

When Governance Is a Must, Not a Luxury

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The KRG must commit, as its statehood referendum nears, to an independent judiciary, a strong parliament, and other hallmarks of a democratic society.

Whether a gamble or a calculated move, the Kurds will head to the polls on September 25 to choose between independence and staying in Iraq. That a vote for statehood will win is a certainty. The Kurds see the stars aligned for the next push toward independence -- the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been an island of stability in a turbulent region, its Peshmerga has defended the region from ISIS and protected minorities, and it can generate revenue through oil exports.

To make their case for self-determination to the world, leaders in the KRG often cite historical grievances, including statelessness and episodes of genocide. International recognition of a Kurdish state is beyond Kurdish control, however. Building one is, and therefore should be, the top priority of Kurdish leaders.

The KRG values international legitimacy and seeks to earn it for its push for statehood. Quite an anomaly, but the Kurds welcome Western interference and seek to convince U.S. and European capitals of their right to self-determination through an independence referendum.

The KRG owes its existence in part to the internationally mandated safe haven imposed in 1991. The KRG's rights and powers increased after Iraq was liberated from Saddam's tyrannical rule in 2003. Integral to the international coalition against ISIS, the Kurdish Peshmerga continues to receive praise as capable freedom fighters who stood up to ISIS's terror and savagery. Seen as a vote of confidence, the KRG offered attractive incentives to foreign businesses, especially in the energy sector, to invest in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Despite such an outward worldview, the international community did not welcome the Kurdish call for referendum and divorce from Iraq, although many voiced sympathy for Kurdish aspirations. Haphazardly drawn, yes, but Middle Eastern borders tend to stick. The KRG's neighbors and faraway friends alike reiterated their support for a unified

Iraq. U.S. officials have repeatedly criticized the Kurdish move as distracting from the fight against ISIS. Closer to home, Turkey and, more bluntly, Iran warned the Kurds against destabilizing the region by threatening the territorial integrity of Iraq.

Although the Kurdish image is shiny in Western capitals, the Kurdish house is far from being in order. A political deadlock has shuttered the parliament for two years, and the Kurdish economy suffers from low oil prices. The KRG has come a long way, but its success story is giving way to new stories of factionalism, economic mismanagement and corruption.

Seeking external endorsement for Kurdish aspirations should not be done at the expense of local political and intuitional legitimacy. The referendum and ultimately sovereignty could bring about the ire of Kurdistan's unfriendly neighbors, which means the KRG needs the support of its population as much as that of its faraway allies. Therefore, for their long-term statehood quest to be taken seriously, the Kurds need to recommit to the democratic process and invest in state institutions. To that end, the referendum and state building need not be sequential or mutually exclusive. Here, the Kurds can learn a key lesson from Israel, whose success despite the odds impresses the Kurds.

Kurds often credit Israel's chance at statehood to American support. Not entirely. Israel's success story owes more to its commitment to democracy, inclusive governance and rule of law -- domestic legitimating characteristics that attract international political and economic support. The foundations of these institutions predate the Israeli flag and currency.

As it marches ahead with the referendum, the KRG owes it to its citizens and the world, whose support it seeks, to recommit to a good-governance agenda. Whether or not it will eventually gain statehood status, the KRG needs to have an independent and professional judiciary that rigorously upholds the rule of law; a private-sector economy driven by small businesses and entrepreneurs, not government patronage; a strong parliament that is a coequal branch of government with the Executive; a flourishing civil society and free press that provide oversight and accountability; and an education sector that teaches young people to be citizens, not subjects.

These are hallmarks of strong, prosperous and democratic states. Working to achieve them must not wait until after independence -- that is what every dysfunctional post-colonial state has claimed. Sadly, there is little in the KRG's current political arrangement that prevents its evolution along these lines.

With outside help, the KRG has made some headway in improving governance. For example, the World Bank is helping restructure and diversify the KRG's oil-dependent economy, and the U.S., United Kingdom and German governments are helping professionalize the Kurdish Peshmerga. International auditing firms are boosting the transparency of the region's petroleum sector. Such external help is necessary and therefore welcome. Ultimately, however, the KRG needs to invest in its own institutional capacity to enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry.

This is a realistic vision precisely because the KRG has been moving in this direction since 1991 -- fitfully and imperfectly, yes, but progress has nonetheless been undeniable. Building such institutions is the real journey that Kurds must now accelerate -- not about borders and flags and seats at the UN, aspirations beyond Kurdish control, but the hard work of better governing the territory under their control.

Democratic and effective governance, in turn, will advance the legitimacy of the Kurdish statehood quest. The referendum is a Kurdish knock on the door of the community of nations. Deserving a state won't cut it; the KRG needs to act like one.

And this is where the Kurds need help and encouragement from their friends. Since 1991, the United States has invested in the KRG's democracy and stability. An independent Kurdistan remains a cause worth pursuing, and the

Kurdish referendum is the right way to go about that. Ultimately, however, true statehood is less about internationally recognized lines on a map than what happens (or doesn't) inside those lines.

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