
DID IRAQ'S KURDS LOSE THEIR BIG BET ON INDEPENDENCE?

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Last Wednesday and Thursday marked an historic time for Iraqs Kurdish population, and indeed for Kurds worldwide, who one day hope that their dream of an independent Kurdish state will be fulfilled. After a months-long preparation by Iraqi Kurdish President Massoud Barzani to organize an independence referendum for the semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region, Iraqs Kurds eagerly ran to the polls and overwhelmingly voted to chart their own way. Over 92% of voters threw their support behind independence, a figure not all that surprising but one that was received with anger by nearly every government in the Middle East.

While millions of Kurds in the region were celebrating their Iraqi brethrens declaration of independence with dances, parades, and celebratory gunfire [] Iranian Kurds were excited, perhaps wondering when they too could organize a referendum process [] Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was deliberating with his national security aides about how to respond.

The Iraqi parliament, usually a slow-wielding, ineffective body riven by personal, ethnic, and sectarian fissures, was solidly unified in condemning the Kurdistan Regional Governments (KRG) referendum. For Iraqi parliamentarians who have made it a bad habit over the last decade to engage in infighting on everything from the composition of the cabinet to a ministrys annual budget, Barzanis project was a desperate political campaign to save his own skin, silence his Kurdish opponents, and illegitimately grab the contested oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Whereas Prime Minister Abadi delivered Barzani with an ultimatum to either hand over control of Kurdistans two international airports or face an international travel embargo, Iraqi lawmakers would rather the prime minister send in the army to Kirkuk and retake the area by force. To the Arabs and Turkmen who live in Kirkuk and would like to remain an integral part of the Iraqi state, a forceful Iraqi takeover of the area [] unfortunate and potentially bloody [] be the only way to prevent Barzani from lording over the city and its resources.

If the Iraqi government was the only major actor in the region opposed and offended about what the KRG did this week, the Kurds would be able to withstand the pressure. Indeed, relations between Baghdad and Irbil have been tense before, and Irbil has always managed to survive the Iraqi governments cutoff of government money through the selling of its oil reserves to and through Turkey. But it becomes far more difficult, if not impossible, for a landlocked Kurdish territory to survive financially and politically if its neighbors are just as upset with the vote as

Iraqis are. Indeed, the animus from Turkey and Iran over the previous three days is so inflamed that it increasingly looks like President Barzani took a huge gamble for his people and lost.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, no friend to his own Kurdish population in the southeast, is beside himself that Barzani's government didn't consult with Ankara before the referendum took place. Erdoğan not only labeled the vote as treachery to the Turkish people, but views the move as a mistake of unprecedented proportions — one that may require Turkey to shut down the pipes that pump Kurdish oil to the Mediterranean. In a speech to the Bestepe Peoples Culture and Congress Center, Erdoğan spoke to Iraqi Kurdish authorities directly and all but threatened to cut off the cross-border business transactions that have assisted the KRG's economy during its years of fiscal turmoil with Baghdad. You will be left in the middle anyway, from the moment we start implementing sanctions, Erdoğan said. It will be finished when we close a valve. All your income is over.

It's a threat that the KRG officials need to take seriously: despite the construction boom of years past and the western-friendly business environment that Iraqi Kurdish leaders have sought to project (paywall) to potential investors, the region is in financial distress. Because crude oil prices continue to be far lower today than their value a few years prior (over \$100 in the spring of 2014 compared to this month's \$48-\$52 range), the KRG has been coerced into implementing considerable spending reductions in its budget. Public sector employees have seen their salaries plunge 75%, a wage dip that prevents Kurdish residents from spending as much money as they would like. The KRG's extreme dependency on crude oil exports for 85% of its revenue has in effect increased Turkey's political power and economic leverage. Were Erdoğan to go beyond words and actually shut down the Turkish pipeline or order a halt to trade with Iraqi Kurds across the border, Iraqi Kurdistan would suffer an extensive amount of economic damage at a time when it's at least \$20 billion in the red (paywall.)

The Kurds are often described as some of America's best friends in a hostile and violent region, but this history didn't stop Washington from condemning the referendum as a risky endeavor that will complicate Erbil's relations with an Iraqi prime minister who is already experiencing extreme political pressure from members of his own governing coalition. When the Islamic State is on the ropes and as close to a territorial defeat as the group has ever been, a controversial vote for independence was the very last thing that the United States wanted. Moreover, while there is no evidence to date that battlefield cooperation between the Kurdish peshmerga and Iraqi security forces have been negatively effected, the Kurdish referendum at least adds a wrench into a tactical alliance partly responsible for ISIS's decline. The Trump administration has been clear that Washington's partnership with the Iraqi Kurds won't suffer in a post-referendum world, but Barzani's decision to go ahead with the project despite US opposition won't exactly help improve the relationship either.

What has Barzani gained for all this trouble? Not much other than a couple days of positive coverage from the Kurdish press and the emotional satisfaction that he took a big leap towards full independence for his people. The Barzani family has been trying to press the agenda on statehood for decades, so it's easy to understand why Massoud Barzani is personally proud of the vote and what it represented for Kurdish aspirations outside of Iraq.

Unfortunately, the sad irony is that the independence bid was a dog-and-pony show rather than a substantive break with the rest of Iraq. A final separation will only occur if Baghdad is willing to participate in secession negotiations with Kurdish officials, a prospect that is now a political non-

starter for Prime Minister Abadi in the current environment.

The most idealistic scenario Iraqis, Kurds, Americans, the regions governments, and the anti-ISIS coalition can hope for is that Iraqi and KRG officials say the right things and begin to cool off the heated rhetoric; rebuild confidence between them that would enable both parties in the future to resolve their differences through an inclusive and impartial diplomatic process; and continue their alliance against ISIS in north and northwestern Iraq. Barzani has dug a deep hole for himself, but with a little time and some cooperation from his colleagues in Baghdad, he may be able to climb out of it.

Kaynak/Source: