

The Dim Future of Kurdistan

by [Ako Hamakarim \(/experts/ako-hamakarim\)](#)

Sep 23, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/almstqbl-qlqatm-lkrdstan\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ako Hamakarim \(/experts/ako-hamakarim\)](#)

Dr. Ako Hamakarim is a senior advisor in the Kurdistan Regional Government Council of Ministers.



Brief Analysis

September 23, 2017

The question of independence is a heated discussion topic in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), claims that the defeat of the Islamic State will change the map of Iraq and the Middle East and offer Kurds an opportunity to declare their own state.

Setting aside questions surrounding the credibility of the independence claim, this article attempts to outline the nature of the potential state. If we assume that the KDP's claims are genuine and that it succeeds in its attempt, the crucial questions include what type of state will emerge and whether Kurds will succeed in addressing their current problems to avert future crises.

Iraqi Kurdistan's history and current situation suggest that an independent Kurdistan would have an uncertain future and be at risk of becoming a failed state. A failed state can here be defined as an illegitimate authority, unable to fulfill basic responsibilities such as education and security for its people. Considering politics, economy, security, and geopolitics, an independent Kurdistan is unlikely to succeed.

Political System

The future political system of Kurdistan will be a continuation of the existing regime, which is democratic in name but increasingly autocratic in practice. The KDP considers itself the rightful rulers of Kurdistan as the victors of the civil war with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) between 1994-1998.

Because Massoud Barzani and his party see themselves as the proprietors of Iraqi Kurdistan, they only accept democracy to the extent that it serves their goals. Indeed, they have tended to repress democracy when it poses a threat to their interests. For example, the KDP expelled the speaker of Parliament on December 10, 2015, when Parliament attempted to amend the presidency law in order to have fair presidential elections.

Against this recent history, the purpose of an independent Kurdistan may very well be to entrench the power of one person, one party, and one dominant group. This would be a recipe for an authoritarian, undemocratic system. Instead of building up a nation and institutions, the KDP has worked to strengthen their dominance and intimidate any individual or group who disagrees with them or criticizes their authority.

Security

Kurdish military forces are neither united nor institutionalized, and they have been divided between the KDP and the PUK since the founding of the KRG. Both command their own special Peshmerga and security forces, and the political leaders of the two parties each have their own private guards and personal forces. The disjointed nature of the security forces is a threat to peaceful coexistence. There has always been a strong possibility of the KDP and the PUK utilizing their separate security forces in internal conflict, as has happened before.

The Peshmerga would also struggle to defend an independent Kurdistan from external threats, especially from its neighbors. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are militarily and economically much stronger than Kurdistan. Moreover, the deficiency of unity, arms, training, and funding for Kurdish forces could result in their collapse, rendering them useless.

Another concern is the potential exacerbation of pre-existing security gaps due to geographic challenges and the limitations on Peshmerga capabilities mentioned above. Militia groups might seek to fill expanded security gaps, posing a threat to the KRG and its neighbors.

Economy

Kurdistan currently suffers from a deep economic crisis, which would likely be exacerbated by statehood. The KDP has claimed that selling oil and forming an economy independent of Baghdad will put Kurdistan on the global energy map, facilitating independence and a thriving economy. Unfortunately, the economic independence policy has, thus far, failed. Since Baghdad cut the KRG's share of the federal budget in February 2014, the KRG has faced an overwhelming economic crisis. According to Ashti Hawrami, the Kurdish Minister of Natural Resources, the KRG's total debts are approximately \$20 billion.

Recent discoveries also suggest that Kurdistan does not have as large an amount of oil reserves as it previously claimed. Currently, Kurdistan and Kirkuk together produce about 700,000 barrels per day. Over the past few years a number of oil companies, including Exxon Mobil and Chevron, have cut back on the number of exploration blocks in Kurdistan. While most official statements cited low production levels, some suggested the exits were more political or security related.

Because its economy is so dependent on oil, Kurdistan's economy is unlikely to sustain itself over the long term. In the last twenty-five years, Kurdish authorities have failed to build a powerful local economy that could provide a solid foundation for building an independent state. In fact, they have worked to destroy the traditional economy in favor of oil and encouraged consumerism within Kurdish society.

The KRG economy also has structural problems related to corruption, a lack of transparency, monopolizing markets, and excessive interference in government affairs by party leaders in favor of party-affiliated companies or influential individuals.

These problems have contributed to injustice in two ways. First, they have created a wealthy minority with close ties to the ruling parties, while the majority of people remain poor. Second, huge geographic inequalities have emerged in terms of development and growth, demonstrated by the large disparity between cities and rural areas.

Geopolitical

Geographically, an independent Kurdistan would be a landlocked state, surrounded entirely by neighbors who are not entirely supportive. Hence, geographical location and a lack of self-sufficiency would likely contribute to the KRG's loss of sovereignty or its subordination to one of its neighbors — probably Turkey or Iran. In the case of subordination Kurdistan would suffer from frequent, potentially destabilizing interventions. Indeed, an independent Kurdistan might become a popular arena for regional conflicts.

Conclusion

Based on the indicators described above, the failure of an independent Kurdistan may be inevitable. Instead of providing happiness and comfort to the Kurdish people, independence would likely foster anxiety, internal divisions, subpar living conditions, foreign intervention, and dependency.

Every Kurd dreams of an independent state. However, it may not be worth the nightmare. The most important factor is not independence for its own sake, but rather the success of the state. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)