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## 4 KEY POINTS ABOUT THE KURDISTAN INDEPENDENCE VOTE

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Last June, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq set September 25 as the date for a referendum on Kurdish independence. At the time, the decision received almost no notice. Now, with September 25 less than a week away, the Iraqi government in Baghdad is scrambling to prevent the vote from occurring and countries across the region are taking sides on the issue. The situation is as unclear as ever.

Iraqi Kurds fly Kurdish flags during an event to urge people to vote in the upcoming independence referendum in Erbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq. (SAFIN HAMED/AFP/Getty Images)

The Vote Could Still Be Called Off

Iraqs supreme court ordered the KRG to call off the referendum on the grounds that it violates Iraqs constitution. According to Arab News, Kurdish lawmakers will meet with lawmakers in Baghdad to discuss the situation, and they may decide to cancel the vote. Late on Tuesday, September 19, Kurdish President Masoud Barzani said he would not postpone the vote without a guarantee of independence from Baghdad. However, this move could anger the Kurdish people, who are very excited about the referendum and, as a whole, support their peoples national determination. Many predominantly Kurdish cities, like Kirkuk, have seen an explosion of pro-Kurdish independence sentiment as the referendum date has approached.

International Opposition To An Independent Kurdistan Is Mixed

The United Nations opposes the vote and called on Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani to instead enter into negotiations with Baghdad with the aim of reaching a deal in the next three years.

The United States has come out strongly against the KRGs proposed referendum. The United States urged the KRG to cancel the referendum and called the vote a distraction from the ongoing fight against Islamic State. This statement came after the State Department and Department of Defense spent weeks trying to dissuade the KRG from holding the vote. On the other hand, the U.S. has long supported Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the fight against Islamic State. These forces are key to the military positions the KRG has taken in prominent cities like Kirkuk that could be

essential to future independence and statehood.

Masked Kurdish forces, loyal to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party, stand guard at the North Oil Company headquarters in the northern Kurdish-controlled city of Kirkuk. (MARWAN IBRAHIM/AFP/Getty Images)

Russia's position is even more nuanced. Russia has previously made statements indicating it supports Kurdish independence, though it has not clearly stated its stance on the September 25 referendum. Russian energy giant, Rosneft, recently announced a billion-dollar investment in natural gas pipelines in Kurdistan, which will provide Kurdistan key financial and economic support if it does decide to separate from Iraq.

### Regional Opposition Is Also Mixed

Israel is the first country in the Middle East to voice its support for an independent Kurdistan. Support for an independent Kurdistan is strong among the Israeli public, and Israel and the KRG have strong economic ties. It is believed that since 2015, Israel has imported up to 77% of its oil from the KRG.

Turkey has long opposed an independent Kurdistan and considers the Kurdish nationalist party within Turkey, the PKK, a terrorist organization. Turkey officially opposes the vote. In fact, Turkey staged tank drills on its border with Iraqi Kurdistan on Monday as a sign of its opposition. However, Turkey has long had good relations with the KRG, especially when it comes to oil. Almost all of northern Iraq's oil goes to ports in Turkey through an oil pipeline managed by Turkey. In 2016, the KRG even offered to sell Turkey a stake in their oil fields for \$5 billion. Even though the Kurdish issue has long been a flashpoint for Turkish politics, Turkey's growing role in the Kurdish oil industry has been lucrative for Turkey and does complicate the Turkish position on Kurdistan.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are taking a diplomatic position and have offered to mediate between the KRG and the Iraqi government in Baghdad. A Saudi delegation has already met with Barzani, who thanked the Saudis for their involvement but did not indicate whether he would suspend the referendum as a result. Saudi Arabia has had direct diplomatic relations with the KRG since January, 2016, when it opened a consulate in Erbil.

### Kurdish Independence Could Shake Up Oil Markets

The KRG currently controls 20% of Iraq's oil resources. If the Kurds do declare and maintain independence within the borders that the KRG currently controls, Kurdistan's oil industry would be among the top 10 largest in OPEC. This makes Kurdistan an important player in the oil market. The KRG has already demonstrated its desire to use its oil resources to build alliances with its neighbors and international players. However, there are many uncertainties when it comes to the oil market. Would an independent Kurdistan seek to increase oil production in order to fund its fledgling government? Would Turkey try to crush an independent Kurdistan by disrupting the Ceyhan pipeline, through which most Kurdish oil exports flow? Would OPEC invite an independent Kurdistan to join the cartel and risk angering Iraq in the process?

If the KRG proceeds with an independence referendum, the impacts on geopolitics and the oil industry could be many and significant. No one can predict what will happen, but the next weeks and months could alter the Middle East.

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