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Issue Brief

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Kurdish Referendum 2017: A Threat to Regional Stability?

October 05, 2017

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On Monday October 2, 2017, a dozen Iranian artillery tanks rolled out to the Parviz Khan Border point between Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan region.¹ The show of force is said to be a part of the joint military drills being conducted between the Iranian and Iraqi military forces, but it is in fact an open warning to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) after it conducted a referendum on September 25 to demand independence from Iraq.²



Unless handled tactfully, this Kurdish referendum shall be a preamble to several domestic and regional disturbances. The fleeting moment of relief after the liberation of Mosul was rather short-lived for the Iraqi government, as soon afterwards the Kurds decided to move ahead with their demand for secession through this vote. The KRG forces had fought besides western forces and the Iraqi military to counter the terror being spread by the notorious forces of the Islamic State (IS). However, after tackling the threat of IS, the Kurds seemed to have gained more poise that could just easily be a mistaken sense of self-reliance that, according to the popular opinion, seems to have gripped their leader, Masud Barzani. Barzani feels that his people have earned the right to rule themselves as he said in an interview, “We are not a part of Iraq ... We refuse to be subordinates.”³ The international community has largely opposed the referendum considering it yet another fissure in the already fragile state of affairs in the Middle East. The only country that has welcomed this development is Israel, which should tell the Kurds something.

The United States, Turkey and Iran strongly advised the KRG against holding this referendum. The United States believes that the gains from the war against IS would be reversed if this step is taken towards the

¹ Raya Jalabi, “Iran sends tanks to border with Iraq's Kurdish region, Kurdish official says”, *Reuters*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-iran/iran-sends-tanks-to-border-with-iraqs-kurdish-region-kurdish-official-says-idUSKCN1C71EF>

² News Desk, “Iran, Iraq hold to joint military drills along Kurdistan region border”. *ISNA*, October 2, 2017, <http://en.isna.ir/news/96071004785/Iran-Iraq-to-hold-joint-military-drills-along-Kurdistan-region>

³ Martin Chulov & Paul Johnson, “Barzani on the Kurdish referendum: We refuse to be subordinates”, *The Guardian*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/22/masoud-barzani-on-the-kurdish-referendum-iraq-we-refuse-to-be-subordinates>

division of Iraq. Following the previous American policy of supporting One Iraq, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made it clear in his press statement on September 29, that they would neither recognize nor support any move to balkanize Iraq.⁴ While the United States bites back a harsher retort, Turkey has voiced out its condemnation loud and clear. This referendum is also speculated to be a stepping stone for a more ambitious bid of creating a larger Kurdish state by joining Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria. Hence, Turkey's apprehensions are understandable as this referendum could incite Kurdish separatism within its own borders.⁵ The Turkish parliament has mandated the deployment of troops along the Iraqi border as the widespread narrative in Turkey remains that the Iraqi Kurdish referendum poses a direct threat to Turkey's national security interests.⁶ It also reiterates that after the 3-year long fight against the menace of Daesh, such a secessionist move will endanger Iraq's political unity and territorial integrity which is no doubt already rather precariously balanced. Being a stakeholder closely involved in Iraq to help liberate its cities from the clutches of IS, Turkey feels strongly about any step that could endanger the security and stability of the region. However, popular opinion regarding Turkey's apprehension here is that it fears that separatism may rear its ugly head within its own territory as well.

Among the many antagonists of the referendum, Iran has also taken umbrage. Along with military drills being conducted in solidarity with Baghdad, Tehran has also rubbed shoulders with Ankara to stress that such a move could destabilize domestic, as well as the regional state of affairs in the Middle East. Tehran imposed fuel sanctions on September 30, flights from Iran to the two main airports in Iraqi Kurdistan have been suspended and Iranian officials have also met with their Turkish and Iraqi counterparts to reportedly take some joint measures such as trade sanctions and increased military cooperation against the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq.⁷ The regional dynamics in Syria have brought Iran much closer to Turkey and the two also share a common stance on this development. However, there will be limits to their respective resistance to the Kurd cause. Tehran and Ankara's national security interests may have aligned against the Kurdish call for independence, but the Iranians have always enjoyed good

⁴ Osama Golpy, "Abadi wins ISIS war, Maliki wins elections: Time for US to shift policy on Kurdistan", *RUDAW*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/02102017>

⁵ Asli Aydintasbas, "Why the Kurdish Referendum is none of Turkey's Business", *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/10/02/why-the-kurdish-referendum-is-none-of-turkeys-business/?utm_term=.6ab0dd2739f6

