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## **HAIDER AL-ABADI VOWS TO USE LAW TO CONTROL KURDS**

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29.09.2017

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Al Jazeera, 29 Sept 2017

Iraqi prime minister pledges to use constitution and law to impose his central government's rule over Iraqi Kurds.

Iraq's prime minister says his government will use the "tools offered by the constitution and the law" amid rising tensions following a referendum that saw more than 90 percent of Iraqi Kurds support a split from Baghdad.

Haider al-Abadi's comments on Thursday came after calls by some in Iraq's parliament to deploy troops to the northern, Kurdish-dominated area.

"We will impose our federal authority all over Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, as per the power of the constitution and law," al-Abadi told parliament.

"We are not making a threat. Some people have threatened us in this region, and some have resorted to force to impose a status quo in these regions," he added.

"We will surprise them because we talk less and our actions are louder than words.

The non-binding referendum in the three provinces of the Kurdistan Regional Government-administered region and some disputed areas was held in defiance of Baghdad, which declared it illegal, and despite international objections.

Al-Abadi said he would counter the Iraqi Kurds with surprise and that actions are louder than words.

The central government of Iraq is applying pressure on the Kurds by implementing the imminent suspension of all foreign flights to and from the Iraqi Kurdish capital Erbil.

The move to take effect on Friday by the Baghdad government marks the first major step taken in retaliation for Monday's vote, which delivered a resounding 92.7 percent "yes" to independence.

An extended suspension of flights would have significant consequences for the Kurds, who have turned Erbil into a regional transport hub that is home to a large international community.

Turkey, also home to a large Kurdish minority, is especially concerned and has threatened a series of measures to isolate the Iraqi Kurds. Iran has also raised objections.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Thursday Iraq's Kurdish region has "thrown itself into the fire" by holding the referendum.

Erdogan called on Masoud Barzani, leader of Iraq's Kurdish administration, to be content with the region's current semi-autonomous status, enjoy its oil revenues, and not drag it into an "adventure that is bound to end in chagrin".

Erbil airport director Talar Faiq Salih told AFP news agency all international flights to and from the city would stop from 6pm (1500GMT) on Friday following a decision by the Iraqi cabinet.

Regional carriers - including Turkish Airlines, EgyptAir, and Lebanon's Middle East Airlines - already announced they would suspend flights serving the KRG at Baghdad's request.

A civil aviation official in Baghdad said the measure applied to the airports in Erbil and the region's second-largest city Sulaimaniya. Baghdad has demanded that control of the airports be handed over to central authorities.

A decision on whether to also suspend domestic flights would be made after Friday, the official said.

Salih said she deeply regretted the decision, which she said would hamper the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group in the country and neighbouring Syria, as well as the delivery of aid to those displaced by military operations against the armed group.

"We have consulates, international staff, international companies, so it's going to affect everyone," Salih said. "We have a big international community here so this is not only against Kurdish people."

In opposing the referendum, Britain also finds itself in bed with Iran, which has a long, ignoble history of oppressing its Kurdish minority. To mark its displeasure over the possible knock-on effects, Tehran sent fighter jets screaming menacingly over Kurdish areas of western Iran on Tuesday. The ethnic and sectarian war predicted by Erdoğan is also rendered a more likely prospect by this week's joint Turkey-Iraq military exercises along the KRGs border and moves to shut down airports and trade routes.

Barzani is meanwhile facing a predictable barrage of condemnation from Baghdad, where successive Iranian-backed, Shia-led governments have fiercely opposed Kurdish self-determination. Iraqi Shia militias are reportedly ready to march on Kurd-controlled Kirkuk. But if fighting breaks out, it will be the fault not of the KRG but of its hostile, insecure neighbours and of complacent, unimaginative western leaders.

In a report published in 2015, the Commons foreign affairs committee was clear where Britain's loyalties lie. The UK is fortunate to have in such a volatile part of the world a partner as relatively moderate, pragmatic, stable, democratic, secular and reflexively pro-western as the KRG, it said. Maintaining the KRG as a haven of tolerance and stability, not least in its approach to women's rights and humanitarian issues, and as an ally against extremist forces, was of critical importance.

Saddam tried to crush the Kurds of northern Iraq in 1991, in the wake of the first Gulf war. Britain and its partners responded effectively with safe havens and a no-fly zone. A determined, principled stand is once again required to uphold the Kurds democratic rights.

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