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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

The Iraqi Kurdistan Referendum: Repercussions and Future Prospects

Policy Analysis Unit | November 2017

Repercussions and Future Prospects of the Kurdistan Referendum

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Role of Tehran	1
The Intra-Kurdish Conflict	2
Kirkuk: the Flashpoint	4
The Erbil-Baghdad Crisis: Future Prospects	4

Introduction

The independence referendum held in late September failed to bring about any concrete developments in the Kurdish path to independence. Consequently, Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the main champion of the ballot, stood down from his position and handed over his powers to the KRG's government, effective November 1. Barzani's resignation represents a juncture in a wider crisis in relations between the Erbil-based KRG and the Iraqi central government in Baghdad. This also precipitated the evacuation of Kurdish Peshmerga forces loyal to the Erbil-based KRG from a number of areas previously under their control. Barzani took the opportunity of his resignation to call out his political opponents, in particular, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, for what he described as "high treason to the nation" for which he blamed the loss of territories contested with the Baghdad government. The Kurdish media, meanwhile, placed the blame for the faltering of the referendum on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its Iraqi vassal in the shape of the Popular Mobilization Units.

The Role of Tehran

Prior to the forceful recapture of "disputed territories" by Haidar Al Abadi's government in Baghdad, Kurdish media highlighted a trip made by Qasem Soleimani, Chief of the elite Quds Brigade of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, in which he tried to persuade Kurdish political leaders to abandon the results of the September 25 plebiscite. Sources close to the PUK even claim that Soleimani threatened to allow members of the Iraqi PMU to enter the region presently under the KRG's control if the Iraqi Kurdish political leadership did not forego its plans for independence¹. Although some observers have claimed that any role of Iran and her allies in subduing Iraqi Kurds was intentionally exaggerated to try to win US support for Barzani, it is undoubtedly clear that Iranian influence was decisive in ending the Iraqi Kurdistan independence project.

¹ Fazel Hawramy, "Iran, US align against Iraqi Kurdistan referendum," *Al-Monitor*, September 14, 2017, available online: <http://bit.ly/2iRG9IU>

Meanwhile, the White House's equivocation and caution—the Americans had repeatedly called for the referendum to be postponed—in dealing with the crisis was a source of frustration and disappointment for the KRG leadership in Erbil. This was decried by the Iraqi Kurds' representative in Washington, who suggested that the United States encouraged Turkey, the Baghdad central government and Iran "with every step" in their efforts to throttle independence for the KRG². American unwillingness to back the Kurds has its limits, however. US support will falter very quickly if Iran is able to increase its influence in one sphere of Iraq in which the US has thus far assumed dominance, in Kurdistan. The development of the US approach to Iraqi Kurdistan will depend largely on the measures that the Baghdad government takes in the coming weeks, and on intra-Kurdish conflict developments in light of the defeat of Peshmerga forces in the north of Iraq.

The Intra-Kurdish Conflict

The withdrawal of PUK-dominated Peshmerga units from Kirkuk, and their submission of the disputed territory to forces loyal to Baghdad, invoked Kurdish memories of the point in 1996 at which Barzani's political party relied on forces loyal to Saddam Hussein in an internal Kurdish battle against the PUK, at the time led by Jalal Talebani. By handing Kirkuk over to Baghdad forces, the PUK has pulled the rug from underneath the feet of Barzani who, the PUK claims, had created a crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan by prematurely calling a referendum, all in an effort to cement his preeminence in Kurdish politics. The run-up to the referendum had witnessed a much broader disintegration of the Kurdish grand coalition which had seen the two main Kurdish factions—the PUK and the KDU—share power within the regional government. This was reflected as well within the Baghdad parliament, where a long united Kurdish bloc splintered into three distinct groups, the PUK, DKP, and an opposition movement known in Kurdish as "Gorran" (for "Movement for Change"). Despite an outward display of consensus and solidarity behind Barzani's position, Kurdish political blocs were in fact in favor of postponing the referendum.

By the time that Baghdad's forces began to recapture regions formerly disputed with the KRG in the wake of the referendum, Barzani appeared to be stranded on the Iraqi

² Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, "A divided Iraq tests U.S. influence as fight against Islamic State wanes," *Reuters*, October 17, 2017, available online: <https://goo.gl/42Haf5>

political scene, having only himself and some of his old-time allies like Iyad Allawi and former Speaker of the Parliament Osama Al Nujaifi. Baghdad consolidated its authority in Kirkuk after Peshmerga forces were ousted from the city and its vicinities on 17 October. In his first statement following this, Barzani was forced to address his political rivals within the KRG, asking them in broad terms only to accept reduced ambitions while not forgoing the gains made so far towards Kurdish independence. Barzani also tacitly accepted the reality that he would have to accept negotiations over the deployment of forces loyal to the Iraqi central government in Baghdad across the areas under KRG control³. Adding to the fact that any future Kurdish enclave or independent state will not include Kirkuk, Barzani today stands on shifting sands within his own political sphere.

Barzani, long accused of autocracy, has been forced to accept his need to compromise with others. Despite his protests that the loss of an opportunity to bring about an independent Kurdistan to the north of Iraq was foiled by his political rivals in the PUK, he will now have to take the internal Kurdish opposition more seriously. This opposition is no longer limited to the PUK, but includes also the Gorran as well as the Alliance for Justice and Democracy, led by former KRG Prime Minister Barham Saleh. Complicating matters further, Barzani may in fact be dealing with disruptions within his own faction, with reports suggesting that two of his in-laws, and fellow Barzanis, are mounting a challenge against Masoud. Even President of the Republic of Iraq and member of the KDP, Fuad Masum, has joined the chorus criticizing the move to hold a referendum. Masum gave a statement in which he made clear that the Barzani's decision to hold the poll on Kurdish independence led to the deployment of Baghdad's forces across the formerly disputed Kirkuk, while doing nothing to "resolve" the constitutional status of the Peshmerga forces within the wider Iraqi security and military forces. The latter appears to be an increasingly unlikely possibility, given that Baghdad's Prime Minister Haider Abadi has issued instructions to keep only formal forces within the territories taken from the KRG.

³ See statements by Masoud Barzani carried in the Arabic and Kurdish press. For an English language review, see "Barzani: Blood of the martyrs, calls for independence 'not wasted'," published by *Rudaw* online on 17 October, 2017: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/171020177>

Kirkuk: the Flashpoint

The status of Kirkuk is not the only contentious issue in the litany of grievances between Erbil and Baghdad, which includes also the question of oil resources, control of border points and social tensions between the Kurdish and non-Kurdish communities living in the areas under KRG control, including both Arabs and Turkmen. These tensions threaten the outbreak of violence between the various communities in Kirkuk. Additionally, the renewed use of the term “Northern Iraq” by Abadi and his cabinet officials in Baghdad suggest that the Baghdad government is considering moving back on the reconciliations reached with the Kurdish political parties. More tangibly, and in a move unprecedented since the US-led invasion of 2003, the Baghdad authorities appointed an Arab Governor for the District of Kirkuk. This move would be indicative of a wider-scale back-pedaling on the part of the Baghdad authorities on Article 140 of the new constitution, which addressed the “demographic alterations” allegedly undertaken by the pre-invasion Government of Iraq in the north of the country. Some Kurdish officials have also described attacks on Kurdish residences in Kirkuk, and alleging the mass evacuation of up to 100,000 Kurdish speaking people from the area around Kirkuk, leading to a situation described by some as an “ethnic cleansing” of the region. In this context, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim’s claim that Kirkuk was a majority-Turkmen city half a century ago appears to be indicative of the willingness of international parties to involve themselves in tensions surrounding Kirkuk.

The Erbil–Baghdad Crisis: Future Prospects

The present crisis in Baghdad-Erbil relations looks set to grow. Erbil’s gesture of “freezing” the outcome of the referendum seems not to have placated the central Iraqi authorities, and the Baghdad government is likely to escalate its previous measures, having already seized the border control points along the frontier with Turkey. A further sign of escalation is the arrest warrant issued for former KRG Vice President Kosrat Rasul, over statements he made against the Iraqi Army. Prior to his splintering from the PUK last year and his embrace of the Barzani-led referendum, Rasul had been widely regarded as a leading political visionary of the Kurds. The arrest warrant against Rasul, nominally answerable to Barzani, is a further indication of Baghdad’s willingness to intervene in internal Kurdish dynamics.

A number of factors will be decisive in charting the future trajectory of the Erbil-Baghdad crisis. The most significant of these being how the rising generation of future leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan will deal with the fading dream of independence in the aftermath of the referendum. The period around the referendum saw the death of one Kurdish political luminary—Jalal Talabani—and the resignation of Masoud Barzani. In turn, the period since the late September poll gave rise to a new generation of Kurdish political thinkers, including Qubad Talabani (Jalal’s son) and Nausherwan and Masrour Barzani. How will this new crop of Kurdish political leaders deal with the legacy of the old guard of Kurdish freedom fighters, who have charted the path to greater and greater independence since 1992?

One notable factor that will impact the future of Kurdish aspirations for independence is the relationship between Ankara and Tehran. Will the two countries continue to regard the constriction of the Barzani camp as serving their mutual interests? One likely outcome is that Turkey will come to view increasing Iranian influence in Kurdistan, a likely consequence of KRG’s meltdown, as a greater threat to its interests. In recent days, Turkey has been indicating its reluctance to see an all-out defeat of its one-time ally Barzani, fearing greater Iranian influence. Many also look to the Arab states to take a stance on these issues, with several Shia Iraqi politicians accusing Saudi Arabia of backing secessionist tendencies amongst the KRG. Finally, the one international party, which all actors look to as the final arbiter in this crisis, is the United States.