ERDOĞAN WARNS WORLD OF IRREVERSIBLE DAMAGE KRG REFERENDUM WILL CAUSE

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Voicing Turkey's strong opposition to the planned KRG independence vote next Monday, President Erdoğan said that Ankara has called on Barzani to turn back from the decision, while hinting at sanctions against Irbil

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan conveyed the Turkish state's last warnings to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to give up on independence ambitions and call off the referendum scheduled for Sept. 25, warning that such a vote could ignite further crises in the region. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York and speaking to the PBS channel, President Erdoğan voiced Ankara's reservations regarding the KRG independence referendum.

"Steps such as demands for independence that can cause new crises and conflicts in the region must be avoided," he said. "We have defended Iraq's territorial integrity from the very beginning when nobody did. This referendum should not be held. Arabs, Turkmens and Kurds live there altogether. How can we, as Turkey, which shares a 350-kilometer-long border with Iraq, recognize this referendum?" Erdoğan asked, adding that Iran does not seem to be on the same page as the KRG either. Erdoğan also told reporters later in the day that the Turkish government was considering sanctions if the KRG proceeds with the referendum.

"We have always supported the KRG," Erdoğan told journalists in New York after his address at the U.N. General Assembly. "We think this approach of theirs amounts to ignoring the Republic of Turkey, which has stood by them and counted them as a close ally."

The Cabinet and the National Security Council will convene to make a final decision on May 22, the president said.

"The Cabinet will undoubtedly evaluate this situation and assess possible sanctions, which will not be ordinary," he added. "We will express our determined stance on this."

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu presented an offer to the KRG. Çavuşoğlu said that Ankara could mediate between the KRG and the Iraqi central government and play a role as a guarantor for the rights of the autonomous region if need be.

Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ also commented on the issue, warning KRG President Masoud Barzani of possible implications.

"It is a dangerous path. Barzani is playing with fire. This fire would enflame Barzani first and then others. The right thing to do is to stop playing with fire, give in to common sense and cancel the referendum," Bozdağ said yesterday at an event.

As the Turkish state expresses its last warnings regarding the independence vote, KRG President Barzani demanded a written agreement with the Iraqi government, which should be guaranteed by the United States and Europe. In the face of Barzani's demands, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi said that the referendum should not be held at all.

"Kurdistan's referendum is rejected whether it takes place now or in the future," al-Abadi told reporters late Tuesday. "What is suggested now [from Baghdad] is to cancel the referendum rather than postponing it."

Al-Abadi has called on Irbil to enter "serious negotiations" with Baghdad to resolve long-standing problems over oil revenues and disputed territories.

"Unilateral change of borders by force opens the door of blood wide," he said.

Meanwhile, the KRG president said yesterday during a rally in Sulaymaniyah that he is ready to engage in dialogue with Baghdad, with the support of the international community, after the referendum. Prior to the meeting Barzani also met with the Iraqi President Fuad Masum. Masum had called for dialogue between Baghdad and Irbil last week.

The Iraqi parliament previously approved full authorization to al-Abadi to prevent the referendum. Ankara expressed support for the Iraqi parliament's decision to oppose the independence vote, calling on the government in Baghdad to negotiate with the Irbil-based KRG.

Iraqi parliamentarians voted last week to reject the nonbinding referendum planned to be held on Sept. 25, authorizing the Iraqi prime minister to take all measures necessary to preserve Iraq's unity.

A "yes" vote in the independence referendum would not spell immediate independence for the autonomous region since the referendum does not have legal force. However, KRG officials say they will use it to pressure the Iraqi government in Baghdad to come to the negotiating table and formalize their independence bid.

In addition to the KRG's neighbors Turkey and Iran, many international actors urge the postponement of the referendum. Saudi Arabia has been the latest country to speak against the vote.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said, "We are counting on the wisdom of President Barzani not to hold a referendum."

"Avoiding a referendum would prevent many risks," the Saudi minister added.

The inclusion of Turkmen-populated Kirkuk into the independence vote irked the Turkish government as well.

Presidential Spokesman İbrahim Kalın said recently, "Kirkuk does not belong to the KRG. Trying to create such a de facto situation is also unacceptable. I would like to express that we are against all kinds of orders that will change the historical and cultural identity of Kirkuk and change its demographic structure."

While there are only a few days left until the controversial referendum, the Turkish military conducted a military drill near the Iraqi border, which was interpreted by many as a cautionary move.

Defense and security experts recently told Daily Sabah that the drill was a clear message to the KRG to make it give up on the independence vote.

Bilgay Duman, a Middle East expert at the Center For Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), said, "The drill conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces is a stern warning to the KRG that Turkey is willing to take any steps necessary regarding its own national security, as President [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan recently stated that Turkey will not sit and watch developments following the referendum."

Furthermore, Turkey has deployed fully equipped commando units as part of military reinforcements along its southern border with Syria, a military source told Anadolu Agency yesterdayTurkish military vehicles with fully equipped commandos from multiple divisions traveled to the Syrian border on Wednesday, near southern Hatay's Reyhanlı district, said the source, who asked not to be named due to restrictions on speaking to the media. The source said the new deployment was part of reinforcements for troops already stationed there.

As the reinforcement near the Iraqi border continues, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım met with the nation's land, naval, air and gendarmerie force commanders yesterday. Yıldırım met with Land Forces Cmdr. Gen. Yasar Guler, Naval Forces commander, Vice Adm. Adnan Ozbal, Air Forces Cmdr. Gen. Hasan Küçükakyüz and Gendarmerie Forces Cmdr. Gen. Arif Cetin Wednesday, a statement said

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