dependence on these states.

In addition, the Kurds hope to receive international support, especially from the United States, whose policies have strengthened Kurdish autonomy. Yet while the United States supported a weak and decentralised Iraq, it still favours a unified federal Iraq. If Iraq breaks up, the threats multiply, endangering regional allies and Europeans ones as well. US interests are likely to be affected. The United States appears to be trying to get the Kurds, the Shias and the Sunnis to maintain the unity of Iraq while giving a great deal of autonomy to the various communities.

Kurdish history has shown that, while nationalist sentiments, common characteristics and aspirations are strong among Kurds in neighbouring countries, cooperation will be more difficult to achieve than it is in one country. The Kurds are not only separated by borders but by the complex influences to which they have been subjected to after living so long in different countries.

During a recent conversation, a prominent Kurdish leader admitted that while "I dream of independence and believe that we, like any other nation, have the right to a state of our own, I am not sure this is our best option at this time. It may be better for us to reach an agreement with Baghdad where we hold strong cards than coming under the tutelage of Turkey or Iran."

"The least bad option may come from an agreement reached between Iraqi Arabs and Iraqi Kurds in a spirit of dialogue and understanding and not as an imposed solution. This agreement, however, must recognise our rights and international guarantees might help to ensure its success but we have to keep our options open, including our right to self-determination."

In the end, the Kurdish genie is out of the bottle and no one is going to be able to put it back. The Kurdish issue is likely to remain one of the major one facing the region in the 21st century.



Limited choices. A peshmerga soldier holds a Kurdish flag as he takes part in a gathering to urge people to vote in the upcoming independence referendum in the town of Bahirka, north of Erbil. (AFP)