

# Will the Referendum Lead to an Independent Kurdish State?

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Since February 2016 the public sector in Kurdistan has protested corruption and unpaid wages. For the first time in 25 years, Kurdish protesters are publicly showing their disappointment in the government. Meanwhile, the KDP's Massoud Barzani, whose term as president has technically come and gone, has begun a campaign for Kurdish independence. Yet mounting frustrations with the government may bode ill for a public referendum on an independent Kurdistan.

The present demonstrations differ from past examples of civil unrest both in terms of the protesters' backgrounds and their objectives. These demonstrations have now incorporated demands for KRG leaders to step down and dissolve the government. And although these are civil protests, members of the security forces and Peshmerga are also participating. Public schools, universities, hospitals, and courts across the region have shut down, and even Erbil—a traditional bastion of stability—has experienced protests.

The reasons for this increase in discontent are clear: public sector employee salaries have not been paid since September 2015 and recent austerity measures have included salary cuts of up to 75 percent. The main catalysts for the protests, however, stem from the Kurdish government's substantial legislative and practical failures.

This is evidenced by President Barzani's focus on the issue of independence when the Kurdish region is being rocked by angry protests, clashes between Peshmerga forces and ISIS terrorists, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s \$25 billion of debt, a worsening Erbil-Baghdad relationship, and ambiguous relations with Ankara and Tehran. Meanwhile, official EU and U.S. delegates are criticizing the region for faltering democracy, a lack of revenue transparency, and wasteful budgeting. The referendum does not present an antidote to any of these issues.

Local economic experts agree that the Kurdish market is off balance, with the Kurdistan market's consumption far outpacing its production, in part due to a lack of robust manufacturing and service industries, agricultural output, and tourism.

The KRG attempted a successful economy solely with oil revenues, beginning to export oil independently in 2013.

Without informing Parliament, the KDP also signed a 50 year contract with Turkey's AKP to export oil directly to Turkey. The KRG Minister of Natural Resources claimed in 2015 that, "through directly exporting oil, the KRG can generate more revenue than the budget share allocated for the region by Baghdad."

In protest to Erbil's new oil policy, Baghdad halted the budget allocated to Erbil, triggering a financial crisis during 2015-2016 in the KRG's public sector. The KRG now claims that this, along with the major drop in oil prices, the war against ISIS, and failed management, has made paying government employees currently impossible.

Currently, the KRG is turning to extracting and exporting natural gas, estimated at 5.7 trillion cubic meters, hoping to become Turkey's most reliable source for natural gas. According to a contract between the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and Turkish General Energy, the MNR must provide Turkey with 4 billion cubic meters of natural gas by 2017. Some Kurdish politicians believe this step can help Kurdistan achieve an independent economy, but exporting natural gas to Turkey in front of Baghdad, Iran, and Russia might pose a major threat to Kurdistan's political existence.

Political fracturing is also eroding the Kurdish region's security. In the war against ISIS alone, there have been 8,000 Peshmerga wounded and more than 1,300 killed. Despite efforts beginning in 2005 to unite the Peshmerga forces from their disparate elements, parliament reports indicate that Peshmerga forces remain divided between the PUK, KDP, and the Ministry of Peshmerga. Each month 60,000 anonymous members of forces, names and ranks unknown to the parliament and Ministry of Peshmerga receive their salary from the Ministry of Peshmerga while 53,000 identified members of forces are receiving their salary from the Ministry.

Efforts to unify the Kurdish region's fighting forces were halted by the 2014 cabinet and currently, only 14 brigades of Peshmerga forces are united. Adding to the instability, the KDP removed the former Peshmerga Minister from power last October following political disputes between the two parties.

Both economic and security setback have left the outlook in Kurdistan grim. ISIS's threats towards the region continue and Peshmerga are fighting this insidious force on behalf of the world on the Kurdish region's border. Yet the KRG cannot provide adequate salaries or a non-partisan and well-trained Peshmerga forces.

