



Commentaries

Turkey's Attitude Toward Iraqi Kurdistan: Monday's Referendum Was Not Serious

Mohammed Aldujayn

September 28th 2017

Iraqi Kurdistan's referendum on Monday, September 25, 2017, which resulted in more than 90% of the votes in support of independence from Iraq, has triggered an international debate among Kurdistan's neighbors.¹ Turkey views this ongoing independence referendum with many doubts, and it has condemned the vote process as illegal and the referendum itself as threatening to regional security and a unified Iraq.² In addition, nations other than Turkey are also concerned. In particular, Iraq and Iran share the same attitudes regarding what has been going on in the de facto capital of Erbil.

Turkey's conflict with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been ongoing for many years in the southern region of the country as well on the eastern borders. However, with Iraq, Turkey can engage militarily within its borders in the case of any possible insecurities or threats posed by the Kurd rebels. Moreover, what happened recently, on September 25, 2017, posed a challenge to the Turkish government as to how to react to the calls of independent Iraqi Kurdistan, which may have consequences for Turkey's southern and eastern Kurdish populations. On that Monday, the Turkish consulate in Erbil said that this referendum would not only be risky for Kurdistan, according to the following statement, "We stress . . . by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, . . . that some radical elements and terrorists, which may seek to exploit the circumstances that will emerge following the referendum, [may] attempt to carry out acts that target our national security."³

(1) Martin Chulov, "More Than 92% of Voters in Iraqi Kurdistan Back Independence," September 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/27/over-92-of-iraqs-kurds-vote-for-independence>.

(2) "Turkish MP Slams Kurdish Referendum as 'Neither Constitutional, Nor Legitimate,'" September 27, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201709271057759463-turkish-mp-kurdish-referendum-illegitimate/>.

(3) No. 297, 25 Eylül 2017, İkby Referandumu Hk., September 9, 2017, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, <http://erbil.bk.mfa.gov.tr/ShowAnnouncement.aspx?ID=335678>.

In another press release from the Turkish government, which was issued before the day of the referendum, Turkey welcomed the decision taken by the Iraqi Council in Baghdad by considering the referendum initiative illegal and unconstitutional. Turkey supported the earlier Iraqi stance on what became a real process of independence, which was focused on the referendum that was carried out in Erbil, the de facto capital of the Kurdistan region.

Turkey's Parliament Approves Expansion of the Turkish Troops

Iraq's territory is one of the fundamental aspects of Turkish national security and always will be. For this reason, and before the Kurdistan referendum, the Turkish parliament approved the expansion of Turkey's troops, which comprise the second largest army of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), to be deployed in Iraq (and also Syria).⁴ A week before the day of the referendum, Turkish and Iraqi forces engaged in a joint military exercise on the two countries' borders. This military activity came at a crucial time for sending a message to Kurdistan that both states are ready to undertake any actions necessary to keep Iraq safely united and stable.

Turkey has benefited from the referendum, though, because of its possible negative causes on its Kurdish population along its shared borders with Iraq, since it was able to vote for the extension of the Turkish military along the unstable eastern borders.

Turkey and Iraq Were Not Alone

Although Masoud Barzani, the leader of Iraqi Kurdistan, was determined to carry out the independence referendum on Monday, his region now faces many challenges. In addition to Turkey and Iraq, Iran expressed many doubts about this referendum and threatened to close its borders with Kurdistan. If Iran does so, this will have a direct impact on trade and the overall economic situation, especially in Sulaymaniyah, in eastern Kurdistan. Both Turkey and Iran fear that this referendum may increase sensitivity in Turkey and Iran (where most Kurds are underrepresented), so they find Kurdistan somehow challenging to national security. The central government in Baghdad also finds what has been happening in Erbil unsettling for its economic strategy. This is because Kurdistan has been ruling the oil-rich city of Kirkuk since 2014, and Baghdad fears the possible annexation of the contested areas, including the profitable oil fields, which are mostly in Kirkuk.

The international community has also expressed doubts about this referendum. The United Nations expressed the concern that this referendum may raise issues of insecurity and further destabilize an already unstable region. Other countries share the same stance; for example, the United States also viewed

(4) "Turkey votes to extend mandate for troops in Iraq and Syria," Euronews, September 9, 2017, www.euronews.com/2017/09/23/turkey-votes-to-extend-mandate-for-troops-in-iraq-and-syria.

Kurdistan's referendum as a possible problem for Iraq and regional security.⁵⁻⁶ Likewise, before the day of the referendum, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia called on president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, Masoud Barzani, to be wise and try not to cause any political tension with the central government of Iraq.⁷ And the United Arab Emirates, through its minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Mohammed Gargash, expressed the belief that federalism for Iraq will be a better and more secure solution for the region.⁸

What Can Turkey Do after the Referendum?

