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## **KURDISTAN REFERENDUM: IRAQ CUTS OFF ALL FOREIGN FLIGHTS TO KURDISH CAPITAL IRBIL**

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Baghdad, furious with overwhelming yes result of this weeks Kurdish independence vote, steps up attempts to isolate Kurdish Regional Government

Passengers queue at the check-in counters at Irbil International Airport in Iraq on 27 September 2017 Reuters

All international flights to and from Irbil in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq are to be suspended from Friday, an airport official has said.

The order from Iraqs central government adds to pressure to cancel the results of this weeks independence referendum, in which 93 per cent voted to split from Baghdad.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadis government does not recognise Mondays independence vote, which it says is an unconstitutional attempt by the Kurds to exert greater control over the countrys oil revenues and disputed territory such as Kirkuk.

Iraqi woman solving uniform shortage for Kurdish fighters

All international flights without exception to and from Irbil will stop from 6pm (1500 GMT) on Friday following a decision by the Iraqi cabinet and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Talar Faiq Salih told AFP news agency on Thursday.

Regional carriers such as Qatar Airways, EgyptAir and Lebanons Middle East Airlines had already informed passengers that flights from Friday would be cancelled until at least 1 October at the request of Iraqs Civil Aviation Authority.

The decision could effectively strand thousands of foreign nationals, since travel outside the KRG to the rest of Iraq is not permitted without a separately-obtained visa from the Arab authorities.

Whether the KRGs other small international airport in Sulaymanyah will remain fully operational is not yet clear. It is expected that internal flights from Irbil to the capital and other cities will continue as normal.

KRG Transport Minister Mowlud Murad rejected Baghdads instructions in a news conference on Wednesday, telling reporters that Irbil and Sulaymaniyah airports must remain open to maintain the Kurdish economy and facilitate the offensives on Isis last remaining strongholds in the country.

Mr Abadi had demanded in a speech earlier that day that the Kurdish authorities cancel the referendum and its results or face the threatened airspace restrictions.

We wont have a dialogue about the referendum outcome, Mr Abadi told parliament. If [the KRG] want to start talks, they must cancel the referendum and its outcome.

The Kurdish people — who number roughly 30 million across several countries — were left stateless when the Ottoman Empire collapsed a century ago. In Mondays vote, approximately 72 per cent of the KRGs 8.4 million strong population took to the polls, returning a 92.73 per cent result in favour of creating an independent Kurdistan.

While the vote was met with enthusiasm by the Kurdish diaspora all over the world, Baghdad and Iraqs Arab population have expressed concerns that areas involved in the referendum include places such as Kirkuk, which is an ethnically mixed and oil-rich province.

The US and others in the international community also advised against it, worried the vote could stoke already inflamed Irbil-Baghdad tensions and affect the fight against Isis.

The retaliatory move from Baghdad comes after neighbouring Iran and Turkey closed their airspace to flights from the KRG during voting on Monday.

Ankara and Tehran are worried that the creation of an independent Kurdistan could fuel the desire for Kurdish independence within their own countries.

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Kaynak/Source: