



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Policy Brief

The costs of voting on Kurdistan's secession

AlJazeera Centre for Studies

11 October 2017





Because the Kurdish question is by its very nature trans-national, heightened conflict between Baghdad and Erbil could ignite the entire Levant [Agencies]

Introduction

Masoud Barzani, the president of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan Region, decided on 7 June 2017 to call a plebiscite on Kurdish self-determination, which was held on 25 September 2017. The decision sparked a torrent of recriminations and threats—Iraqi, regional, and international—in the weeks leading up to the poll, but the regional government was undeterred. The referendum covered the Kurdistan region as recognised by Baghdad, as well as disputed areas, which Erbil describes as “Kurdish areas outside the region”.

Barzani anticipated high turnout among Kurdish voters, but it did not exceed 72 percent. Taking the numbers released by the regional government’s election commission at face value, the turnout was relatively high, but it still fell short of the expectations of the region’s leaders. The low turnout in the province of Sulaymaniya (55 percent)—the result of political disputes between the province and Erbil—may reveal why turnout across Iraqi Kurdistan did not meet the Barzani government’s expectations.

This did not put a damper on the celebrations seen in major Kurdish cities on the evening of the vote after polling stations closed. It was the first time in the modern history of the Levant, and since the emergence of nationalism, that a substantial segment of Kurds affirmed their national right of self-determination. It was therefore not unusual to see so many Kurds take the plebiscite as an occasion for celebration, despite the threats of Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara.

Of course this does not mean that Erbil was unconcerned by the threats of its partners in Baghdad and neighbouring capitals. Barzani’s stubborn determination to hold the

referendum, which explicitly constitutes the first step toward an independent Kurdish state, and his response to Iraqi, regional and international reactions, were based on a calculated decision not take literally the threats of referendum opponents, which continued up until the eve of the vote. But no one can say yet whether Barzani's reading of the situation was correct; and, in this instance, the difference between an accurate reading and a miscalculation will be costly, for the Kurds, Iraq and the entire region.

This is a preliminary overview of the context of the Kurdistan referendum, the reactions from Baghdad and the region, and the forces that encouraged Erbil and those who opposed it as well as an attempt to explore the potential repercussions of the poll.

Internal division and external threats

Masoud Barzani announced his desire to hold a plebiscite on self-determination for all citizens of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region more than six months ago, but the date of the poll was only set on 7 June 2017. Initially, the concerned parties did not take Barzani's announcement seriously, but when it became clear that the Erbil government was determined to convene the referendum—an unprecedented event in the Levant's modern history—the reactions began taking shape.

In the few weeks before the referendum, the principal opponents of the measure—the federal government in Baghdad, Turkey and Iran—relied on US pressure and international mediation, thinking these could force a cancellation of the vote or an indefinite delay. But an offer from the United States, the United Kingdom and the United Nations envoy to Iraq on 14 September 2017 to delay the vote and initiate talks between Erbil and Baghdad was not received positively by either the Iraqi federal government or the presidency of Iraqi Kurdistan. A mediation attempt by Iraqi President Fuad Masum, a Kurd with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party (PUK), failed, as did another initiative from General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Both initiatives were accompanied by a slew of threatening statements and actions from Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran. The Iraqi parliament, with its large Arab majority, both Sunni and Shia, approved a request submitted by Prime Minister Haider Abadi to dismiss the governor of Kirkuk, a Kurd with the PUK who did not oppose the referendum or convening it in his province, which falls within a disputed area. The Iraqi Supreme Court on 18 September 2017 issued a ruling suspending the referendum pending a hearing on constitutional objections to it. The prime minister also announced that the federal government would not recognise the referendum or its result, considering it a unilateral, unlawful move. When the president of Iraqi Kurdistan said in a press conference on 24 September 2017 that the referendum would not be the end of the road and that he

would take action to initiate talks with Baghdad immediately after the results were known, the Iraqi government announced it would not take part in any talks based on the referendum and its outcome.

Baghdad received explicit backing for its position from Iran and Turkey. Officials of the two governments—including both foreign ministers, President Hassan Rouhani and President Recep Erdogan, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, and both national security officials—issued a series of condemnations of the poll and the policies of the Iraqi Kurdistan presidency. As the date of the plebiscite drew near, the tone of Iranian and Turkish officials grew more strident. Both countries considered the poll to be illegitimate, and both threatened to take punitive action against Iraqi Kurdistan.

Notably, the Kurdish issue occupied a prominent spot in talks between the Iranian and Turkish army chiefs of staff during an unprecedented Iranian visit to Ankara on 15 August 2017. It was later announced that the Turkish chief of staff would reciprocate and visit Tehran prior to President Erdogan's visit to the capital, scheduled for 5 October 2017. On 23 September 2017, the Iraqi army chief of staff met with his Turkish counterpart in Ankara for surprise talks, where it was announced that the three chiefs of staff—Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi—would hold a joint meeting in the near future. Turkey and Iraq also agreed to begin joint military exercises on the Turkish side of the border on 26 September 2017.

