LETTER TO EDITOR

Iraqi Kurdistan Referendum and its Implications

Sir,

The Kurds in Iraq have won the international community's trust as they have been part of the solution to the issues facing the region. Dissatisfied with Baghdad and overconfident that the regional countries will not backlash due to the referendum, the KRG proceeded with the referendum for independence in the Kurdistan region including the disputed areas. The KRG decision-makers were vigilant enough to avoid playing the nationalist card and make the case exclusively as a domestic affair. Neither neighboring countries, in which many Kurds are residents, nor the international community supported the referendum. In this article, I would like to bring certain aspects of the Kurdistan Independence Referendum into a better light of appreciation. It will be argued that it is not about the process rather the structure of the international regime of recognition. The international community has opted for the already dysfunctional Iraq.

Iraqi Government enforced punitive measures against the Kurdistan Region as the Kurds in Iraq, frustrated by the federal government's dysfunctionality, pushed for the referendum for independence on September 25, 2017. That was not something of a surprise for the Kurds in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Cancellation of the Severe Treaty of 1923, the overthrow of the Ottmans by Kemal Ataturk, and Iran and Iraq's refusal to include Kurds' demand for statehood triggered a century-long instability in the region. Turkey, Iran, Syrian, and Iraq rarely find a mere common interest, but when it comes to halt Kurdish statehood aspirations in their respective countries, they all appear to be united. Saad Abad pact of 1937, Baghdad Pact of 1955, Algeria's treaty of 1975, and a recent Kurdistan blockade are historical evidences.

The misperception by the governments of these countries of the KRG intentions would be a recipe for perpetual instability in Iraq and beyond. The KRG claims that Baghdad has failed to treat the Kurds as equal partners. Thus, no sign of de-escalation of the tension is evident between the KRG and the Iraq federal government in the foreseeable future. For instance, the new Iraq's political structure of the post-Saddam regime allowed the KRG to legally engage in international relations for the first time. According to article 117 of the Iraqi constitution, "The regions and governorates shall establish offices in the embassies and diplomatic missions, in order to follow up cultural, social, and developmental affairs." Subsequently, the KRG formulated a foreign policy agenda that elevated the Kurds' global status to unprecendeted hights. Baghdad has always been sceptical about the KRG's foreign policy as a sub-state unit. Activism of subnational entities in the international arena is known in literature as paradiplomacy. Iraq was afraid that the Kurds ultimately would pursue a secessionist form of foreign policy. Bingol (2016) referred to it as protodiplomacy. The KRG referendum exacerbated the existing tension between both sides to a level that is widely believd to be obstinate.

Massud Barzani's very last statement as president of Kurdistan was a reiteration of historical distrust that exists in the Kurdish collective memory toward Baghdad. He highlighted that Baghdad does not believe in power sharing and partnership. On the contrary, he asserted that centralized policies which are against new Iraq's federal, and democratic and pluralistic constitution is in practice. Before the referendum, the KRG reported 55 articles of Iraqi constitution not honored by the federal government, including provisions on revenue sharing and Article 140 mandating the resolution of the disputed territories problem.

The KRG's September 25 referendum Tipped diplomatic support in favor of Baghdad in a rather dramatic form. The main powers' opposition, including the US, the KRG's ally, and neighboring countries, towards the referendum Provided Baghdad with moral and diplomatic justifications. Seeing the very survival and autonomy of the region in jeopardy, the KRG accepted Iraq's conditions. In an interview to the Wall Street Journal, Falah Mustafa, head of the KRG Department of Foreign Relations, stated, "It

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is not easy to hide my worries about perpetual hostilities between Baghdad and Erbil. Bagdad treats us not as a partner but as an opponent."

Despite all this, the KRG has proven to be a trustable anchor for the regional stability. 25 years of self-rule shows that the Kurds are pragmatic toward regional realities. According to Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG Prime Minter, "The government's policy is to establish long-term relations with Iran and Turkey based on mutual respect and interest." "We would like to be part of the solution not the problem in the Middle East" being aware of its limited options, and the KRG has opted for developing ties with Iran and Turkey. Playing a significant role in international coalition for fighting ISIS provided the KRG, a considerable diplomatic opportunity. The coalition forces treated the Kurdistan Region as a country accordingly as president has been received by the head of states. Believing that they play a major role in the balance of power in the region as a substate actor, and the Kurds wish for a scenario in which they could bandwagon with uper powers to gain even more autonomy in Iraq. IIraqi Kurds' refrained from playing the nationalist card before the referendum, as the KRG understood a potential backlash from Turkey and Iran. Turkey and Iran fear of domino effect as they perceived it an inspiration for their own Kurds to obtain more rights (Lundgren, 2007). Their steadfast cooperation against the KRG paid off. They collectively hindered the referendum and punished the KRG with diplomatic, economic, intelligence and military blockade.

The regional countries well understand that the Kurdistan Region is the terrestrial common denominator. To pursue a long-term agenda forward and guarantee boarder security, Turkey and Iran have to come down to a compromise towards the KRG. An instable Kurdistan Region within Iraq would negatively impact the security of both countries as they share approximately one thousand kilometers of boarder with the KRG. Knowing that the independence bid is temporary put off they will certainly take steps to gradually normalize their cooperation with the KRG. Realpolitik is the main rule of international relations when it comes to nations' self-determination. I am disappointed that oppressed nations have no friends," Massud Barzani said in an interview to CNN. The Kurd's aspirations for statehood have been in vain; in the words of Bernard-Henri Lévy 'Night has fallen onto Kurdistan.

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