

Forbes

Kurdistan Ignites New Mideast Fires: National Independence At What Price?

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October 4, 2017

The people of Kurdistan have voted for independence from Iraq. Baghdad already has retaliated against its rebellious province. Iran and Turkey have threatened to respond as well. The Kurdish vote also will exacerbate tensions in Syria, where Washington and Ankara already have clashed over America's reliance on Kurdish forces in battling the Islamic State.

Iraq's Kurds suffered greatly under Saddam Hussein's rule: he used poison gas and killed nearly 200,000. An American "no-fly" zone effectively freed them of his control and Erbil has been autonomous since 1991. That status survived the U.S. invasion and subsequent sectarian war, though all parties acknowledged the fiction of Iraqi sovereignty. For instance, Washington's military assistance to the Kurdistan Regional Government officially passed through Baghdad. The Kurdish statelet doesn't enjoy UN membership, but otherwise acts largely independently. Until now visitors could fly directly into the KRG, as did I last year.

Of course, the Kurdish desire for independence is not unique. Spain faces a political crisis after the government in Madrid employed riot police to disrupt an independence referendum in Catalonia. Scottish independence remains a live possibility. Belgium is badly divided and Flemish residents have pressed for greater autonomy if not a full-scale split. The French-speaking province of Quebec once came close to leaving Canada. Somaliland exists de facto independent of chaotic Somalia, the prototype of a failed state. Independence campaigns succeeded in South Sudan, Slovakia, Kosovo, East Timor, and the multiple nations derived from Yugoslavia.

The most dangerous independence movement, at least from America's standpoint, today may be that in Taiwan. The Republic of China survived the defeat of the nationalist government by the Chinese communists when Chiang Kai-shek and his government moved offshore to the island of Taiwan, which had been occupied by Japan. Years ago the ROC gave up the pretense of ruling the mainland, but the People's Republic of China did not return the favor. Today few Taiwanese identify with Beijing's authoritarian rulers and by any measure deserve their own internationally recognized state. However, a formal declaration of independence would force the Chinese government to act. And the rising nationalistic power is unlikely to docilely accept the legal loss of such an important land.

Kurdistan could prove to be even more dangerous. The Kurds joined a long line of peoples betrayed by the Versailles settlement to World War I when the British and French divided up the Middle East. There are as many as 45 million Kurds today and they constitute one of the largest

people groups without their own nation. They are concentrated in several Middle Eastern nations which increasingly look like failed states.

But there is no agreed upon criteria as to who gets to create a country where and when. In practice, people get to secede when they are able to secede. Only a few succeed.

What about the Kurds? No event precipitated last week's vote. With presidential elections scheduled next month domestic politics was an important factor. Still, the KRG has a bill of particulars against Baghdad—broken promises, constitutional violations, political failures—that makes a plausible case for separation. However, Kurdistan's ability to sustain an independent existence is uncertain at best. The landlocked territory is surrounded by adversaries which control its access to the world. The Islamic State's surge stalled Kurdistan's economic development; financially the KRG is dependent on declining oil revenue shipped through other states.

Until now Kurdistan has survived as an autonomous zone because of both the weakness of the Iraqi state and Washington's informal protection. Moreover, Kurds in Syria have created an autonomous region out of the collapse of the Syrian state and chaotic civil war. Opposition to the Islamic State yielded American military support though not political sponsorship.

In contrast, Turkey's Kurds have suffered under the full weight of the Turkish military. The first round, from about 1978 to 1999, displaced hundreds of thousands, imprisoned scores of thousands, and killed tens of thousands. Thousands of villages were destroyed. The war reignited two years ago, with a resurgence of brutality, destruction, and death. Iran's Kurds have avoided a similar fate because they are better integrated nationally, though armed resistance occurred even there. But their dissatisfaction remains.

There is no inherent reason why Washington must take a position when other people seek independence. However, U.S. policymakers find it almost impossible to resist the temptation to meddle in affairs of no particular interest to America. And in this case Washington's seemingly hopeless entanglement in the Mideast makes Kurdish affairs important.

America never paid much attention to Kurds in Iran and Syria—there were no militant independence movements, the ruling regimes were hostile to America, and both nations posed larger security challenges. In Turkey, which contains the largest number of Kurds, Washington ignored the ill consequences of the government's brutal military campaign, fought with U.S.-supplied weapons. Then, at least, Ankara was a key American ally. Humanitarian considerations were of little concern.

In Iraq support for Kurdish autonomy advanced America's geopolitical ends, most notably constraining Saddam Hussein's government. The Kurds have remained helpful allies over the 14 years since the U.S. invasion, during which the Baghdad government has not been in position to reassert authority over Kurdish territory. However, tensions have risen as Kurdish forces extended their territorial control while defending against ISIS, including to Kirkuk, a contested city also claimed by Arabs and Turkmen. As the threat from the Islamic State receded the Abadi government was likely to turn its attention toward the KRG.

Now Erbil's referendum multiplied the dangers. Opposition to Kurdish independence may be the one issue uniting Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Ellen Lapsion of the Stimson Center argued that "It should not be beyond imagination for statesmen of good will to negotiate a new status for

Iraqi Kurdistan.” Of course, one can imagine that. But this is the Middle East. It is going to remain a matter of imagination.

Erbil rejected proposals for mediated talks with Baghdad: Kurdistan desires independence. However, such talks would not likely have yielded a solution. Behind Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi hovers his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, who originally won power using the Shia nationalist card.

Abadi demanded nullification of the “illegal” and “unconstitutional” referendum results. He promised to take all “necessary measures to preserve the unity of the country.” His government also requested control of Erbil and Sulaimani airports; refused by Kurdistan, Baghdad closed down air traffic into the autonomous territory. Baghdad has moved to take control of Iraq’s border posts in Kurdish territory. The Abadi government is conducting joint military exercises with Turkey and announced similar maneuvers with Iran. More ominously, the Iraqi parliament authorized the movement of military forces into the disputed city of Kirkuk and use of troops to take control of oil resources under the Kurds’ control; legislators also urged the Abadi government to bring charges against the Kurdish leaders.

Turkey, busy waging a war against its Kurdish citizens, conducted military maneuvers along its border with Kurdistan and threatened to close the border and cut the oil pipeline transporting Kurdish oil. Said President Recep Tayyip Erdogan: “We have the tap. The moment we close the tap, then it’s done.” Turkey’s parliament extended the authorization for Turkish troops in both Iraq and Syria. He warned that the KRG risked bearing “the shame of having dragged the region into an ethnic and sectarian war.” Kurdish leaders believe that Erdogan is bluffing, given economic considerations, but they may underestimate the power of the same nationalism which is pushing them toward independence.

Iran closed its airspace to KRG flights and banned transportation of refined oil products in and out of Kurdistan. Tehran also conducted military operations along its border with the KRG. Militias allied with Tehran, the Popular Mobilization Units or Quds Forces, have been operating in Iraq and also could become involved.

In Syria the Assad government backed away from Kurdish areas early in the civil war, giving greater space to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, which has created an autonomous region called Rojava. But the YPG is tied to Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers Party, and Ankara used its military to constrain the ambitions of Syrian Kurds. Moreover, if President Bashar al-Assad consolidates control he also may move to curb Kurdish autonomy.

In short, the cause of Kurdish independence could spark multiple conflicts. And Washington would face pressure to choose sides.

Kurdistan has its advocates. Kurds fought Hussein, gave refuge to religious minorities, and battled the Islamic State, playing an especially important role in the liberation of Mosul and battle for Raqqa. Kurds are religious moderates, friendly to Israel, and pro-Western. Kurdistan is not as democratic and free as sometimes claimed; it is essentially a Barzani family enterprise. Kurdish parliamentarian Rabbon Marof, who promoted the “No for Now” campaign, complained: “We don’t have rule of law—we have a monarchy.” But given its neighbors, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and, these days, Turkey, the Kurdish statelet doesn’t look so bad even on this score.

Washington long offered the Kurdish leadership discreet, private assurances of support, but then strongly opposed the “provocative” referendum. Secretary of State Tillerson said that Washington did not recognize a referendum that “lacked legitimacy.” That stance probably was inevitable, given fears of further destabilizing an already war-ravaged region.

Some analysts urged Washington to intervene to at least calm the waters. For instance, said the *Washington Post*'s David Ignatius: “The United States owes it to the Kurds to help broker their dialogue with Baghdad” and “de-escalate tensions that could destabilize” the KRG. *Guardian*'s Simon Tisdall argued that it “is time to settle the debt” from the Western allies to the Kurds. Bloomberg's Eli Lake suggested that U.S. officials “could exercise some leverage—not only to protect their Kurdish allies, but also to stabilize the region.” He would threaten to cut off aid to Ankara and Baghdad.

The belief that U.S. officials can limit regional opposition to the KRG's unilateral moves toward independence evokes thoughts of the Tooth Fairy and Great Pumpkin. After all, if it was possible for Washington to stabilize the region, America would already have done so. To cut aid to Iraq would undercut the regime that Washington just went to great expense and effort to save from destruction by the Islamic State.

Turkey spent decades brutally suppressing Kurdish separatism; how likely is President Erdogan, who has greatly enhanced his domestic power by playing the nationalism card, to back down regarding Kurdistan? Ankara already is putting distance between Turkey and the U.S. and NATO. Additional threats aren't likely to dissuade the Erdogan government from protecting what it views as vital interests.

Obviously, negotiation among the interested parties would be better than confrontation and conflict. Indeed, it probably would be best for Kurdistan to focus on enacting economic reform, freeing its political system, improving relations with Baghdad and Ankara, and strengthening its autonomous status. However, Kurds have been waiting a long time to move from de facto to de jure independence.

Moreover, from Iraq's standpoint there is nothing to negotiate: Baghdad has no reason to accept an independent Kurdistan. Iran and Turkey gain nothing from tolerating what looks to be a contagion which could divide their nations. The Assad government can make few demands now, but Ankara might act to prevent a de facto Syrian Kurdish state on its border.

Kurds are entitled to their own country. In theory. But reality is very different. Kurds live in a dangerous region, surrounded by opponents of their independence ambitions. If they make a nation, they deserve Americans' best wishes. But this is one potential conflict Washington should stay out of.

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