



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 11

The Consequences of the Kurdistan Independence Referendum: Relations between KRG – Iran/ the GCC

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Abstract

This workshop examines the potential implications of an independent Kurdistan as well as the regional powers' policies, namely the Gulf States and Iran, to such an occurrence. The study will focus on the role of the KRG in regional policies –all of which have substantial Kurdish populations – in response to the Kurdish independence. While some analysts have hailed the referendum of September 2017 as a bold step, others have criticised it for heightening tensions or anticipated tensions in the region, citing some of the demonstrations that took place against it. Iraq, Turkey responded negatively while Iran aggressively whereas the US and the UK both expressed strong disapproval, while Russia tacitly signalled acceptance of the notion of Kurdish independence. The GCC remained focused on the traditional one Iraq policy and the state's unity relating it directly to the process of Referendum.

Description and Rationale

Objectives and scope:

The KRG initiated the non-binding referendum, in which more than 90 percent voted 'Yes' to secession, on September 25 last year. Kurds are one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world, primarily distributed across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, with a semiautonomous region established at the intersection following the Gulf War in 1991. The region has been federated since 2005 following the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and leaders in the region, Iraqi and Kurdish alike, have worked diligently to strengthen control over affairs in the North. Tensions between the KRG and Baghdad, primarily stemming from the distribution of resources and oil control over disputed territories, have engendered further desire for distancing between KRG and Iraqi central government. Consequently, the question of sovereignty – today in contestation – concerns Iraq vis-à-vis the KR's potential independence and the impact on regional dynamics of any new form of governance that might stem constitute this workshop's main foci.

Negotiations over prospective independence have intensified in the past years. In May 2017, the KRG formally articulated its intention to hold a referendum to the UN Security Council. However, the process had effectively began a year earlier when the president of the KR, Masoud Barzani, back then in February 2016 affirmed that a referendum would be held in the KRI among on the issue of independence. The ostensible goal of the referendum was not to immediately declare the independence of the people of Kurdistan, but to negotiate with Baghdad. Earlier, in 2005, an informal referendum had been held in which 99 per cent of the participating electorate voted in favour of independence.

Iran and Turkey

During talks in Tehran in the lead-up to the vote, the presidents of Iran and Turkey vowed to closely collaborate to prevent the perceived disintegration of Iraq and Syria, and to oppose the drive by Iraqi Kurds for independence. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani stated: "We want security and stability in the Middle East. The independence referendum in Iraq's Kurdistan is a sectarian plot by foreign countries and is rejected by Tehran and Ankara", adding: "We will not accept a change of borders under any circumstances." Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meanwhile, stated: "We have already said we don't recognize the referendum in northern Iraq. We have taken some measures already with Iran and the Iraqi central government, but stronger steps will be taken soon." In essence, while both Turkey and Iran oppose Kurdish independence in principle, their approach to the issue has been markedly different. On the one hand, Turkey has very good security-related and economic relations with Erbil. But on the other, Iran has far more influence within Iraq. The main reasons Iran opposes Iraqi Kurdish independence are that, firstly, the KRG shares a border with Syria, which poses an obstacle to the realisation of Iran's long-term agenda (establishing a Shiite Crescent). Secondly, Iran is concerned that its own Kurdish population may rise up to claim similar rights in the future. Thirdly Iran is wary of Saudi Arabia's attitude to proposed Iraqi Kurdish independence.

The Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) states and the KRG

The relations between GCC member countries and the KRG are limited, as the Gulf states have had to maintain a balance between building relations with the Kurds and maintaining those with, and their interests in, the broader Iraqi state. The UAE has the most extensive relations and political ties with the Kurdish capital of Erbil, and placed a consulate general in post there as early as 2012. This move was subsequently carried out by Kuwait in 2015, then Saudi Arabia in 2016, a tangible upgrade in relations that was conducted despite Iran's objections. KRG president Masoud Barzani visited a number of Gulf countries in 2015, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the KRG granted Emirati, Qatari, and Kuwaiti citizens the right of non-visa entry in 2014. At the same time, however, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar do not have high-level representation with the KRG.

With regards to the responses of the GCC states in the run-up to the referendum, strong support for the vote was voiced in Saudi and Emirati traditional and social media, but both governments formally expressed concerns about Iraq's territorial integrity and the need for stability. Bahrain also advised Kurdish leaders not to rush into a move that might destabilize Iraq. Kuwait was even more forthright, emphasising that its primary interests lay in the continued national unity and independence of Iraq. Oman did not take a public position. Qatar took the strongest Gulf Arab position in opposition to the Kurdish vote, expressing "deep concern" that the referendum could "pose a threat to the unity of Iraq and the security and stability of the region."

