
WHAT NEXT FOR IRAQ AFTER THE FAILED KURDISH REFERENDUM?

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The punditry world has never been as united as it is today: virtually everyone agrees that the independence referendum that was organised on 25 September in Iraqi Kurdistan was an unmitigated disaster. There is also a consensus on what factors caused Kurdistan Regional President Masoud Barzani to miscalculate so badly, so there is little point recounting those arguments here.

The short-term consequences of the crisis also appear to be fairly obvious. Federal authorities, with associated paramilitary forces, will reassert its authority over most if not all of the disputed territories, strategic oil fields, and border points, including airports. Large population centres within the Kurdistan Region proper are unlikely to be directly impacted, but they will be made to feel the economic consequences of the reassertion of federal control. Meanwhile, Kurdish politics have already completely fractured, with the regional president and his party losing virtually all claim to legitimacy (having lost legal legitimacy a long time ago) while a series of actors continue blaming each other for the disaster.

The real question is how Baghdad and Erbil can resolve their dispute peacefully and in a sustainable manner. A long-term resolution of the dispute between the two sides will depend on a number of factors, very few of which are likely to materialise without massive intervention from the international community, the likes of which have only rarely been successful in the past, and certainly not in Iraq.

The first step towards resolution is for both parties to properly define their interests, which is far easier said than done. Both sides will need considerable time and effort to deflate their egos and coalesce around interests that can reasonably be satisfied. Baghdad's current sense of hubris, and the chauvinistic taunting that has been taking place on the airwaves and the halls of government increase the likelihood that the federal government will present maximalist demands. On the other hand, Erbil will have serious trouble getting used to its reduced clout after 14 years of an oversized role in Iraqi internal politics.

A serious constitutional reform effort will have to follow, mainly for the purpose of identifying a new form of federalism that everyone can live with. This will have to involve a fair and transparent revenue sharing mechanism, the establishment of a fair and impartial dispute resolution mechanism that both sides can rely on, etc. That process on its own is likely to take years, and that assumes that both parties are willing to go through the exercise, which is far from certain at this point.

Based on past experience, there is a serious risk that none of these objectives will be met, and that the current crisis will be allowed to simmer for years before finally boiling over once again. Since 2005, when the current constitution was adopted, Baghdad has tried and failed to revise the text on a number of occasions, including in far happier and more stable times. It has also failed to make any serious progress in establishing the institutions that it is theoretically obligated to establish by the Constitution, including the upper chamber of parliament and a whole slew of others.

Moving from crisis to crisis

In the current environment, left to its own devices, Baghdad will live day by day, moving from crisis to crisis, rather than seeking a major resolution of its relationship with Erbil. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) is yet to be defeated; then there will be parliamentary elections, which will be followed by the inevitable government formation crisis, which will then lead to a struggle for control over security policy and institutions. All of which means that any serious effort to resolve the crisis with Erbil will not appear on the radar for years.

The regional context will not help either, given how angry virtually all governments appear to be with Erbil. All of these countries will always prioritise their own personal interests and relations with Baghdad over any sympathy or sense of loyalty they might have for the Kurds. That was made extremely clear by the way in which all regional airlines cancelled their flights to the Kurdistan Region's airports at Baghdad's request after the independence referendum. Plus, a renewed anti-Kurdish chauvinism, fuelled by the Peshmerga's embarrassing retreat from Kirkuk and other areas, will certainly not help.

Therefore, if there is to be a solution, it will have to come from the international community. If the United Nations and countries of goodwill wish to prevent the current seething tensions from exploding into a new conflict in the immediate or long term, they will have to invest significant resources, first to convince Baghdad that it has an interest in a long-term solution, and second to find one or several options that Baghdad, Erbil and Suleimania can live with.

This will require a multi-pronged approach that will be as difficult to devise as it will be to implement.

It will require deploying massive goodwill, resources, patience, imagination and determination, not all of which are in plentiful supply at the moment. While a successful outcome remains unlikely, it is not impossible, so perhaps the best approach for the rest of us is to cling to whatever hope we can muster.

Kaynak/Source: