Looking Forward to the Independence of Iraqi Kurdistan

by **Hassan Mneimneh (/experts/hassan-mneimneh)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hassan Mneimneh (/experts/hassan-mneimneh)
Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.

Brief Analysis

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In a few weeks, the citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan will vote in a historic referendum that will pave the way for the emergence of a fully sovereign Kurdish state. Almost a century has passed with Kurdish national aspirations thwarted by a world order that has otherwise accommodated the formation of many states in the region on nationalist and ethnic bases. Kurds in Iraq and elsewhere may take pride in this prospect — even if its realization is faced with challenges and hurdles. Iraqi Kurdistan ought to expect support and backing from its friends. As a first-hand witness to Iraqi Kurdistan's nobility of spirit in the face of adversity, it is in fulfillment of such duty that I present the following suggestions.

It is essential to frame the putative historic event for what it is: an act of independence, not of secession. Undoubtedly, Kurdish nationalist conceptions have endeavored towards realizing the goal of sovereignty for over a century. Iraq, however, presents a distinct case, with its Kurdish experience amounting to an archetype of the condition of all Iraqis under successive authoritarian governments. Iraqi rulers have espoused a discourse of the national interest, while engaging in policies at the detriment of Iraqi society. Thus, the Ba'th regime recognized an autonomous administrative region in governorates with Kurdish majority, while scheming to eradícate the Kurdish presence in Iraq. "The genocide of the late 1980s was the culmination of a long series of discriminatory measures.

Iraqi Kurdistan has been subject to a regime of colonial occupation. The "Arab" label used by the occupier was the tool, not the agency, of its exploitative drive. In their quest for freedom and independence, Kurdish forces in Iraqi Kurdistan have defeated an occupation. Theirs is a victory against tyranny, not a divorce of nationalities. Certainly, the Saddam regime has weaponized ethnic differences, thrusting Arab populations into his effort to dilute the Kurdish character of the city of Kirkuk and other localities. His efficacious use of "Kurdish" militias and formations (Jahafil, Fursan, and others), however, underlines that his brute force approach aimed at protecting his dictatorship, rather than the realization of nationalist project.

Irrespective of all positive and negative nationalist aspirations and propositions, the communities of Iraqi Kurdistan — as a Kurdish society — were the target of an external and sustained effort at physical elimination, from the March 1988 chemical attack on the city of Halabja and the continuous experimentation in the use of "special weapons" in targeting cities and villages, to the "Anfal" operations — with genocidal intent, and with lethal results in the hundreds

of thousands. This record of traumatic persecution endows Iraqi Kurdistan with a collective existential consciousness that sets it apart and prepares it for independence. The political factions that constitute the leadership of Kurdish society have evidently sought to capitalize on this uniqueness in their ideological pursuits. This has largely been achieved while avoiding excesses, in words and deeds. Iraqi Kurdistan was a victim of the "Anfal" — as a sum-up of oppression and tyranny — but it rose up from the ashes as a moral, if not yet material, force worthy of emancipation and independence. It may thus set an example for the rest of Iraq.

It is this historical experience that must inform the name of the putative nation. Militants aspiring for a Greater Kurdistan may be inclined to see in the independence of the part a harbinger of freedom for the whole. Iraqi Kurdistan would thus be "Southern Kurdistan", a stand-by entity in anticipation of the fulfillment of the "Greater" dream. However, this would largely be an ideological projection, dismissive of the history and experience of Iraqi Kurdistan. The hope is thus that the emerging nation will keep Iraq in its name. "Iraq", an ancestral term etymologically traceable to the dawn of human civilization, is not the property of any one nationality. Maintaining it in the name of "Iraqi Kurdistan" as a state furthermore highlights a partnership with the rest of Iraq, one that will not dissolve with independence.

Well beyond the name, "Iraqi Kurdistan" can set a model of diversity and continuity. Evidently, the Kurdish language will be the official language . But this would be a multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation. Recognizing Arabic, Turkmen, Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syria as national languages would be the natural path for the new state. In continuation of actions already adopted in Iraqi Kurdistan as part of Iraq, highlighting multiculturalism as an integral part of the polity would constitute a paradigm shift in the region. If it succeeds on its difficult quest for reform, independent Kurdistan may provide a new formula for its neighborhood, based on republican reference, decentralized administration, and open secularism — a separation of established religion and state as the means to protect both religion and state from mutual abuse.

Such ideal outcome would require, however, much effort. No praise of Iraqi Kurdistan can ignore the deep, fundamental, and seemingly perennial problems that afflict it. There seems to be an entrenched tribal underlay to the manifestations of modern political institutions in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. Critics may argue, well beyond polemics, that the leadership is caste-like, government agencies are akin to fiefdoms, and the performance of crucial institutions, such as the military, the judiciary, the press, and civil society, is hindered by - if not totally subjugated to - the will of the leadership. Feuds in the leadership have led to civil war conditions in the 1990s, and have subverted parliamentary elections into mere seat-allocation arrangements. In their quest for impact, reform political movements have sought to leverage Baghdad against the entrenched power structure. While there is merit to the accusations, it is hard to argue that the broader Iraqi context, in its own dysfunction and precariousness, may provide a better environment for addressing these ills. In fact, by accepting an international mandate on the path to independence, Iraqi Kurdistan, as its own individual polity-in-formation, may be incentivized for reform in ways that have so far lacked in the new Iraq a decade and a half after the fall of the despotic regime. Sound governance in an independent Iraqi Kurdistan may in turn invite emulation in the rest of Iraq.

The burdens faced by the new Iraqi Kurdistan are numerous. Still, unexpected, new equations may arise if the new entity were to offer its regional context, consumed as it is with identity feuds, a different model. Would Iraqi Kurdistan seek membership in the Arab League, injecting into it a revised definition of an "Arab" state? Would Erbil initiate a new "Kurdish League" issuing invitations to Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, as nations with substantive Kurdish culture and presence?

The challenges of this rosy scenario are at multiple levels. The first is internal, with the inherent challenges of fulfilling the promise of a representative system, the realization of the independence of civil society, and the

completion of unified security agencies.

The second level is clarity regarding the relationship with Iraq, taking into account historical rights and social realities. The issues at stake are thorny, with Kirkuk, oil, and water the most prominent issues. In light of the limited span still accorded to hydrocarbon wealth at the global level, a swift resolution of these issues is in the mutual interest. Diversifying and transitioning into a post-oil reality through infrastructure investments is a win-win proposition for Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq.

The third level is about the animosity of the regional states. The issue is, however, tempered by realities. In war-torn Syria field experimentations in autonomy may benefit from recognizable progress in Iraqi Kurdistan. In Turkey, despite trepidations and back-pedaling, it can be surmised that Ankara realizes that the Kurdish question is in need of resolution, and that delaying it only exacerbates the issue. An independent Iraqi Kurdistan can serve as a mediator towards arrangements for a soft landing of the recurring conflict. Only Iran may harbor the illusion of firm and permanent control on its portion of Kurdistan, and an independent Kurdish state to its west may cause the emergence of a local threat. The Iranian grip on its Kurdistan is loosening, the most prominent evidence of which is being jihadi recruitment. Counter-intuitively, the emergence of Iraqi Kurdistan, as an alternative reference, may thus constitute a retardant to radicalization in Iranian Kurdistan.

The fourth level is that of the international implications for the emergence of an independent Kurdish state — as a model for independence. It is incumbent on the United States and the European Union to help usher this new experience away from characterizations of separatism, while also providing assistance to avoid a repeat of the "new state as a failed state" trope that has afflicted recently independent states (South Sudan, Eritrea, Timor Leste). United States leadership on this issue would be in keeping with promises, stated and implied.

It is a long and arduous road. However, Iraqi Kurdistan's path to independence has never been clearer. It is up to new Iraqi Kurdish citizens, Kurdish and otherwise, to translate their nobility of spirit into a new model, in a world much in need of one. ❖

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