The KRG and the great powers in the region

The Kurdistan Regional Government has a good relationship with the UK and the US, especially since the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, when it declared the referendum, both Western countries strongly condemned it. By contrast, Russia and Israel had a very different response. The UK believed that it had proposed an alternative plan which would have seen negotiations take place between the government of Iraq and the KRG to address all areas of dispute. This would have provided the opportunity for the aspirations of the Kurdish people to be met. It is regrettable that certain segments of Kurdish leadership rejected the proposal. Commenting on the referendum, the UK's then-foreign secretary Boris Johnson said: "The UK does not support this referendum and continues to back the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. We believe that any referendum should be agreed with the Government of Iraq." Meanwhile, the KRG has enjoyed a close relationship with the US, building up a reservoir of goodwill across the government. But Washington suggested the Referendum was not timely for fear that would disrupt Iraqi unity and hamper the fight against Islamic State.

Another significant regional power in the region is Russia, which has sought to develop its economic relations with the KRG and since the referendum has attempted to maintain a balance between its relations with Baghdad and Erbil. An illuminating statement was published by Russia's foreign ministry on September 27, two days after the referendum. It made the following points: "We maintain our unwavering commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the friendly Iraq and other Middle Eastern states"; "Moscow respects the national aspirations of the

Kurds”; “We believe that all disputes that may exist between the Iraqi federal government and the government of the Autonomous Kurdish Region can and should be solved through constructive and respectful dialogue, with a view to devising a mutually acceptable formula of coexistence within a single Iraqi state”. Meanwhile in Israel, a month before the referendum the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated: “Israel supports the establishment of an independent Kurdish state”. Senior Israeli officials have said Netanyahu's comments reflect official Israeli policy on the matter in light of the referendum. A number of these officials, including the late president Shimon Peres and defence minister Avigdor Lieberman, have in the past expressed support for Kurdish independence. Earlier this month (September 2018), justice minister Ayelet Shaked said: "Israel and countries of the West have a major interest in the establishment of the state of Kurdistan. I think that the time has come for the US to support the process."

Anticipated Participants

The questions that this proposal will seek to answer include:

- Iraqi Kurdistan’s independence a security challenge to Iran, Iraq and Turkey.
- What were the pressures on the KRG to hold the referendum for independence?
- How have the KRG’s neighbours, Iran, Iraq and Turkey responded to its efforts for autonomy and independence in the past, and how has this changed.
- Will Kurdistan use the result of referendum to negotiate with Baghdad in a process that will ensure a smooth and peaceful independence.
- What might the KRG’s previous policy towards the GCC states suggest about future of the Kurds in Iraq?
- What can we expect of the KRG’s foreign policies towards the GCC and Iran if the result of the referendum is successfully negotiated?
- How might the KRG work with the GCC states to find a way to stop destabilizing actions of Iran in the region?
- Will the Gulf states support the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan in the future?
- Why are some forces in the region desperate to ensure this goal is not achieved?
- Could the UK and US take a mediatory role in the crisis unfolding between the KRG and Iraqi central government?
- How will a post-referendum KRG compete with the US and Russia for regional influence?
- Did Israel support Kurdistan’s referendum? And if so, in what capacity?
- Did the US and the UK left behind the Kurds for the Kurdistan independence?
- Why Iran is wary of Saudi Arabia’s attitude to proposed Iraqi Kurdish independence.
- The future of Islamic State in Kurdistan Region and Iraq.

Workshop Director Profiles

Irfan Azeez Azeez Al-Sabah doctoral Fellow at Durham University's School of Government and International Affairs (SGIA). He is part of a research project titled "Transnational Language, Transient Identities and the Crisis of the Arab Region". This project directed by Professor Anoush Esteshami at the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham university. In his doctoral research, Irfan Azeez investigates how IS has shaped Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)-Turkey relations and KRI-Iran relations. More broadly, the research aims to deepen the understanding of the role of non-state actors in the Middle Eastern region. Azeez completed a Master of Law at Kingston University in Arbitration Law and Alternative Dispute Resolution.

Irfan Azeez is the former Secretary General of the Kurdistan Students' Union. He is also political analyst. Azeez grew up in the Iranian and Iraqi parts of Kurdistan region during the period when the Kurds were being persecuted by the Iraqi regime.

Irfan Azeez is the former Editor-in-Chief of Kongra newspaper, Xabat magazine, Xema magazine, Rwanin newspaper, and Nvar magazine. Moreover, he is the former director of the Xema Centre for the researcher centre's business and political relations. He is the author of the books "Strategic Relations Between Kurdistan and Turkey" and "Future Outlooks for Iraq's Political Situation".

Dr. Marianna Charountaki is a Lecturer in Kurdish Politics and International Relations at the School of History, Politics and International Relations, University of Leicester. She is also the Director of Kurdistan International Studies Unit (2016-2018) and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research interests range from international relations and foreign policy analysis to the international relations of the broader Middle East. She is the author of the books *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, (Routledge, 2010) and *Iran and Turkey: International and Regional Engagement in the Middle East*, (I. B. Tauris, 2018) as well as articles in *Harvard International Review*, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Journal of American Foreign Policy Interests*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* and *Journal of Arabian Studies*.

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