Barzani’s Gamble

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The President of Kurdistan’s Regional Government (KRG), Masoud Barzani, proceeded with conducting an independence referendum on September 25, 2017, despite calls from the Iraqi central government, as well as major regional and international stakeholders to postpone it or to discuss possible alternatives with Baghdad. The referendum, which is legally not binding, is feared to end in a chaotic situation that might eventually lead to the dissolution of the Iraqi state. This article will attempt to analyze the feasibility of Iraqi Kurdish independence through analyzing the stances of the major domestic, regional and International players. It will further present the anticipated future scenarios of the independence.

Domestic Rifts

There are Kurdish political parties against the independence move, namely Gorran and Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal) parties. Both parties rejected holding referendum due to what they described as “complex circumstances marked by numerous crises and an uncertain future,” declaring the move as a dangerous step. Furthermore, they organized a “No for Now” campaign to express their opposition to the referendum. On the other hand, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the de facto ruler of Sulaymaniyah governorate, is internally divided between those who supports the referendum and those who supports Gorran’s stance. Nevertheless, it was more open to compromise. A senior Kurdish official from the PUK stated that they believe that Barzani should accept the “alternative” offered by the US, UK, and UN, which entails postponing referendum for two years in return for UN intervention to “solve the outstanding issues between the KRG and federal Iraqi government.”

The major reason behind this reluctance could be attributed to Barzani’s authoritarian rule. Barzani was supposed to step down three years ago at the end of his second term in 2013, yet he did not. In addition, he blocked the Iraqi Kurdish parliament from convening in October 2015, “after it tried to limit his powers and [questioned] how he will spend the oil revenues.” Furthermore, the Kurdish region of Iraq (KRI) have been suffering from an economic crisis, since 2014 that left civil servants and even Peshmerga’s salaries either utterly unpaid or partially paid. On the popular level, many Kurdish citizens, especially youth in Sulaymaniyah, expressed their opposition to the referendum, claiming that it is an attempt from the leaders to remain in power, and distracting the people from addressing the economic challenges. A recent survey estimated the total “yes” vote at 67 percent, indicating that their support decreased in comparison to the 99 percent approval vote attained in the 2005 non-binding referendum. In addition, 66 percent of Sulaymaniyah and Halabja will either vote against independence or abstain. The territorial borders of the current Kurdish region in Iraq are limited to three governorates, which are Irbil, Dahouk and Sulaymaniyah. However, the KRG insisted on including disputed territories such as the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, Sinjar, Makhmour and Khanafin to their future statelet. This move is disputed by the Iraqi central government, as well as ethnic minorities residing in these areas, especially Arabs and Turkmens. The disputed territories are of indispensable importance to the Kurdish state. The three governorates of the Iraqi Kurdish region holds about 2.9 percent of...
Iraq’s known oil reserves (115 billion barrel), whereas the other governorates, partially or totally in dispute, holds about 19.6 percent of the Iraqi oil reserves. Moreover, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a Shi’ite militia allied to Iran, are residing in the disputed territories, which causes frequent clashes with Peshmerga. For example in August, both forces clashed in Tuz Khormato, south of Kirkuk.

Iraqi Kurdistan is landlocked, its viability will depend on the consent of regional states, namely Turkey and Iran. Both states raised their concerns regarding the Kurdish secession movement in northern Iraq and its impact on their territorial integrity, given that both countries have a restive Kurdish population. Iran and Turkey have at their disposal a number of tools to deploy against Iraqi independence. These tools could be summarized as follows:

**Economic sanctions: Iraqi Kurdistan**

region (KRI) is a landlocked region, which is dependent on both Turkey and Iran in importing its consumer goods. According to Mustafa Sheikh Abdulrahman, the Head of the Union of Importer and Exporter of Kurdistan, the volume of Turkish and Iranian exports to the KRI reached 15 billion USD in 2016. The Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, hinted that Ankara may impose sanctions on the KRG, if Barzani insists on conducting the independence referendum as planned. Similar measures might be adopted by Iran, as the Secretary of Iranian Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani threatened to close all border crossings with KRI if it declared its independence. Moreover, the KRG is dependent on Turkey for exporting 85 percent of its oil to the international market via the Iraqi – Turkish pipeline. It is estimated that about 80 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan's economy is dependent on the oil revenues.

Therefore, Turkey could halt Kurdish oil exports, and stop selling electricity to the KRG. Military intimidation: Both Ankara and Tehran are increasing their cooperation against KRI potential independence. During the last visit by Iranian General Mohammad Baqeri to Ankara on August 15, 2017, both parties discussed various security issues including cooperation against Kurdish militants situated along the Turkish-Iranian borders. They further signaled their intention to resort to military options. Iran, periodically, bombs border villages with Iraqi Kurdistan and launches cross-border raids into northern Iraq to attack Kurdish militants. Such assaults aim to step up pressure on the KRG to dissuade it from moving towards secession. On the other hand, the Turkish army launched a highly visible military drill near the Habur border crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan, which will last until September 26, a day after the planned referendum. Both moves reveal the Turkish and Iranian intent to utilize all necessary tools, including military measures, to prevent Kurdish secession.

Absent International Support Both the United States and the EU opposed the referendum. On the US side, the Kurdish independence would not only lead to a civil war among different sectarian groups within Iraq, but it will unravel the borders of the neighboring countries, and distract the efforts to oust ISIS out of Syria and Iraq. The House of Armed Services Committee released a draft of the annual defense bill on June 2017 revealing that payments for the KRG are contingent upon Erbil’s participation in the government of a unified Iraq. On the other hand, Barzani failed to garner the support of the European parliament for secession. During his trip to Brussels, he met only two European MPs (out of 751 members), as well as some low-level diplomats. Throughout the meetings Barzani claimed that the Gorran Movement and the Kurdish Parliament attempted to conduct a coup against him. On the other hand, the EU is not ready to back a secession movement; especially in the context of Catalonia’s attempt to seek independence from Spain. Future Scenarios

the light of the abovementioned challenges, possible scenarios could be summarized according to the following:

A negotiated settlement (South Sudan scenario): Both the Iraqi central government and KRG might negotiate the terms of secession, and agree on delineating borders. This scenario would be preferable to the KRG, yet the possibility of its implementation remains slim. This is due to the fact that the federal parliament rejected the non-binding referendum. Moreover, as mentioned previously, both Turkey and Iran can adopt a number of measures to prevent the Kurdish statelet. Furthermore, Iraqi Kurdistan has no viable state institutions, as its security forces are still divided between KDP and PUK. The Quebec scenario: Quebec has tried to secede from Canada several times without much success. This scenario may be
applicable to the Iraqi case, if the Iraqi federal government rejected to acknowledge the result of the referendum, in addition to the Kurdish failure to garner regional or international support for its independence.

Crisis scenario: In this case, the Kurdish will declare their independence unilaterally, and try to persuade regional and international powers to back their independence. In case of any military clashes, either with the Iraqi government or with the regional countries, the KRG will try to secure regional, specifically from Israel, or international support, from the US, for their independence. Finally, the literal implementation of Kurdish independence remains a remote possibility. Barzani’s gamble may prove to be a risky approach, and may backfire if he failed to secure overwhelming domestic and global support for independence. This referendum should not be perceived as an end in itself, but rather a beginning of a new crisis between KRG and Iraqi central government.

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