

Iraqi Kurdish referendum stokes Mideast war tensions

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25 September 2017

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq's, oil-rich, predominantly Kurdish north is proceeding today with a referendum on Kurdish independence. The vote is expected to endorse the KRG's call for the creation of a separate state.

Washington has long served as a patron of the KRG. But it and the European imperialist powers are opposed to today's referendum, as are Iraq's central government, and Turkey, Iran, and Syria, which are all home to significant Kurdish minorities.

Turkey has been adamant in demanding the KRG scrap the referendum, with Turkish government officials issuing warnings late into the night Sunday of dire consequences for the KRG if the referendum is held. Calling the referendum a threat to the national security and territorial integrity of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ, declared, "We are telling (KRG President) Barzani and his administration: It is not over yet. Stop playing with fire and cancel the referendum decision."

For its part, the US fears a Kurdish independence bid will further destabilize its already fragile puppet regime in Baghdad and inflame or trigger fratricidal ethno-religious conflicts across the region, thereby cutting across its own drive to establish unbridled hegemony over the world's most important oil-exporting region—in particular, its plans to mobilize its local clients for confrontation and war with Iran.

In pursuit of its predatory geostrategic interests, US imperialism has waged virtually uninterrupted war in the Middle East for the past quarter-century, destroying whole societies and razing state structures. A key element in this process has been the inciting of ethnic and religious sectarian divisions, including the promotion of Kurdish nationalism.

Following George W. Bush's illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, Washington cooperated closely with the KRG, while in neighbouring Syria, the Pentagon and CIA have backed the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the US war for regime change in Damascus.

KRG President and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani announced the referendum via an executive decree last June, although his term as president ended more than two years ago. The referendum was endorsed at a barely quorate parliamentary session earlier this month.

Barzani, seeking to bargain with the major imperialist powers as Kurdish nationalists have done for decades, insists that today's vote is merely consultative and will not result in the immediate formation of an independent Kurdish state.

Apart from Barzani's KDP, among the many fractious parties of the Kurdish elite only the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) has unequivocally supported the referendum. The KRG's second-largest party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is led by former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and has ties to Iran, has been badly divided over whether to back the referendum.

Intensifying regional conflicts

Echoing the position of the US and the European powers, the UN Security Council issued a statement last Thursday expressing "concern over the potentially destabilizing impact of the Kurdistan Regional Government's plans to unilaterally hold a referendum next week."

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis, as well as British Defence Minister Michael Fallon, have all visited the KRG capital, Erbil, in recent weeks to try to persuade Barzani to cancel or at least postpone the vote.

US imperialism fears that the political and probable military conflicts unleashed by the referendum will cut across its chief immediate Mideast goals: preventing Tehran from establishing a land corridor to supply its allies in Syria and Lebanon and preparing for an all-out clash with Iran.

The Kurdish vote takes place as a new and even more dangerous phase of the war in Syria between the US and the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers looms, as they scramble to gain control of territory vacated by vanquished ISIS forces. Last week, Trump used his UN General Assembly address to denounce Iran as a "criminal" and "rogue" regime and serve notice that he could scuttle the Iran nuclear deal in coming days.

Support for the Kurdish referendum has come from Israel, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu giving an explicit endorsement. For decades, Tel Aviv has maintained close ties to the KDP, which has been led by the Barzani family since its formation. It views the emergence of an independent Kurdistan on Iran's borders as a weapon to be wielded against Tehran. Russia, which enjoys substantial commercial relations with Erbil, including through sizeable investments by the energy giant Rosneft, has avoided condemning the vote.

Until recently, Turkey has enjoyed close and lucrative relations with Barzani and the KRG. But it vehemently opposes the referendum, fearing that a vote for independence, let alone the emergence of an independent Kurdish state on KRG territory, could boost Kurdish nationalist-separatist forces in Turkey's southeast.

Since 1984, Turkish security forces have waged a ferocious war against a Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-led insurgency that has led to the deaths of some 40,000 people, the destruction of 40,000 villages and the forcible displacement of up to one million people.

On Saturday, an emergency meeting of the Turkish parliament extended special authorization for its troops to act in Iraq and Syria in the interests of "national security."

Ankara is concerned that the KRG referendum will also encourage the PKK-aligned YPG (People's Protection Units) in northern Syria to try to turn the autonomous zones they control along the Turkish border into a separate state. The YPG has emerged as the backbone of the US-sponsored proxy army in Syria, even as Washington has assured Turkey it supports the "integrity" of Syria.

On Friday, in defiance of pronouncements from Washington, the Kurdish authorities in northern Syria held the first stage of planned elections at district, municipal and regional levels—elections that they say

could be followed by an independence bid if Damascus refuses to recognize them.

The sectarian partition of Iraq

Within Iraq, the referendum is especially contentious because it will include not only the three KRG provinces of Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah, but the so-called “disputed territories” of Khanaqin, Sinjar, Makhmor, and oil-rich Kirkuk.

The “disputed areas” are currently controlled by KRG Peshmerga forces, but lie outside the recognized borders of the three northern provinces that make up the KRG and include large Arab, Turkmen, and Arabic-speaking religious minorities.

This raises the prospect that non-Kurdish peoples could be forcibly incorporated into an independent Kurdish state and the danger of violent ethnic conflict.

This is especially true in oil-rich Kirkuk province, which was annexed by the KRG’s Peshmerga fighters in 2014 in the wake of Islamic State’s offensive across northern and western Iraq. With the referendum excluding the Arab district of Hawija still occupied by Islamic State, a pro-independence vote in Kirkuk seems assured.

Other “disputed territories” are now less homogeneously Kurdish following the former Baathist regime’s deliberate transfer of Arab populations into them in order to reduce local Kurdish dominance.

As a result of fears stoked by the referendum, local Turkmen leaders have called on Baghdad to declare martial law in Kirkuk and deploy armed forces to prevent the referendum.

The referendum is also contentious in some towns within the KRG. Demonstrations that led to angry clashes took place earlier this month in Mandali, in Diyala province, one of the three provinces that form the KRG, protesting against the town’s inclusion in the referendum.

Some of those in favour of Kurdish independence question the referendum’s timing, arguing that it is a ploy to consolidate Barzani’s power in Kurdistan and strengthen his bargaining hand with Baghdad.

Last Monday, following a vote in the Iraqi parliament opposing the referendum, Iraq’s Supreme Court ordered the suspension of the referendum pending an investigation into its legality. The Iraqi constitution guarantees “the unity of Iraq” and grants no right of secession.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who has come under increasing pressure from his political opponents to come out forcefully against the referendum, declared that Iraq might resort to force “to protect our population, to protect our Kurdish population and our Arab and Turkmen and other ethnic populations of our own country.”

The reactionary character of Kurdish nationalism

The attempt to create an independent, capitalist Kurdish nation-state through the reshuffling of the borders that British and French imperialism imposed on the Middle East at the end of World War I is reactionary. It would not serve the interest of Kurdish workers and toilers, never mind the region’s myriad other peoples, but would only create more favourable conditions for imperialist-incited nationalist, ethnic and religious movements to flourish.

The rhetoric about “self-determination” for the Kurds notwithstanding, more than a century of historical experience has demonstrated that the Kurdish bourgeoisie is incapable of establishing independence from imperialism, the principal obstacle to realizing the democratic and social aspirations of all the peoples of the Middle East.

While the Kurdish peoples in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria face discrimination, the record shows that the separatist and communalist programs of the Kurdish nationalist parties only serve to divide the working class along ethnic, cultural and religious lines, and are devoid of any genuine democratic or progressive content.

In pursuit of its own selfish class interests, the Kurdish bourgeoisie has time and again made the Kurds the pawns and proxies of the imperialist and regional powers, who once their predatory objectives have been realized cruelly abandon the Kurdish people to their fate.

Washington’s war drive in the Middle East since the 1991 Gulf War has exposed the Kurdish nationalists as tools of imperialism. In exchange for a few crumbs from imperialist plunder and exploitation—such as limited autonomy in Iraq—they have hired themselves out as proxy forces for imperialism.

The Kurdish nationalists welcomed the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, even though Washington had tacitly backed Baghdad’s suppression of a Kurdish uprising just after the Gulf War. Despite Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party having supported opposing sides in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, they joined forces in the corrupt Kurdistan Regional Government established in 2005.

The KRG worked with the US occupation and is now playing a leading role in the US-led war against Islamic State. It provided manpower for the bloody imperialist-led offensive against the ISIS in Mosul, an ethnically diverse, Sunni Arab-majority city. In the course of this onslaught, numerous reports point to blatant acts of ethnic cleansing by Kurdish forces aimed at driving Arab and other minority populations from areas that they intend to integrate into a Kurdish state.

The oppression faced by the vast majority of the Kurdish population, together with workers and toilers across the Middle East as a whole, can be overcome only in a united struggle in opposition to the continued domination of the region by imperialism.

As Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution, established in his theory of permanent revolution, the outstanding democratic tasks in countries of a belated capitalist development can be accomplished only as part of the struggle for socialism. The fight for such a program demands not the repartition of the Middle East on ethnic and sectarian lines, but rather the unification of the workers and toilers in the fight for the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of the struggle for socialism globally.

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