

Question:

1. How have regional governments responded to Ma'soud Barzani's announcement of a referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence to be held in September?
2. How have different sub-state groups responded, to include different Kurdish factions in Iraq and across borders?
3. How are the Kurds using the independence referendum to leverage their interests?

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Executive Summary

Why now?

President Ma'soud Barzani has been promising a referendum on Kurdish independence since 2014, so we have to ask the question why now? The non-binding referendum, if approved, will not necessarily mean a declaration of independence (Atran, Rasheed, Wahab). Barzani has admitted that the purpose of the referendum was not to declare independence but to gauge the opinions and rights of the Kurds in Iraq (Anonymous 2). But there are several factors potentially driving Barzani's decision to announce a referendum now.

1. Strengthen a long-term bid for greater autonomy (Atran, van den Toorn)
2. Create a better negotiating position in any settlement that follows the liberation of ISIS-controlled territory including oil-rich regions (Anonymous 1, Anonymous 2, Atran, Hamasaeed, van den Toorn, Wahab)
3. Push to permit foreign/military aid to go directly to Erbil rather than through Baghdad (Atran)
4. Consolidate Barzani credibility as well as his political, military and economic hold over Erbil and large portions of the KRG (Anonymous 2, Atran). Barzani's credibility will be particularly important to either secure his legacy as he steps down from the presidency at the end of his term this year or to provide a justification for a third unconstitutional term (van den Toorn)
5. Shore up domestic support for Barzani's administration, which is facing a "legitimacy crisis" due to 1) the inability of the KRG to pay salaries on time or in full, 2) that Parliament has not met in nearly

two years, and 3) that Barzani is in his second “unconstitutional” term (these all contribute to the “crisis of legitimacy,” not just salaries, though that is a big one (Anonymous 1, Anonymous 2, Hamasaeed, van den Toorn)

6. To authenticate Barzani’s nationalist credentials particularly at a time when the PKK is gaining influence across the Kurdish territories transnationally and inside the Kurdistan Region (Anonymous 2)
7. In rejecting all of the above reasons, Amjed Rasheed—a Kurdish specialist at Durham University—stated (in a minority opinion) that Kurdish leadership “genuinely believes that it is a time of the Kurds to achieve their inspiration and dream to become an independent state.”

Expected Outcome for Kurds

The Movement for Change (Gorran) along with the Kurdistan Islamic Group (key oppositional Kurdish political parties) declined to participate in the committee organizing the referendum (Anonymous 1, Atran, Gulmohamad, Wahab). An expert who prefers to remain anonymous concluded, “What you see is that for perhaps the first time in Iraqi Kurdish modern history, the independence project - and thus, Kurdish nationalism itself - has been politicized” internally among Iraqi Kurds. Christine van den Toorn, director of the Institute for Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, expects that the referendum will increase divisions within Kurdish political parties as well as between political elites and the people—essentially along the lines of those in favor vs. those against the referendum.

A second anonymous contributor argues that it has already led to targeted threats against those Kurds, mainly independent and opposition groups, who oppose the referendum without a functioning parliament in place. This group, mobilized under the No to a Referendum movement, includes over 100 journalists and writers thus far. Also, the deputy head of the KDP faction in the defunct Iraqi Kurdistan parliament announced on the KDP information website that a campaign against the referendum “will be punished by the court of people and history will never be merciful.” Erbil police also just official closed the Standard Institute office, which is a civil society organization, for “criticizing Peshmerga and the referendum.” Other journalists have received death threats for opposing the referendum.

Hamasaeed suggests that the referendum was essentially part of a long-term Kurdish shaping operation preparing the groundwork for a future Kurdish state. Kurds are particularly motivated to act now, while they still have leverage given their role in fighting ISIS, to push for independence in the event that Nouri Al-Maliki and a pro-Shia/anti-Kurdish government comes to power in the upcoming elections (Wahab). Therefore, success from a Kurdish perspective is a referendum that does not result in a firm public or international “no” (Hamasaeed).

However, the second anonymous contributor disagrees with the assertion that the Kurdish are motivated to act now. She notes that the referendum “is a tactic to divert domestic and international attention away from the Kurdistan Region’s deep-seated internal problems. It is part of the post-ISIS preparations being made among many groups to leverage Baghdad. Even within the KDP officials know that ‘now is not the time’ and that the region needs to build up its institutions first. This can be perceived as a desperate measure by Barzani as he faces challenges to his authority, namely by the PKK, which has gained influence in his region, and a rising Baghdad.”

Regional Responses

There is no official international support for the referendum at this time. Reactions range from mild opposition (not against greater Kurdish independence, but think the timing is not right) to strongly worded

opposition. Kurdish leaders were reportedly not surprised by foreign governments' negative reaction to the announced referendum (Gulmohamad, Rasheed, Wahab). The United Nations has also stated that it will have no role and does not support the referendum. Given this, the second anonymous contributor questioned who would be the independent actors to monitor the referendum vote?

Countries with Kurdish populations strongly opposed to Kurdish independence

As might be expected, countries with Kurdish populations—Turkey, Syria, and Iran—strongly oppose any movement towards Kurdish independence in Iraq (Anonymous 1, Atran). These countries include Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq (Atran).

Turkey called the referendum a “grave mistake” (Anonymous 1, Anonymous 2, Atran, Gulmohamad, Hamasaeed, Wahab, Waziri). Scott Atran, a researcher who conducts field research in Iraqi Kurdistan, suggested that a concerted push for independence could trigger increased Turkish military action not only against the PKK in Iraq, including near the Iranian border, but also more sustain cross-border incursions and de facto holding of Kurdish Iraqi and Syrian (YPG) territory. However, Sarhang Hamasaeed, USIP's Director of Middle East Programs, questioned whether there is a difference between the public statements of countries, like Turkey, and what they privately discuss with Kurdish leadership. Some speculate that the Kurds would not make an announcement like this if there were not tacit approval or expectation of tacit approval from Turkey (Hamasaeed, Rasheed, van den Toorn, Waziri).

Iran is strongly opposed to Kurdish independence in Iraq (Anonymous 2, Rasheed, Wahab, Waziri), but some say it has not been as vocal as Turkey because the government does not believe this referendum will actually lead towards independence (Anonymous 1, Anonymous 2, van den Toorn). In fact, the referendum—if interpreted as a sign of increasing internal Kurdish divisions—could increase Iranian influence over Kurdish parties in eastern Kurdistan (Anonymous 1). But Atran argues that the Iranians are taking the threat of Kurdish independence seriously with Qassim Soleimani, head of Iran's Quds Force, demanding that the Kurdish flag be removed from Kirkuk. Hoshang Waziri states that an independent Kurdistan is a red line for Iran—that it will never accept a smaller, Shia-led Iraq.

The Iraqi government also opposes the ability of any one group deciding “the fate of Iraq, in isolation from other parties,” according to Iraqi government spokesman Saad al-Haddithi (Gulmohamad, Rasheed, Wahab). Abadi recognized the Kurds' political aspirations for greater autonomy, but suggested the time is not ripe for these discussions. Hamasaeed reminded readers that Iraq is in an election season and political leaders stated opposition might be driven by efforts to look strong and patriotic. Moreover, other provinces, such as Basrah, oppose the Kurdish referendum and notions of independence because they would not permit the KRG to take resources and territories that they believe are an integral part of the Iraqi state. A key issue is the disputed territories and whether they will be included in this referendum.

Most other governments think the time is not right

Most other governments with interests in the region—UK, US, EU, Germany, and Russia—are either not supportive or not encouraging at this particularly point in time (Anonymous 1, Gulmohamad, Rasheed, van den Toorn, Wahab). They fear independence would be a distraction in the fight against ISIS (Anonymous 1, Gulmohamad). The US is concerned that a successful push for autonomy would weaken the Abadi government and embolden his pro-Iran rivals, which would undercut long-term US security relations with Iraq (Wahab). The US State Department and US Government does not support the referendum (Anonymous 2).

Regional Kurdish groups support the referendum

Despite evidence of divisions among Kurdish political parties for the referendum, regional Kurdish groups that have fought with the Peshmerga—including the PKK (Turkey), YPG (Syria), and the PAK (Iran) support the referendum (Atran, Rasheed). There are conditions of PUK support (which is fractured), which is that the Kurdish parliament is first reactivated and that all of the disputed territories are included (Anonymous 2).

Shia groups in Iraq strongly oppose the referendum

Shia groups, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), strongly oppose the referendum. Additionally, the State of Law bloc—a Shia-led coalition in parliament—rejected the referendum, which would lead to the division of the country.

Iraqi Sunni groups have mixed response

Some Sunni tribes and militia would accept Kurdish independence if they, too, could have autonomy in Sunni areas (Atran). However, Sajida al-Afandi, an influential parliamentarian of the Sunni Union of National Forces stated, “Neither the domestic nor the foreign circumstances are currently ripe for Kurdistan’s secession from Iraq.” Sunni groups are particularly opposed to Kurdish territorial ambitions in disputed areas such as Kirkuk. However, some Sunni Arabs in disputed territories prefer the Kurds to the Shia militias for now (Rasheed, van den Toorn), but this support “is ephemeral and transient” until ISIS is defeated and Sunnis Arab have a new opening to renegotiate their position with the government in Baghdad. Kurds seek to capitalize on this. Other Sunni Arab groups reject Kurdish overreach and have joined Hashd or are waiting for the return of ISF, federal government forces and authority (van den Toorn). The Sunni Arabs have also been less vocal because many are living inside the Kurdistan Region at this moment and are dependent on Masud – at least for the time being (Anonymous 2).