Many possible economic sanctions could be levied on Kurdistan. The first to be enacted came from Baghdad's central government. Haider al-Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister, announced that air flights would not be permitted to take off from airports in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and the airports would be shut down; however, humanitarian and urgent flights would be exempt. Turkey also suspended flights from Turkey to Erbil and Sulaymaniyah on the following Friday, September 29. According to an earlier statement from the Turkish consulate, "In this case, it will not be possible for the Turkish airlines Atlas Global and Pegasus to conduct . . . flights from Erbil and Sulaymaniyah from the mentioned date [September 29]."⁹

Turkey shares an important crossing point on the border with Kurdistan at the Habur crossing gate. The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has said that if Harbur's entrance to Iraq is closed, it will hurt the Kurds in Iraq, who could suffer significant losses of goods and services. In this sense, Turkey can exercise its power on Erbil, and the dependence of Kurdistan on imports from Turkey is the key focus in Turkish strategy concerning the crisis brought on by the independence referendum. The possibility of closing borders will directly impact the import of oil from Kurdistan (via Kirkuk) to the international market, as 85% of Kurdistan's oil passes through Turkey.¹⁰

The Referendum Is Not Serious

The Iraqi parliament considered the referendum to be unconstitutional and illegal. Although, according to Kurdish sources, more than 90% of votes were in favor of independence, the referendum process was

(5) David Zucchino, "On Eve of Kurdish Independence Vote, a Warning from Turkey," *New York Times*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/23/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-independence-referendum.html>.

(6) David Zucchino, "Pressure Mounts on Iraqi Kurds to Cancel Independence Vote," *New York Times*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/21/world/middleeast/iraqi-kurds-independence-vote.html>.

(7) "Saudi Arabia Urges Barzani to Call off Kurdish Independence Referendum," Arab News, September 21, 2017, www.arabnews.com/node/1164416/middle-east.

(8) "UAE's Gargash to Kurdistan: Federalism Is More Viable Than Separation," English Al Arabiya, September 23, 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/09/23/UAE-minister-Gargash-Federal-system-better-alternative-to-separation-.html>.

(9) Abdullah Ayasun, "Turkey to Suspend Flights to Iraqi Kurdistan after Referendum Vote," *GlobePost*, September 27, 2017, www.theglobepost.com/2017/09/27/turkey-flights-kurdistan/.

(10) "Turkish Threat to Block Kurdistan Oil Exports Drive Prices to 2-Year High," *Rudaw*, September 27, 2017, www.rudaw.net/english/business/26092017.

neither monitored nor observed by international organizations. Turkey's announcement on suspending flights and its threats to close Habur to the cities of Kurdistan, along with Iraq's prior suspension of operations at Kurdistan's airports, are only efforts to exert power over Erbil. Also, the intention is to remind Erbil that it lacks full control of its airports, on one hand, and on the other, that it is dependent on trade with Turkey. Berzani himself said to the media that this referendum is intended to reveal how many of Kurdistan's people and expatriate Kurds support the idea of independence.

The crisis brought on by the referendum has assured many things for Turkey and the other countries in the region. What happened before, during, and after the referendum seemed to challenge Turkey and Iraq primarily. However, Turkey proved to be ready to implement any solutions needed. It voted for the extension of the Turkish military presence in Iraq (and Syria as well), deployed its troops jointly with the Iraqi military on the borders, and became more closely observant of Kurdistan. Turkey disregards any possibility of an independent Kurdistan, and there are other countries that share this attitude, including Iraq, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, among others. Turkey is a member of NATO, and a stable and unified Iraq means a stable Turkey, given that the southern and eastern parts of the nation have large populations of Kurds, who may be influenced by what occurs in northern Iraq.

There are many mutual economic and political interests shared by Turkey, Iraq, and Erbil. According to the Turkish Statistics Institute, in 2016, trade between Turkey and Iraq was US\$7 billion.¹¹ The economic ties between Turkey and Iraq and the effects of the potential independence of the Kurdistan region on Turkey have supported the mutual interest of Turkey and Iraq of keeping the latter nation unified and stable. Moreover, Turkey benefits from trade with Erbil, as demonstrated when the Turkish Minister of Customs and Trade, Bülent Tüfenkci, appeared live in an interview on A Haber TV to assure viewers that the Habur crossing remained open and would continue to remain open.¹² The crisis provoked by Kurdistan's referendum has not impacted regional security so far, and the economic ties between Turkey and Erbil are still intact. However, the Iraqi suspension of air traffic in Kurdistan will continue, and Turkey's decision to suspend flights to the cities of Kurdistan went into effect on September 29, and will continue unless Kurdistan takes the initiative and begins negotiations with Turkey and the central Iraqi government in Baghdad.

(11) Berza Şimşek, "Habur sınır kapısı kapatılırsa ne olur?" BBC Türkçe, 27 Eylül 2017, www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-41413398.

(12) Bakan Tüfenkci'den Habur açıklaması, A Haber TV, September 27, 2017, www.ahaber.com.tr/webtv/gundem/bakan-tufenkciden-habur-aciklamasi.