

Why is Iran Against the Independence Referendum?

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Brief Analysis

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Iran is increasingly nervous about Iraqi Kurdistan's bid for a referendum on an independent Kurdish state. This nervousness arises because of two factors. First, declaring an independent Kurdish state would encourage Kurdish separatism within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Second, a new Kurdish state would undermine Iran's ambition to establish a 'Shia crescent' from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, because a Kurdish state might have better relations with Sunni partners in the region than with Iran.

Given the spread of the Kurdish population across Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, the independence of Iraqi Kurds will reverberate across the region. For example, it could provoke nationalism in Iran's Kurdistan Province, which shares a long border with Iraqi Kurdistan. Iran's fear is fueled by the memory of when Iranian Kurdish political groups established the Republic of Mahabad in Iran in 1946. The Republic of Mahabad emerged as a result of the Soviet troop presence in northern Iran. Although Iran declared its neutrality during World War II, Iranian Kurds took advantage of the political upheaval. After an existence of only eleven months, the Iranian government overthrew the Republic of Mahabad, and Qazi Muhammad, the president, was executed on March 31, 1947 in a public square.

Currently, the military in Iran is strong enough to face down any groups seeking to divide the country. However, there are Iranian political groups outside Iran's border, who, although they are forbidden to have any activities within Iran, may pose some threat. These are the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Iran, the Communist Party of Kurdistan-Iran, and the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan- Iran. Moreover, over the last decades anti-Iran attacks have occurred on a small scale in Iranian Kurdish provinces. Tehran wants to extinguish these attacks, and fears that any attempt to establish an independent Kurdish state in Iraq would provoke Iranian Kurdish areas to pose greater challenges within Iran.

In order to stop Iran's international ambitions, a decade ago Sunni Arab leaders raised their concern about Iranian wishes to establish what they termed a "Shia crescent" in the Middle East. This term was used for the first time in 2004 by Jordan's King Abdullah II in which he expressed his alarm about Iran's expansion in the Middle East. The term was also used by the former president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, in an interview with Al-Arabiya, saying that: "Shia in Iraq and across the Middle East are more loyal to Iran than to the countries in which they are living." The Iranian aim is to secure its borders, and by supporting Shia-backed militants in their fight against organizations like

the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Iran can ensure the fighting stay far from its own borders.

On the other hand, friends of Iran believe that Iranian objectives are more pragmatic today than they were during the first two decades after the revolution of 1979. Now, it is claimed, Iran wants to build friendly relations with Shia factions across the Middle East in order to create economic opportunities for Iranian companies to invest, since Iran has suffered from trade embargos by Western powers.

However, reality shows us that the Sunni Arab leaders' view is more accurate. Many are deeply concerned about the Shia crescent, pointing out that Iran has involved itself extensively in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and has defended the Alawite Shia minority in Syria to protect Bashar al-Assad. As the Islamic State continues to lose territory in Iraq, mainly to the Iranian-backed militant Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), Sunni leaders worry about the potential danger posed by Shia Iranian militants. Furthermore, today Iran has more influence on Iraqi Shia in Baghdad than ever before, and Iran explicitly supports forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Shia crescent from Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut is clearly emerging. Meanwhile, many Arab countries that have close alliances with the West, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt, are desperately looking for measures to be taken to stop such Iranian expansion. Western countries seem to regard Shia Iranian-backed forces as preferable to the Islamic State.

Sunni Arab states see the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum as a valuable counterweight to Iranian expansionism. There is, though, another complicating factor: this new state would have a long border with Iraqi Sunnis. Currently, Sunnis are not happy with power-sharing in the Iraqi government, and while Sunni leaders after 2003 were in favor of an integrated and centralized Iraqi state, today Sunnis are realizing their marginalization in successive Iraqi governments.

The fear is that declaring a new Kurdish state may produce a break-up of the Iraqi state into three provinces with large Sunni populations: Tikrit, Anbar, and Mosul. Sunnis may also think about claiming their own independence, or at least think building an autonomous region much like the present Kurdistan region. Later, they may want to establish their own state and separate from the Iraqi Shia dominated government. Therefore, an attempt to establish a new Kurdish state may inspire another breakdown in Iraq, from which Sunnis their own region.

Establishing a Kurdish state in the north of Iraq would pose many challenges for the Iranian government, particularly because it would encourage Iranian Kurdish nationalism. An independent Kurdish state would also pose an obstacle to Iran's ambition to construct a Shia crescent or corridor between Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, which might be welcomed by Iran's Sunni rivals. ❖

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