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What Can Make or Break a Kurdish State?

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In recent years, the possibility that the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG or Kurdistan) will achieve independence from Iraq has grown substantially. Three schools of thought have shaped the discourse on the issue.¹ The first argues that Kurdistan has all the trappings of a state so that it is only a question of time before it declares independence. The second school is more skeptical, reasoning that the talk of independence is merely tactical and that the obstacles are too difficult to overcome. The third school claims that the Kurds' interests lie in remaining part of Iraq and that doing so is the most viable option.

The latter approach does not have many supporters among the Kurds themselves; it is a point of view advocated mainly by neighboring states and the international community, which instinctively oppose the division of existing states, and fear that breaking up Iraq would further destabilize the Middle East. The fact that the breakup of the Soviet Union had positive outcomes, including the fact that the newly independent Baltic States joined the EU, is discounted. Opponents of Iraq's breakup also ignore the fact that the Middle East is already a volatile region with a number of failing states, including Iraq.

The second school's arguments are often raised by Kurdish parties opposed to the KRG's ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is leading the call for independence, as well as by scholars, analysts, and journalists, some of whom are well-wishers and others less so. Proponents of this view argue that as a landlocked region, the KRG's survival depends on its neighbors, which will never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state for fear that it would lead to unrest among the Kurds living within their own borders. Similarly, the international community would also be reluctant to support the creation of a Kurdish state out

¹ For a short list of essays on independence see, <http://ekurd.net/related-articles/independent-kurdistan-state>.

of concern that it would lead to instability in Iraqi Kurdistan's neighboring countries.

A second set of arguments against the likelihood of independence has to do with the domestic politics in the KRG, namely the dire economic situation, widespread corruption, and an incompetent and undemocratic administration, as well as the region's financial and economic dependence on Baghdad. In addition, skeptics question the good faith intentions of the KDP's leadership, contending that its promotion of independence is a ploy used to distract attention from charges of corruption, with the goal of winning the Kurdish vote in the upcoming Kurdish elections tentatively set for July 2017. Others contend that President Mas'ud Barzani is too weak and indecisive to declare independence.

While many of these arguments might appear initially convincing, they overlook the sweeping changes that have taken place in the Middle East and the world at large, and which might prove to be decisive in determining Kurdistan's fate. For the greater part of the twentieth century, wars have wrought havoc on the Kurds; however, at the turn of the twenty first century, three wars opened new vistas for them. The 1991 Gulf War established the basis for genuine autonomy in northern Iraq; the 2003 Iraq War cemented the KRG's relationship with the United States and formed the basis for the post-Saddam Iraqi federation; and the war against the Islamic State (Da'esh), which erupted in summer 2014, put the Kurds on the international map. This current war might be creating a window of opportunity for independence because it allowed the *Peshmerga* to take control of the Kirkuk region, which the KRG can use to bargain with Baghdad, and because the KRG proved to the international community that it is a crucial player in the war against *Da'esh*.

On the other hand, the upheavals in the region and the war against *Da'esh* exposed the weakness of three regional states: Iraq, because of the Sunni-Shi'i rift and the war itself; Turkey, due to its domestic challenges, deteriorating economic situation and regional entanglements; and Syria, because of its multiple wars. What are the likely reactions of these states, the KRG's neighbors, if it were to follow the path to independence?

The neighboring states are not made of one cloth. Turkey has developed a dichotomy of the "good" Kurds in Iraq vs. the "bad" Kurds in Turkey and Syria. Accordingly, one can imagine a situation whereby it could live with a Kurdish state in Iraq while continuing to fight the other Kurds. Turkey's strategic and economic interests may dictate such a paradoxical stance, as Ankara will need the Iraqi Kurdish state for its oil and gas, for balancing Iran, and as a buffer against the rising Shi'i axis. Syria may remain weak for long time, but one should

expect problems from various non-state actors there — such as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham or even the YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or People's Protection Units) — that might attempt to challenge a new Kurdish state. With respect to Baghdad, it is inconceivable that it will initiate an all-out war against the KRG while it is in the midst of its war with *Da'esh*, which, for Baghdad, is now the greater of two evils. Still, the Shi'i militias, *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilization Units), which were significantly strengthened during the last two years, and which are being underwritten by Iran, might decide to open a front against the Kurds.

