



Washington's Kurdish Dilemmas

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Iraqi Kurdistan's recent referendum regarding independence from Iraq has provoked an overwhelmingly negative response in the Middle East and beyond. There is no question that most Kurds support transforming their autonomous region in northern Iraq into an internationally recognized independent state. The "yes" vote in the referendum exceeded a massive 92%.

However, the Baghdad government understandably regards the move as a threat to Iraq's territorial integrity. Iraqi authorities closed air routes leading to Kurdistan even before the referendum was held, a step that has extremely damaging implications, since Kurdistan is entirely land-locked. Neighboring countries, especially Turkey, Syria and Iran, with sizable Kurdish minorities, similarly view the referendum and what it symbolizes as a menace, and they are responding accordingly. Turkey, for example, has threatened to block Kurdistan's oil exports through its territory, and Tehran has emulated Baghdad's action and closed Iranian airspace to flights to and from Kurdistan.

The United States faces a delicate situation. Sentiment among US allies in the region is badly split. Israel backs Kurdish independence, and Israeli officials, past and present, have expressed support for the referendum. But, as noted, two other US allies, Iraq and Turkey, are vehemently opposed to that outcome.

Tensions are spiking, and a regional military crisis seems to be brewing. Baghdad and Ankara have muted their usual quarrels and are now coordinating their policies toward Kurdistan. The two governments already have threatened joint retaliation because of the pro-independence vote. Turkey and Iran, which rarely agree regarding policy on any issue, are cooperating closely to confront this problem.

The Kurdish situation highlights an irreconcilable tension between abstract concepts of justice and geopolitical realities. A solid case can be made that the Kurds are an identifiable nation and culture deserving their own state. Indeed, Kurds constitute the largest distinct population in the world without such a state. The Allies in World War I even promised the Kurdish people a separate homeland out of the ruins of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Fulfilling that commitment, though, would have antagonized the stronger and more numerous Turkish and Arab populations. The European colonial powers, therefore, reneged on their commitment and parceled out most of the Kurds to the successor states (Turkey, Syria and Iraq) emerging from the Ottoman wreckage.

Restless and resentful Kurds have tried to overturn that result throughout the decades since the Allied diplomatic betrayal. The leftist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has waged a secessionist war against the Turkish government for decades. Iraqi Kurds exploited an opportunity to

establish a self-ruled entity in that country when the United States and its NATO allies imposed a no-fly zone over northern Iraq in the 1990s to weaken Saddam Hussein's hold on power, and later waged a full-scale war to overthrow his regime. The Kurds created an independent state in all but name in northern Iraq, establishing a separate flag, currency, and army, and thwarting the Baghdad government from exercising any meaningful control over Kurdistan's economic policies.

Kurdish fighters in neighboring Syria similarly have exploited the unraveling of that country to gain control over a wide swath of territory in the north. Although not officially recognized by the international community, most authority in that region is exercised by the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) militia and its appointed officials. Kurdish activists in both Iraq and Syria are beginning to hint about politically linking the two territories, and there is already cross-border military cooperation between Iraq Kurdistan and its ethnic brethren in Syria. There also is significant collusion between the PYD and the insurgent PKK in Turkey.

Kurdish political ambitions put the United States in an awkward and potentially dangerous position. Washington regards Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria as capable, reliable allies against ISIS for good reason. PYD forces in Syria have inflicted some of the worst defeats ISIS has suffered, including preventing the terrorist group from gaining control of the Syrian border city of Kobani. They accomplished the latter feat while the Turkish military stood by idly across the border. Iraqi Kurdistan's Peshmerga military units repelled ISIS offensives in several sectors in northern Iraqi and northeastern Syria. Those troops also were crucial in liberating Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, from ISIS occupation.

However, some of the Kurdish military actions indicated a political agenda beyond defeating ISIS. When Peshmerga forces expelled ISIS from the Iraqi city of Sinjar, those forces flew dozens of Kurdish flags. The Iraqi national flag was nowhere to be seen. That had to be unsettling to the Baghdad government, especially since Sinjar is located well outside the normal boundaries of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Obama and Trump administrations have given material assistance to Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria. Indeed, the United States provided air cover for the Kurdish offensive to retake Sinjar. That aid, however, has caused tensions with Baghdad and Ankara. The nature of the dilemmas for US policy were underscored when Turkey's military repeatedly attacked the same Kurdish units that Washington supplied and which were cooperating with US military personnel. Furthermore, Ankara has conducted periodic military incursions into northern Iraq for nearly a decade to root-out PKK guerrillas who periodically use that territory to launch attacks across the border into Turkey. US and Turkish officials clearly are not on the same page in terms of policy.

Trump administration officials are caught in a severe bind. Kurdish fighters have been very useful allies against ISIS and other Islamic extremists in both Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, the United States is committed to maintaining the territorial integrity of those countries, and the Kurdish agenda clearly runs counter to that policy. The situation with Turkey is even more uncomfortable for Washington. Turkey is a NATO ally, and despite Ankara's often murky behavior, is viewed as an important partner in the fight against Islamic terrorism. Kurdish secessionist ambitions regarding southeastern Turkey greatly complicate Washington's relations with Ankara.

The administration also faces difficulties on the domestic front regarding the Kurdish issue. There is substantial admiration in the United States for the Kurdish war effort against ISIS. Indeed, especially among conservative and neoconservative Republicans (some of whom are an important component of the president's political base), there is enthusiastic praise for the overall Kurdish political agenda. Some prominent opinion leaders openly urge Washington to extend official diplomatic recognition to an independent Kurdistan.

Their reasons for such sentiments are not hard to fathom. The Kurdistan government and population are unabashedly secular in a region where extremist Islam is on the rise. There also is greater religious tolerance in Iraq Kurdistan than in virtually any jurisdiction throughout the Middle East. It is not coincidental that most Christians fleeing the disorder elsewhere in Iraq and in Syria, have sought refuge - and received it - in Kurdistan. The Kurds seem committed to an economic system that has important free market features, even though Kurdistan's economy is hardly free of corruption and state interference. Likewise, although American and Israeli admirers tend to overlook signs of growing authoritarianism in President Massoud Barzani's government, Iraqi Kurdistan's political system remains at least quasi-democratic. Compared to other Middle Eastern states, Kurdistan understandably comes off quite well in the arena of American public opinion.

The Trump administration desperately tries to resolve Washington's worsening policy dilemma. US leaders continue to express support for Kurdish anti-ISIS actions, and military aid continues to flow to those forces in both Iraq and Syria. At the same time, the US government has adopted an official position opposing the independence referendum and the agenda of an independent Kurdistan. That attempt at pursuing a balanced strategy increasingly seems to be a stance that satisfies no one.

US leaders need to put America's interests first regarding Kurdistan's bid for independence and Kurdish ambitions generally. One can legitimately empathize with the goals of a population arbitrarily denied a homeland for decades on end. But the US policy must balance the moral case for supporting the creation of a Kurdish homeland with the geopolitical reality that achieving that goal would further disrupt an already unstable Middle East.

If Washington would cease trying to micromanage that region (a thankless mission if one ever existed) the United States might be able to adopt a morally satisfying policy regarding the Kurds. But as long as American leaders insist on a high-profile US role in the Middle East, they must give considerable weight to pragmatic geostrategic considerations. The goal of attempting to strike a balance between the two factors may have superficial appeal, but it is not realistic in the long-term. Geostrategic considerations almost inevitably will carry the day.

As regional tensions continue to rise, there is even a risk that the United States could become entangled in armed conflicts involving Kurdish independence. As fond as one might be of the Kurds and the justice of their goals, incurring such a grave risk is not warranted. Instead, the United States needs to revamp its entire Middle East strategy promptly to avoid getting caught in the middle of an increasingly dangerous situation.

Ted Galen Carpenter is senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.