

The Tortuous Path to an Independent Kurdistan

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During his one week visit to the United States in early May, the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) president Masoud Barzani publicly and openly discussed the idea of independence for Kurdistan in Iraq. While President Barack Obama did not express support for this move, Barzani's actions are still significant. By openly discussing independence, Barzani broke a long-held taboo that insisted discussion of an independent Kurdistan occur behind closed doors so as not to antagonize the central Baghdadi government or neighboring countries. The president's words also prove that he has become more confident that the idea of an independent Kurdistan could become supported internationally due to the recent shifting tides in the Middle East region.

After Barzani's break with tradition, several senior international officials also began to publicly mention an independent Kurdistan. Days after Barzani's statement, Hungary's prime minister Victor Orban expressed public support for an independent Kurdish state during Barzani's visit to Hungary. Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, the one-time Vice President of Saddam Hussein who now heads the Ba`athi faction of the Islamic State (ISIS), also unexpectedly implied his support for a Kurdish state during a long speech. Even Anwar Eshki, a former Saudi general and ambassador to the United States, called in June for the establishment of Greater Kurdistan that would include the Kurds of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

With open discussion of an independent Kurdistan more visible than ever, the realistic prospects and challenges of the state remain unclear. Meanwhile, those who are skeptical or outright oppose the idea have raised manifold arguments doubting the state's viability. These arguments have included Kurdistan's lack of access to the sea and consequent dependence on neighboring states, and the push-back from those neighboring states, namely Turkey and Iran, due to their fears of an independent Kurdistan encouraging Kurdish separatists within their own countries. Critics have also mentioned KRG's economic dependence on the central government in Baghdad, the weakness of the KRG's Peshmerga forces exposed by its war with ISIS, and internal Kurdish rivalries, corruption, and lack of common agreed language that will hinder state building. More broadly, these critics have argued that a Kurdish state will destabilize the region, and that the United States, along with many in the international community, will not support an independent Kurdistan since Washington still adheres to the concept of a unified Iraq. Indeed, it is not difficult to find reasons to suggest the impossibility of a Kurdish state.

However, after the "Arab Spring" and the rise of ISIS, the reigning accepted truths of the region have paradigmatically shifted, with the international understanding of the Middle East shifting along with it. Many of these objections to a Kurdish state that have been raised no longer apply to the Kurdish region of today, especially as

nation-states such as Iraq has proved to be a failed state. What has not wavered is the commitment of the Kurdish people in Iraq to the goal of an independent Kurdish state, which they have sought for decades. Geographically speaking, Kurdistan would not be the first landlocked state to survive. Switzerland, Austria and Hungary are only the most successful examples of forty eight landlocked countries in existence.

And while it is true that Turkey and Iran opposed an independent Iraqi Kurdistan in earlier years, these states' tacit attitudes towards the KRG have changed. Now both states appear to implicitly accept the concept of a Kurdish entity distinct from Iraq. In particular, Turkey has expedited Kurdish economic independence by allowing the establishment of oil and gas pipelines between Kurdistan and Turkey outside of Baghdad's control. For sure this will increase Erbil dependency on Ankara, but the opposite is also true. For example, Joint economic ventures have strengthened, with 100,000 Turks working in Kurdistan and an annual bilateral trade exceeding \$8 billion. Turkish politics also show signs of explicit recognition of an independent Kurdistan: President Tayyip Erdogan recently stated that Kurdish independence in Iraq was an internal Iraqi issue and that Turkey would remain neutral. This statement was a far cry from the Turkish government's formerly unbending position of support for Iraqi unity.

As for Iran, while it may attempt to use its proxies to prevent an independent Kurdistan, Iran itself would most likely avoid launching a conventional war against the KRG should it declare independence. Potential Turkish backing of a Kurdish state makes this even more unlikely. Thus, it seems that Kurdistan may reclaim its historic role as a buffer zone between these two giants.

Regarding military concerns, ISIS' sudden rise did threaten the KRG and expose its military weaknesses but has also provided benefits to the cause of Kurdish independence. The collapse of the Iraqi army in response to ISIS' advances in June 2014 allowed the KRG to take control of a number of disputed territories, including the oil-rich region of Kirkuk. On the national level, the struggle against ISIS significantly boosted Kurdish national feelings and granted urgency to the goal of independence. According to Kurdish specialist Dr. Nahro Zagros, radical Islamism's new association with ISIS has also enhanced secularization trends within Kurdish society. It A proof of the more secular tendencies of Kurdish society was that Islamist parties gained only 16% of votes in the 2013 parliamentary election.

Despite criticisms of the Peshmerga's effectiveness, Kurdistan also proved its mettle when its forces became the only bulwark against ISIS after the large and well-equipped Iraqi army collapsed. KRG military performance has in turn positively affected its international standing, and Kurdistan has gained a reputation as a pro-Western force of stability. Accordingly, many states—European states in particular—are developing stronger diplomatic and economic relations with the KRG and providing direct and indirect military support. This new respect has naturally influenced the frequency and tone with which Kurdish independence is discussed in international forums.

While the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in general and the Barzanis in particular seem determined to achieve independence sooner rather than later, there are still some roadblocks to independence that have not been solved by the shifting fortunes of the Middle East. The most serious of these is the ongoing controversy that the leading KDP party faces over to the potential renewal of Masoud Barzani's presidency after his term ends in August. Kurdish opposition, namely the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Gorran and the two Islamic parties oppose this renewal. Meanwhile, the KRG must also tackle issues regarding the constitutional draft currently in the process of finalization, which must be submitted to a referendum for ratification and would provide clearer procedures for parliamentary and presidential elections.

An external stumbling block is the Obama administration's continued support of a unified Iraq. Yet the administration cannot stop the momentum that is taking place in Kurdistan and may be forced to adapt its policies to developments on the ground. Furthermore, a new administration in the United States may similarly change U.S. policy towards an independent Kurdistan.

Consequently, it seems that now more than ever an independent Kurdistan may overcome the obstacles hindering it to become a reality. Masrour Barzani, Masoud's son and chief of Kurdish intelligence, describes the expected split in the following way: "We are not pushing for forced separation. We are talking about amicable divorce." As to the question of timing, President Barzani stressed that the process of developing an independent Kurdistan was "certainly coming", and "will not stop. It will not [take] a step back." Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has discussed independence in more specific terms outlining a time-frame of five to six years while asserting that Iraq is a failed state there was consequently no Iraqi nation from which to separate. Sirwan Barzani, a military commander and nephew of President Barzani, provided what is perhaps the boldest assessment, claiming that, "we will be independent within two years."

While the timing is unclear and the obstacles still significant, one thing is certain: going back to the arms of Baghdad is no longer an option for the Kurds. ❖

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