The Kurdish region's intelligence service is even more complicatedly partisan. The Kurdistan Security Council, established in 2011 by Parliament, combined what had previously been known as the Peshmerga Intelligence Agency, Security (Asaish) and Intelligence Agency. The aims of the Security Council are to exchange intelligence, provide security and stability for Kurdistan residents, and protect legal and constitutional principles in the region, but these aims have not yet been completed. Moreover, the Security Council is composed exclusively of KDP and PUK officers, excluding the Kurdish region's other political parties. Even within this two-party organization, KDP controls the main joints of the Security Council and PUK members are discriminated against. Although the Security Council constituents proved successful in their fight against ISIS, it has relatively failed in maintaining the region's legal and constitutional principles during the ISIS offensives launched on Kurdistan in August 2014. Nor did the Security Council ensure the president's departure from the position when his term ended in August 2015. Instead, the Security Council has agreed to the deactivation of the parliament and barred its speaker. If such measures continue, the Security Council, instead of a serving as a shield to protect Kurdistan from external threats, becomes a sword used against Kurdish internal opponents.

These are all indications that the Kurds are not prepared to establish their own independent state. And now, after many members of the Peshmerga have sold munitions and guns to pay their rent or provide necessities for their families, many no longer have cash for transportation to return to their assignments. This is not a sustainable situation, and said forces are now threatening to overthrow the government.

These protests are unique in Kurdish history. Until 2003, protests in Kurdistan were against the Ba'ath party and

demanded western support for Kurds. Afterwards protesters demanded political rights for Kurds in the new Iraq until 2007. Then, demonstrations began highlighting internal demands. The Christians in Duhok held demonstrations in 2008 requesting autonomic rights in their region, which indicated a breakdown of social bonds in Kurdistan. In 2010, the protesters demanded national and religious rights, defending freedom of political activities. A protest occurred in May 2010 in front of the Parliament office in Sulaimani requesting Parliament to form an independent committee to investigate the case of a murdered journalist and find the killers. Many believed he was murdered for criticizing the government.

After the Arab Spring, bloody protests erupted in 2011 across various areas of Kurdistan. People lost trust in the authorities when they failed to investigate the subsequent violence or address the protests' demands. This wave of unrest inspired Kurdish Islamists, who in December 2011 protested in Duhok and Zakho against liquor stores, burning down shops. In the spring of 2013, the Islamists in Erbil protested at Parliament and created political and religious unrest in the capital. Since then, protests have become routine and created social and political instability. Despite attempts to crack down on protesters in Erbil, such as the arrest of activists planning to protest citizens' living conditions, there were peaceful protests and strikes in Erbil until the beginning of February 2016. The strikes have paralyzed the government, as well as the public demanding change in government and an end to corruption.

Failed economic projects, a misguided oil policy, and an inability to build strategic infrastructure indicate that the region is not prepared for independence. All focus should instead be on security; although Peshmerga forces continue to fight ISIS, a lack of salary payments and starvation are weakening Kurdish resistance at the front lines.

Some authorities have used the region's intelligence agencies to threaten internal critics and opponents instead of providing this stability and constitutional organizations in the region. As Kurdish authorities have already played the independence referendum card several times at the wrong times and places, it no longer has much effectiveness in exciting domestic solidarity. It does, however, save the authorities from criminal prosecution. These factors have created immense disappointment and frustration among the Kurdish people even in light of celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the uprising that overthrew the Ba'athist regime. The current geopolitics of Kurdistan and regional countries' negative stances toward an independent Kurdish state are additional strikes against the independence project.

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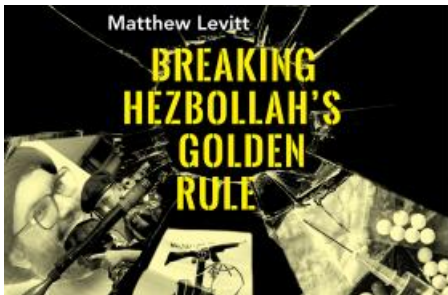
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