⁶ News Desk, "Iraqi Kurdistan vote poses direct threat to Turkish national security: Turkey", *Press TV*, September 23, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/09/23/536162/Turkey-National-Security-Council-Iraq-Kurdistan-referendum-national-security-threat>

⁷ Fazel Hawramy, "Iran's pressure on Kurds could backfire", *AL-MONITOR*, October 3, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/iran-kurdistan-krq-referendum-sanctions-policy-next-steps.html>
<http://thegreekobserver.com/world/article/21464/iraq-iran-turkey-put-economic-pressure-iraqi-kurds/>

relations with the Iraqi Kurds due to border proximity and oil trade.⁸ This puts Tehran in a rather tricky position. It would bode well for Iran to voice a rhetoric that could be a balancing act for the greater good of the region.

As far as the sagacity of this move by the Kurds is concerned, there could be several gaping holes of logic concerning its longevity and impact. There are concerns even among the Iraqi Kurds themselves that the driving force behind this move is economical than patriotic. A former *Peshmerga* fighter commented on this aspect of the independence vote saying, “This referendum is just about money and is not in the interests of the nation. I won’t be voting.”⁹ The Kurd struggle for statehood has been in place for more than a century and the Kurds in Iraq have suffered greatly at the hands of Saddam Hussein who even used chemical weapons to kill them in an alarming multitude. However, the recent government, as well as the US and its allies joined hands with Kurds for fighting a common enemy and for three years, they have fought alongside one another. This is what has perplexed Baghdad, as well as the American authorities that the KRG decided to move forth with this vote of independence in face of all the resistance at this critical juncture in time. The reason, many say, is purely financial. The KRG is dissatisfied with the amount of funds allocated to it which have significantly decreased in the aftermath of the conflict in Iraq. Thus, in face of impending poverty, the KRG moved forward with the vote.

It is interesting to note here that the truly alienated areas of the Kurdish territory in Iraq are the ones grappling with actual poverty, not those in the capital city of Erbil. These are also the areas where resides the truly destitute population of Kurds which are not only against the referendum but some are unaware of its very occurrence. A poor Kurdish shepherd when asked about his opinion about the referendum said, “Referendum? What is it? I don’t know anything about it.”¹⁰ Some among the cognizant are opposed to it on grounds that such a move would make no difference as it only benefits the ones who are in power, “Whatever the outcome of the referendum, the benefits will not be for the people, they will be for the politicians”, said a former female *Peshmerga* fighter.¹¹

⁸ News Desk, “Kurdish-Iran border trade hindered by Iraqi checkpoints”, *RUDAW*, July 17, 2016, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/170720163>

⁹ Tom Westcott, “A country called Kurdistan?”, *IRIN*, September 13, 2017, https://www.irinnews.org/special-report/2017/09/13/country-called-kurdistan?gclid=Cj0KCQjwx8fOBRD7ARIsAPVq-NnXeOZ0JcjlhHtD1Fu9TWjeg_iIlVYLxsPldZrIACXinLB1nRCtUHAAaAqulEALw_wcB

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The KRG has had to face a logistical nightmare in the process of conducting this vote as many were bereft of any understanding of how it will work. Also, word of the referendum did not appear to have reached the region's northeastern border areas, where farmers move their families to fertile mountainous pastures every summer when the snows melt. Six million Iraqi Kurds and long-term residents of Iraqi Kurdistan were expected to register, according to Mahmoud at the electoral commission. But an Iraqi ration card, along with Kurdish identification, was required to prove eligibility, and this reportedly proved contentious as many in the diaspora no longer had these cards to hand.¹² But the vote was conducted nevertheless and it indicated a 97% majority of Kurds yearning for independence and statehood.

What is not clear is the next step for the KRG in face of the Turkish, Iraqi and Iranian punitive sanctions that could even limit supply of essentials to the Iraqi Kurds, troop deployment by these three countries and lack of international support.¹³ However, it has managed to unite states that were never allies of one another but that may or may not last depending upon the fervor of the Kurd cause and its ambiguous patriarchs who might not continue to fuel it forever. One thing is clear though, the struggle is far from over.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ News Desk, "Iran, Turkey back Iraq's integrity, voice opposition to Kurdish secession", *PRESS TV*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/10/02/537221/Iran-Iraq-Turkey-Kurdistan-Mohammad-Baqeri-Hulusi-Akar-terrorism>