



The Kurds Are Armed, Attracting Investment And Stateless. So What's Next?

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Ninety-two percent of Iraqi Kurds voted for independence in September 2017, and the Kurdish Regional Government began drafting plans to negotiate with the Iraqi government to gain independence — then came the backlash.

The United States refused to support any push for an independent Kurdish territory, reiterating its support of a unified Iraq. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, called the move “treachery.” Iraq cut flights into Kurdish cities. The swift reaction led some to characterize the referendum as a failure that set back the cause for independence.

The Kurds remain the world’s largest ethnic group without a country. Tens of millions of Kurds are spread out across Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Kurdish controlled enclaves and autonomous regions such as Iraqi Kurdistan exist, but the request for an official state remains unfulfilled. Kurdish leadership began discussing plans to hold a referendum on independence and self-determination in 2014 but postponed the vote in order to focus on the fight against ISIS. As the Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi forces and allied militias began to push into Mosul, the Kurdish leadership announced in April 2017 that the referendum would take place.

Kurdish representative to the U.S. Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman disputed that the independence referendum was a failure, saying the goal of the referendum was to “hear the voice of the people.”

“I don’t believe that the 2017 referendum was a failure. As we made very clear prior to the referendum, the goal was to hear the voice of the people, not to immediately change the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad,” Rahman told The Daily Caller News Foundation. “We

still believe that a strict implementation of the Iraqi Constitution is the only way to guarantee the rights of our people and all minorities in Iraq. We are now engaged in talks with other Iraqi groups on forming the next government after Iraq's May election."

She also said that although the Iraqi Kurds and the U.S. disagreed about the referendum, their relationship was "strong enough to overcome that."

The referendum resulted in the loss of territory the Kurds had taken in the aftermath of the Iraqi forces' retreat in 2014, such as in Kirkuk, which the Kurds wanted to be the capital of their state. The Iraqi military swiftly took control of the city, effectively ending any immediate realization of an independent Kurdish state. The Peshmerga — the militias that held off ISIS even as national Iraqi troops fled in 2014 — were unable to counter the Iraqis, partly due to political disunity.

Deniz Ekici, executive director of the Kurdish Policy Research Center, said that the loss of Kirkuk was important because it "has always been a Kurdish city."

"The Kurds have always been the majority. The city has both emotional and military meaning for the Kurds," he said.

Ekici also claimed that the Kurds left in Kirkuk were subjected to harassment from both the Iraqi government and Iranian backed militias. One of the more dominant parties in Iraqi Kurdish politics, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has lost influence, due to its role in refusing to resist Iraq's recapture of Kirkuk.

This has resulted in the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) gaining more influence to remain the dominant power within Iraqi Kurdish politics, according to Ekici. However, the KDP still faces challenges from other Kurdish parties.

The withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga forces has reduced security in Kirkuk. ISIS, which the Iraqi government declared defeated in December 2017, has launched attacks in the city that have killed dozens of people.

Rahman acknowledged ISIS has become resurgent in some areas in the disputed territories and compared it to how Al-Qaeda operated in 2003. She called for a joint security mechanism between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces.

"There is clearly a need for a joint security mechanism between Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga in Kirkuk and the disputed territories. These are areas that were stable previously, and it's in all of our interests to bring back stability," she said.

The Kurds have also attempted to bolster the cause of independence outside of military and political means. Its leaders have aggressively pursued foreign investment to boost economic independence and strengthen ties to the international community. Rahman was optimistic about economic recovery from the losses associated with ISIS aggression and blow back from the referendum.

“Kurdistan has been through some difficult economic times since 2014, but I think the economy is slowly coming back. Many oil companies are optimistic about their findings and looking to invest even more,” she said.

The KRG promoted an event in June hosted by Republican Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska, which focused building ties between American businesses and Iraqi Kurdistan. Rahman wanted to “regain the confidence of foreign and local business people and investors,” confidence that had been lost in the aftermath of the independence referendum.

“Throughout our history, our people have been resilient and optimistic in the face of formidable obstacles. I am confident that with the help of our people we will overcome the challenges, to increase the active presence of international companies in the Kurdistan Region and to regain the confidence of foreign and local business people and investors,” Rahman said at the event.

The Iraqi Kurds still have a powerful lobbying presence in Washington, D.C. Filings with the Foreign Agents Registration Act show that in 2018, the KRG is spending at least \$300,000 on consultants and lobbying firms, such as PASS LLC and Greenberg and Traurig, according to Open Secrets. The KRG also spent \$392,000 in the first six months of 2017 to Denton, MSL Qorvis and Greenberg and Traurig for “government communications and support.”

A FARA filing in February showed that the KRG was continuing to pay Greenberg and Traurig \$20,000 a month to provide the KRG with “strategic advice, counsel, and analysis of the U.S political landscape.”

The Kurds have powerful allies on Capitol Hill. Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, who has built a reputation for being non-interventionist, said when running for president in 2015 that the U.S. should directly arm the Iraqi Kurds and guarantee them their own country. He has not wavered in support of arming the Kurds in the fight against ISIS and other terrorists, though he has been mum on the issue of independence.

“It is in the interest of the United States to support the Kurds who are regularly engaged against terrorists,” Paul said in a statement to TheDCNF. “I have often said, I would arm and encourage the Kurds directly. Our support should be given directly to the Kurds and not filtered through Baghdad.”

Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York also called for the U.S. to support Kurdish independence in a statement in September 2017.

There is opposition to the Kurdish aspiration for independence in the U.S. Ted Carpenter, senior defense fellow at the Cato Institute, said Washington cannot support Kurdish independence and argued it would upset the region even more.

“There was the unity of the response of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. All of them made it very, very clear it would not lead to an independent Kurdistan,” Carpenter said to TheDCNF in a phone interview.

Carpenter described how the independence referendum affected the Syrian Kurds fighting against ISIS. The U.S. has looked the other direction as Turkish forces bombed American-

backed rebel groups. Turkey began attacking the Syrian Kurdish forces in January, which resulted in the country taking parts of northern Syria previously under Kurdish control.

“The Trump administration had resisted the demand of Turkey to sever or limit its ties to Kurdish insurgent groups in northern Syria,” Carpenter said. “It wasn’t long after the referendum that they [U.S. government] began to phase out arms and aid to these groups.”

“It’s hardly the first time the United States has sold out the Kurds,” Carpenter said, referencing events such as the U.S support and abandonment of the Kurds during the Gulf War. He added that the Kurds’ relationship with the U.S. was like “Charlie Brown, Lucy, and the football.”

“The Kurds don’t have enough strength to totally and officially establish independent entities in Iraq or Syria, let alone a combined Kurdistan. While the United States may sympathize with their goals, they cannot support it,” Carpenter said. “Foreign policy is a product of the achievable.”

Ekici was a bit more positive, though he did say that Western powers were not likely to fully support the Kurds due to the “fragmented reality of the Kurdish political scene.”

“The U.S has not abandoned the Kurds,” Ekici said.

It remains to be seen what the Trump administration’s policy towards the Kurds will be and if there will be a shift towards supporting independence. Rahman said she was pleased to see that the Peshmerga were positively mentioned in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for their role in fighting ISIS.

“We were very pleased to see the Peshmerga mentioned specifically in the recent NDAA; ongoing support from the U.S. and Coalition is essential to ensuring that we don’t see a resurgence of ISIS or its descendants in Iraq,” Rahman said.

The language in the NDAA called for the American government to continue “to provide operational sustainment” to the Peshmerga so they “can more effectively partner with the Iraqi Security Forces, the United States, and other international Coalition members to consolidate gains, hold territory, and protect infrastructure from ISIS and its affiliates in an effort to deal a lasting defeat to ISIS and prevent its reemergence in Iraq.”

With independence still an unrealized dream, Kurdish leaders have focused on working within the current Iraqi government to ensure that they have a voice despite the politically dominant Sunni and Shia coalitions. Rahman said the KRG is still pushing for the implementation of the Iraqi Constitution to “guarantee the rights of [Kurdish] people and all minorities in Iraq.”

“We believe that a strict implementation of the Iraqi Constitution is the only way to guarantee the rights of our people and all minorities in Iraq, and to ensure a fair and just sharing of revenues and resources across Iraq,” she said. “We are working with Baghdad to form a government and will advocate for our rights within the framework of the Constitution.”