

# After the Kurdish Referendum: Regional Implications

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Brief Analysis

## Watch experts discuss the potential fallout from the September 25 independence vote in Iraqi Kurdistan.

*On September 29, David Pollock and Michael Knights addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Pollock is the Institute's Kaufman Fellow and director of Project Fikra. Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with the Institute who has worked in all of Iraq's provinces and spent time embedded with the country's security forces. Bilal Wahab, a native of Iraqi Kurdistan and a Soref Fellow at the Institute, moderated the discussion.*

## David Pollock

**A** firsthand experience of the September 25, 2017, referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan shows that the Kurds are seeking an independent, self-governing state for moral as well as practical reasons. The quest is likewise rooted in historical events and unfulfilled promises from the Iraqi government.

From a moral perspective, the Kurdish argument has three premises: (1) the right to self-determination; (2) a history of oppression, including genocide, meted out by successive Iraqi governments; and (3) the case that, over the past twenty-five years, the Iraqi Kurds have created a stable, peaceful, relatively democratic, and tolerant region that does not threaten neighboring states. Indeed, over the past few years Iraqi Kurdistan has been an island of stability amid violence, as Iraq, Syria, and other regional states have faced wars and terrorism. Kurdistan has likewise served as a haven for as many as two million refugees -- mostly Arabs, not Kurds -- and Kurdish fighters have proven formidable opponents of the Islamic State (IS).

The practical argument is linked to the insufficiency, from Erbil's perspective, of the autonomy deal with Baghdad over the past fifteen years. In broad terms, Kurdistan, given its stability and effectiveness in fighting IS, does not want to be taken for granted. More particularly, Kurdish discontent centers on its perception of inequitable sharing of oil revenues, the need for a promised referendum on Kirkuk and other territories claimed by Kurdistan, and inadequate support for Kurdish armed forces -- the Peshmerga -- in the form of money, training, and weapons.

Another reason for the referendum, voiced by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) president Masoud Barzani and his advisors, involves growing ethnic discord between Kurds and Arabs, especially with the largely Shia Arab government in Baghdad. These Kurdistan leaders also contend that the already-strong Iranian influence in Iraq is growing, a dynamic that could further complicate cooperation between Baghdad and Erbil and, worse, drive the Kurds into a situation in which they are, once again, oppressed.

Kurdistan leaders evidently acted now based on the fear that the autonomy arrangement, since it hasn't worked yet, will only worsen in the future. They sensed as well, given their perception of strengthening Iraqi armed forces, that their leverage on the Kirkuk issue could weaken, increasing the likelihood of a future military confrontation from Baghdad over the disputed territories. The Iraqi government naturally offers counterarguments to these claims but unfortunately is now unwilling to negotiate its differences with the KRG.

If such negotiations eventually do resume, as they should, KRG leaders privately say they could cover precise borders between Iraq and Kurdistan, including around Kirkuk. Even before that, Kurdistan is willing to begin a dialogue with Baghdad on possible compromises on border security and airport control. Finally -- and important to consider here with respect to regional ramifications and territorial limits -- is that the referendum only applies to Iraqi Kurdistan, not to the Kurdish populations of Syria, Turkey, or Iran.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the referendum was unwelcome given otherwise close Turkey-KRG ties and the complicating matter of Erdogan's fraught relations with his country's own Kurdish population. Iran is even more adamantly opposed to Kurdistan's moves toward independence, fearing loss of influence there and possible new U.S. outposts on its border. Turkish and Iranian leaders have also claimed to see an Israeli hand at work in Kurdistan, with their media "reporting" Israeli flags flying in Erbil. During a full week there, however, the speaker saw not one such flag -- only an orderly and peaceful exercise of local political will.

## **Michael Knights**

**T**he timing of the referendum was dictated in part by a desire to hold it before the military balance shifted in favor of federal Iraq, but the exact timing of the event was mostly dictated by Kurdish domestic politics. The Kurdistan Region is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections in November 2017, and there is also the issue of the presidency, with KRG president Masoud Barzani having exceeded his legal term in 2013. The KRG leadership perceived a need to deliver a landmark achievement before Barzani's presidency ended.

Now that the KRG referendum has happened, the key is to focus on Turkey's role in any punishment levied on the Kurds. Nothing remarkable would be occurring if it were just Iran and Iraq punishing the Kurds, but the addition of Turkey makes this a very dangerous situation for the Iraqi Kurds. They put all their eggs in one basket by forming an

alliance with President Erdogan: it was his support that allowed the landlocked Kurds to export oil and flout Baghdad's rules.

Losing Erdogan would be a game changer for the KRG because he could cut off all the KRG's oil and customs revenues, leaving the region bankrupt and isolated from the world. Erdogan is deeply hurt and humiliated that the KRG not only blindsided him on the date of the referendum but also held the referendum over his strong objections. U.S. and Kurdish diplomacy should focus on calming down Erdogan, and the Iraqi government, by downplaying risks of unilateral Kurdish follow-on moves toward independence or annexation of disputed areas such as Kirkuk.

The United States has no interest in seeing an ally, the KRG, crushed by Iran and Turkey at the encouragement of Iran, and Washington has no interest in seeing Moscow dominate mediation of the issue. A U.S. envoy should lead the mediation effort to ensure the Kurds take part in the 2018 Iraqi elections, which will maximize the possible moderate coalition that could reappoint Haider al-Abadi as prime minister. U.S.-mediated negotiations between Baghdad and the KRG would also minimize the chances of the Islamic State returning along the disputed crease between federal and Kurdish territory. The Kurds are the only entity in Iraq to have stood up to Iran, in particular on this referendum. The United States may not be happy about the referendum, but Washington should recognize that a Kurdistan Region with a degree of autonomy is an important hedge in the case of Iranian dominance of federal Iraq.

*This summary was prepared by Rania Said Abdalla. ❖*

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