Iran is likely to pose the greatest challenge to a Kurdish state. It continuously declares its opposition to the notion, inciting the opposition PUK and Goran parties against it, and using more direct means of subverting it in order to prevent its formation. Iran opposes a Kurdish state for the same reasons that Turkey would support it: It will be a Sunni state, it will strengthen Turkish influence in the region, and it will eclipse Shi'i power in Iraq. The big question is whether Iran will initiate a war against a newly independent Kurdistan. What is certain is that Iran will try its best to weaken it; and, in that case, the US could play a decisive role in backing the Kurds, depending on the policies and priorities of the new Trump administration.

What about economic concerns? The deteriorating economic situation in the KRG has often been mentioned as a principal roadblock to independence. Indeed, after a decade of economic boom, the region is experiencing a severe economic crisis, due to the need to accommodate two million refugees and internally displaced people; the falling price of oil, on which it is entirely dependent; large-scale military expenses; and, most importantly, the ongoing dispute with Baghdad over the budget and oil revenue sharing agreement. When the KRG seized control of oil rich Kirkuk in June 2014, it exacerbated tense relations with Baghdad, which had cut payments to Erbil at the end of 2013. There are those who believe that until it solves its economic problems the KRG should not declare independence. Others reason that independence is the only way to solve the intractable problem with Baghdad. Barzani stated this view very bluntly: "Since we could not achieve a real partnership with Baghdad, let us try becoming peaceful neighbors."²

Those who believe that the declaration of Kurdish independence is only a matter of time, present the following arguments: The majority of Kurds in the KRG support independence; the KDP leadership is determined to make such a move; the KDP is already preparing the ground for such an eventuality; and, finally, turning back the clock is now improbable, in the wake of the sea-changes that have taken place in Kurdistan and Iraq. With regard to the Kurdish public, a

² [K24](#), December 7, 2016.

recent poll showed that approximately 85 percent support independence.³ This support has increased over time, against the background of the traumas experienced under different Iraqi regimes, as well the encounter with *Da'esh* since 2014, which has cost the lives of more than 1,600 Peshmerga.⁴ Moreover, the young generation has been educated and raised on the idea of an independent Kurdistan.

The KDP's leadership resolve stems from decades of struggle by the Barzanis, their urge to associate independence with themselves, and the fact that they are much more cohesive than their political rivals. Although some ridicule his real motives and intentions, President Barzani has vowed to declare independence even if he is forced to do so in only one village in Kurdistan.⁵ In fact, even among some opposition members in the PUK, there is support for independence. Thus, Kosrat Rasul, Vice President of the KRG, stated to an Italian outlet that a Kurdish state is no longer merely a dream.⁶ Another leading member, the second deputy general of the PUK, Barham Salih declared, "it is the right of the Kurdistan's region's people to achieve independence."⁷

The KDP leadership has also taken some practical steps to advance its agenda. One of these was mobilizing Kurdish public opinion, as exemplified in a conference held at the end of December 2016 by the American University of Kurdistan to discuss independence: Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and security chief Masrur Barzani, as well as members of opposition parties participated.⁸ The KDP has also initiated several rounds of talks with the PUK and Goran in order to resolve the year-old political crisis that has paralyzed the KRG. Another very important development has been the talks in September and October 2016 between Mas'ud Barzani and Nechirvan Barzani, and Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-'Abadi. The Barzanis' agenda for the talks was to advocate for an "amicable divorce," in the belief that convincing Baghdad is the best way to achieve independence. Recently al-'Abadi said that the Kurds have an "undisputed right" to self-determination.⁹ Meanwhile Mas'ud Barzani is touring world capitals in an effort to drum-up diplomatic support for an independent Kurdish state. Finally, there is also a concerted effort underway to reform the corrupt economic system, including an austerity program that cuts government expenditures, and an agreement with Deloitte, the largest professional and financial services company in the world, to conduct an audit of the Kurdistan Region's oil production, exports, and revenues.

³ [K24](#), August 20, 2016.

⁴ [Rudaw](#), December 25, 2016.

⁵ Author's interview with a close associate of the president, 19 December 2016.

⁶ [Corriere Della Sera](#), December 12, 2016.

⁷ [Ekurd Daily](#), 15 December 15, 2016.

⁸ [Ekurd Daily](#), 15 December 15, 2016.

⁹ [Rudaw](#), August 26, 2016.

Certainly, the road to Kurdistan's independence remains fraught with obstacles. Nevertheless, there is already a critical mass of circumstances that can make independence a reality, if the Kurdish leadership plays its cards well this time.

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