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Why the Kurds Are Seeking Independence From Iraq

By Patrick Cockburn
September 25, 2017

On 10 April 2003, I was driving on a road west of Kirkuk, waiting for the city to be captured by the Kurdish Peshmerga and worried that we might arrive there before the Iraqi army had withdrawn or broken up. We could see no cars from Kirkuk coming towards us, which might mean that there was fighting still going on.

We could see abandoned Iraqi army camps beside the road but no looters, a bad sign in Iraq in wartime where only extreme danger will deter looters from trying to grab the richest pickings. We were hawking about what to do, when a car appeared from the direction of Kirkuk whose driver leaned out the window to shout: "It is finished – the way to Kirkuk is open."

An orgy of looting was going on inside the city, with the theft of everything from mattresses to fire engines. I saw two looters drive away a large yellow bulldozer they had just stolen. The Kurdish Peshmerga had taken over the city a few hours earlier, saying that they were there to fill the vacuum left by the disintegration of the Iraqi army and to restore order, though they did little to stop the looters.

They had repeatedly promised the Americans that they had no plans to seize Kirkuk and, even now, were insisting that their occupation was only temporary. A senior Kurdish officer standing

in the wreckage of the governor's office told me that "we're expecting to withdraw some of our men within 45 minutes".

Fourteen years later, the Kurds still control Kirkuk, the oil capital of northern Iraq with a mixed population of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, as well as much of the surrounding province. The leaders of the US-led coalition during the invasion had feared that, if the Kurds captured the city, they would provoke a Turkish invasion, since Turkey had declared that it would not tolerate such a thing. I wrote an article describing the Kurdish takeover with the headline "Kurdish victory provokes fears of Turkish invasion".

It never happened: in the years following 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan has been like the eye at the centre of a hurricane, always brushed by disastrous winds but avoiding complete catastrophe.

Journalists reporting on Kirkuk frequently referred to it as a "powder keg" because of its ethnic and sectarian divisions along with its oil wealth, which so many different parties would like to control.

The cliché is a useful one for reporters in Iraqi Kurdistan in general, because it suggests that an explosion will happen without saying when. Again and again, predictions of Turkish invasions or war between the Peshmerga and Iraqi central government forces over disputed territories have proved false or premature.

The referendum on independence for the Kurdish controlled territory, due to take place on 25 September, is the latest event billed as threatening the stability of Iraq and a good chunk of the Middle East. Seldom has a democratic poll in such a small place been so universally denounced by so many international powers, including the US, UK, Germany and France.

A White House statement emphasises "to the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that the referendum is distracting from efforts to defeat Isis and stabilise the liberated areas. Holding the referendum in disputed areas is particularly provocative and destabilising."

Regional powers like Turkey and Iran have likewise demanded that the referendum be cancelled and threatened retaliation if it is not. In Baghdad, the Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has denounced it and the Supreme Court ruled that it was "unconstitutional". But for all the sound and fury, it looks as if the vote is going ahead.

A peculiarity of this hysterical reaction is that the referendum is non-binding and does not commit KRG President Masoud Barzani to doing anything concrete to achieve self-determination. He himself says that the purpose of the poll "is to tell the world that we want independence", adding that outside powers had believed that the calling of the referendum was merely "a pressure card", a ploy to extract concessions from Baghdad.

By pressing ahead with it, he believes he has put Kurdish independence firmly on the agenda. If nothing else, he has demonstrated that the international community is terrified by anything that destabilises Iraq and that the cooperation of the Kurds cannot be taken for granted.

Among the Iraqi Kurds, Barzani has already re-established his credentials as the standard bearer of Kurdish nationalism, defying threats and pleas for postponement or cancellation of the vote. Even Kurdish leaders opposed to it as too risky are calling for as large a “yes” vote as possible, so as not to undermine the demand for a Kurdish state.

The national issue also diverts attention from the corruption and incompetence of the KRG government and the dreadful condition of its economy. Barzani has scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections for 1 November, when he and his Kurdistan Democratic Party should benefit from an overwhelmingly positive referendum result 35 days earlier.

The political landscape of northern Iraq is changing in other ways. Isis is on the run and on Thursday the Iraqi army started an offensive against one of its last substantial enclaves at Hawija west of Kirkuk.

As always, calculating the political and military balance of power in Iraq is difficult because so many players are involved and the way they come together is unpredictable. How, for instance, will Abadi react to being treated so contemptuously by the KRG? His forces have just won a historic victory over Isis by recapturing Mosul after a nine-month siege. He will not want to lose the credit won then by being faced down by Barzani.

On the other hand, Baghdad’s hard-fought success at Mosul depended on the air support of the US-led coalition. Without it, the central government’s military strength is for the moment too modest to give it a military option against the Kurds.

There is another reason why the Kurdish leadership may show caution after the referendum, assuming there is no last-minute postponement: they have a lot to lose. The Kurdish demand for self-determination is not like that of the Algerians or Vietnamese after the Second World War because, in many respects, the KRG is already highly independent and has been so since 2003. Its government is stronger politically and militarily than many members of the UN. But it is also true that the Kurds’ real share of power within the nominally power-sharing government in Baghdad has been shrinking. For practical purposes Iraq is already two countries, despite the pretence that it is a unitary state.

The real constraint on self-determination for Iraqi Kurdistan is that, referendum or no referendum; it remains a minnow in shark-infested waters. The US and its allies will no longer need the Kurds to the degree they do today once Isis is defeated. The Iraqi central government will get stronger rather than weaker. The safest course for the Kurds is still a confederal power-sharing agreement with Baghdad, but so far neither side has had the will to make this happen.