The morning of the referendum, Erdogan said that the Turkish National Security Council would consider taking measures against Iraqi Kurdistan, but did not reveal the nature of such measures. The Iranian government spokesman announced that Tehran, at Baghdad's behest, had closed its airspace to air traffic from the Kurdistan region, while the Iraqi government announced it had asked the Kurdistan government to surrender to the Iraqi government all airports in the region and all land crossings with Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Iraq, the most deeply affected by the issue, fears that the referendum will lead the Kurdish region to secede, which would be the first step on the road to partition. Iran and Turkey consider a Kurdish state in Iraq a threat to their own territorial integrity and encouragement for similar demands in their own states, which are home to large Kurdish populations. For all three countries, the declaration of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq presages a bitter regional war, especially if Erbil presses its claims to disputed areas in Iraq.

On the international front, the referendum also met with opposition, though not as strong as those of Iran and Turkey. After failed attempts to mediate and pressure Erbil, the US State Department issued a strongly worded statement against the referendum on

20 September 2017. It was no secret that US opposition to the plebiscite was not principled, but rather linked to the war against the Islamic State (IS) and Washington's hope that a united Iraq could counter Iranian influence in the region. As a result of the US stance, backed by most other international powers, the UN Security Council issued a statement on 21 September 2017 expressing concern for the potential repercussions of the referendum. On the day of the poll, the Turkish and Iranian presidents each made separate calls to Russian President Vladimir Putin, reiterating the unity of both Iraq and Syria.

Inside the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, the Kurdish parties were not united. The Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which has substantial influence in Erbil and Dohuk, was the engine behind the referendum; but its competitor, the PUK, with a stronghold in Sulaymaniya and influence among Kirkuk Kurds, was divided. PUK leader Mulla Bakhtiar was among the most prominent supporters of the referendum, while Bafil Talabani, the son of the party's founder Jalal Talabani, and leader Khasro Goran were opposed. A PUK splinter group, the Change Movement, and most Kurdish Islamists were similarly opposed to the poll.

Aside from the Islamists, whose culture is not based on radical nationalism, the PUK and the Change Movement enjoy close ties with Iran and Iranian support; and undoubtedly, Iran pressured the leaders of both parties to oppose the referendum, or at least its timing. In addition, most Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party (PUK) and Change leaders see the plebiscite as a pet project of Barzani, who has occupied the presidency of the region since 2015 without a constitutional mandate and leads the regional government less like an elected, democratic office-holder than a tyrannical tribal leader.

In light of all this opposition and threat, the important question is why Barzani and his camp insisted on holding the referendum.

Barzani's calculations

In regard to the divergent stances of Kurdish parties, Barzani calculated that support for the referendum among the Kurdish public and the aspiration for independence would ultimately encourage opponents to change their position. Even if it did not, the opposition would have little influence over voters, neither keeping them from the polls nor affecting the yes vote on self-determination. Clearly, Barzani's reading here was relatively on the mark. PUK and Change Movement leaders, as well as leading Islamists, reconsidered their opposition on the morning of the referendum and went out to vote in large numbers. But the last-minute shift was not enough to sway public opinion in Sulaymaniya, which had been captive to opposition rhetoric for weeks. Voter turnout in the province was thus much lower than in Erbil and Dohuk. Barzani's regional calculations were more complex. Erbil received explicit support from Israel. In the

months leading up to the poll, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his support for the Kurds' right to self-determination and an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Barzani and his supporters believed the Israeli stance would shift the US approach to the poll and its stance on a Kurdish state. In fact, Barzani calculated that Erbil could use the Israeli stance and exploit Turkish and Iranian fears of an Israel-influenced Kurdish state to pressure Turkey and Iran. In addition, both Iran and Turkey maintain extensive economic ties with Iraqi Kurdistan; perhaps the Barzani camp imagined that neither Turkey nor Iran could afford to sacrifice their relations with the region or their massive corporate investments in it. For Erbil's leaders, Iranian and Turkish objections were only temporary and aimed for their own publics' consumption; once Iran and Turkey were reassured that the Kurdish state would not constitute a security threat or act as a centre for a Kurdish collective movement, it was calculated that they would normalise ties with the new entity.

Saudi Arabia officially opposed the referendum in a statement from its Foreign Ministry posted on Twitter; the United Arab Emirates followed suit, with Emirati Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash posting a statement on his Twitter account. Yet, influential Saudi and Emirati figures close to decision-making circles welcomed the poll, demonstrating that at least some parties in those two states believed that Kurdish secession would inflict serious harm on Turkey and Iran, both of which oppose the blockade on Qatar.

In fact, the major problem for Barzani and the Iraqi Kurdistan leadership was not holding the plebiscite. The referendum is simply a procedure and given the widespread deployment of Peshmerga forces in northern and eastern Iraq, thanks to their partnership in the war against IS, there were few obstacles to the referendum process. The problem would come in the aftermath of the referendum, when it would become clear whether or not Kurdish leaders accurately read the stances of regional powers.

The day after the poll, the Turkish president commented on the leadership of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region with uncommon candour. Erdogan said that he initially believed Barzani would not go through with the referendum, admitting he had miscalculated. But he followed up saying that the referendum was illegitimate and that northern Iraq did not belong to Kurds alone, but also to Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians and Yezidis. No one but Israel would recognise the referendum, Erdogan said, and Turkey would not permit the establishment of a neighbouring state that could become a launching pad for terrorist groups. The same day, Ali Akbar Velayati, the foreign affairs advisor to the Iranian supreme leader, spoke no less frankly. Velayati, one of the closest people to Khamenei, called the legitimacy of a referendum conducted by Erbil without Iraqi or independent oversight into question. He accused the regional government of falsifying both the turnout and the results. Velayati said that the Iraqi people, united, would confront any attempt to divide Iraq and that partition would only serve Israeli and US interests.

If Erdogan and Velayati's words have any meaning, the Erbil government must reconsider the consequences.

A perilous future

The Kurdish-majority provinces in northern Iraq have existed in relatively autonomy from Baghdad since 1992, when the region became an Anglo-American protectorate following the first Gulf war. Although Iraqi Kurds adopted armed confrontation with Baghdad since the 1930s and waged a series of sporadic wars against successive Iraqi governments, they would never have had the power to achieve autonomy without foreign intervention in Iraqi affairs over the last three decades. After the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, de facto autonomy became de jure autonomy, recognised in the new Iraqi constitution.

The region could not have taken a step like the referendum on self-determination – which is universally recognised as the first step toward independence – two or three years ago. The American-led war against IS, waged since 2014, has given the region incredible armament capacities and established a good-faith partnership between Erbil and Baghdad. As a result, the Kurdistan region's military control has extended far beyond its 2003 borders. Today, Peshmerga forces control Kirkuk, broad swathes of the Diyala province, including the border city of Khanaqin, and equally broad areas of Salah al-Din and Nineveh on both banks of the Tigris River.

These are disputed areas. Peshmerga forces should withdraw from them and cede control to the federal government until Baghdad and Erbil reach an agreement on the Kurdistan region's borders. But it seems certain that the Barzani government – which said on the eve of the battle to liberate Mosul from IS that the region's borders are drawn in blood – will not withdraw without an armed confrontation over these areas, particularly Kirkuk. However, Kirkuk is of no national significance to the Kurds in the city or nearby; historically, the city's majority was not Kurdish, but Turkmen, and Kurds have not been present there since the 1950s when the Iraqi oil industry began to flourish and the area became a magnet for labour. Kirkuk's importance for the future Kurdish entity lies elsewhere.

The Kurdistan region exports roughly 600,000 barrels of oil a day. When the price of oil topped \$100 per barrel, the revenue was sufficient to cover the needs of the regional government and even foster an air of economic prosperity. But the decline of oil prices to about \$50 per barrel, which is expected to persist for the coming years due to fundamental changes in global energy production, means that the region will not be able to manage its affairs at current export levels. To provide sufficient resources for an independent state, it must control Kirkuk, which would boost oil exports in the new polity

to about a million barrels per day. This is the dilemma of the new entity and its relations with Iraq and its neighbours.

Neither Baghdad, which assumes the responsibility to protect its citizens and their national wealth, nor Ankara, which considers itself the guardian of Levantine Turkmen, will be flexible about the fate of Kirkuk. Given this, in addition to the threat Iran and Turkey see in the establishment of a Kurdish state in the heart of the Levant, it is likely that Ankara and Tehran would back Baghdad if it took measures to reclaim Kirkuk and other disputed areas, especially those of mixed ethnic compositions. This may have been the import behind the Iraqi prime minister's speech to army officers on 26 September 2017, when he said that his government is responsible for protecting Iraqis all over Iraq and that it would take all necessary security measures to achieve this goal.

Reliable sources in Baghdad say that the Iraqi government has already made the decision to extend its full control over Kirkuk and its oil fields as soon as Halabja is liberated from ISIS. In light of the Arab consensus, both Sunni and Shia, to confront Erbil's actions, it is not difficult to see the elation of Iraq's new Shia leadership at the revival of Iraqi patriotism, sparked by the crisis of the Kurdish plebiscite.

Ankara and Tehran possess other means to blockade the Kurdish entity if they choose to impose sanctions on Erbil, from suspending the region's oil exports through Turkey to closing land and air ports and placing restrictions on the movement of Iraqi Kurdish officials and citizens. Although such punitive measures are currently unlikely, if Erbil takes an additional step toward a declaration of independence, it will be met with Turkish and Iranian sanctions.

Iraq does not exist in a vacuum; like other states in the Levant, its fate is linked with that of the entire region, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf and from the shores of the Black Sea to the Arab Sea. Looking at the Syrian crisis is enough to understand the close link between the fates of Levantine states and their peoples. Because the Kurdish issue is by its very nature a trans-national one, heightened conflict between Baghdad and Erbil could set the entire Levant ablaze.