Non-Kurdish minorities want to be left alone

Non-Kurdish minorities in disputed territories, particularly Ninewa, want their autonomy and to be left alone (van den Toorn). While KRG officials claim they have support from minorities, populations near Ninewah most likely would prefer a united province under a united Iraq. The referendum is likely to expose and exacerbate tensions between minority groups and the KRG. Minority groups are also divided (Anonymous 2). Some do support the KDP and Barzani while others lean toward Baghdad. These loyalties are also transactional and can change over time, depending upon who can provide services, security, and jobs.

What does this mean for the US?

A second expert, who prefers to remain anonymous due to frequent travel to the region, stresses that it is essential that the USG does not overreact to this move. She argues that the US has significant leverage over the Kurds and should not give in to the threats Barzani makes. It should not officially endorse or support the referendum, or any other unilateral measure taken by the KRG that seeks to bypass official state institutions. Much of this is for public consumption in the West, as well as to his local constituencies. She warns that “[b]y overly coddling and enabling Barzani, the US will dissuade any necessary negotiation that needs to take place between Baghdad and Erbil, as well as institution building that is sorely needed in the Kurdistan Region. The US should avoid stirring the ire and tensions among local groups seeking their own form of self protection and autonomy, let alone the Iraqi government, by supporting the KRG’s extension of territories through a unilateral move (referendum). This is particularly important given the outcomes of the anti-ISIS campaign and the extensive territories that the Kurds have expanded their de-facto control. The U.S, should continue to emphasize its commitment to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Iraqi

state. It should enhance Iraqi state institutions and continue to channel any support to Iraqi sub-state actors through the Iraqi government. Any future resolution to Iraq's territories and borders should be negotiated between the KRG and Baghdad."

According to this second anonymous expert, many Kurds state that the only people really making an issue of this are non-Kurds. "Barzani can back away from the threat of pushing for independence because he has done so already, and can even use the failure to do so as a conspiracy by outsiders against Kurds. He can play the victim card as save face. Also there is no significant challenge to Barzani at this time – not from Arabs or other Iraqi Kurdish groups. The only real threat is from the PKK."

Subject Matter Expert Contributions

Scott Atran, ARTIS

1. How have regional governments responded to Ma'soud Barzani's announcement of a referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence to be held in September?

Turkey, Iran, Assad's Syria (i.e., countries with significant Kurdish minorities and active Kurdish political movements, including separatist movements) are very strongly opposed. Turkey could likely step up military action not only against PKK in Iraq, including near the Iranian border, but also more sustained cross-order incursions and defacto holding of Kurdish Iraqi and Syrian (YPG) territory.

2. How have different sub-state groups responded, to include different Kurdish factions in Iraq and across borders?

All Kurdish groups except the Change Movement and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) attended the meeting called by Barzani and approved Sept 25 as the date for referendum. Main Turkish (PKK), Syrian (YPG) and Iranian (PAK) Kurdish groups with military forces all of which have fought together at times with KRG forces since 2014 -- support the referendum.

All Shia groups I know of are strongly opposed (incl popular mobilization forces), some Sunni tribes and militia would accept confederation if they, too, could have autonomy in Sunni areas; however, as Sajida al-Afandi, a influential parliamentarian of the Sunni Union of National Forces stated: ³Neither the domestic nor the foreign circumstances are currently ripe for Kurdistan's secession from Iraq. We believe that Erbil's threats regarding holding a referendum on secession are intended to place pressure on Baghdad to achieve oil or financial gains and perhaps have a better negotiating position in any national settlement that may follow the disappearance of the Islamic State."

3. How are the Kurds using the independence referendum to leverage their interests?

Barzani has not said this referendum, if approved, will mean a declaration of independence. It may be used to strengthen a bid for greater autonomy, allowing foreign aid (including military aid), for example, to go directly to Erbil rather than have to pass through Baghdad. Through a referendum which Barzani has been threatening for years -- I think the KRG is seeking to gain leverage to annex disputed areas from Mosul to the KRG (such as Sinjar) and create a better negotiating position in any settlement that follows the liberation of ISIS-controlled territory (if that ever really happens, because the political, social and even economic conditions that facilitated creation of ISIS have not changed appreciably). And, of course, the referendum serves the Barzani family's ³electoral² politics and military and economic hold over Erbil and large portions of the KRG.

But Kirkuk, which is largely controlled by PUK, may be key. In early April 2017 Erdogan said that the Kurdish flag has to be taken down from Kirkuk Province or relations with the KRG would be seriously harmed. At about the same time, Qassim Soleimani, head of Iran's Quds force, visited the KRG (Sulaymaniyah) and said pretty much the same thing his visit was also seen as attempt (unsuccessful so far) to drive a wedge between the two large factions of the KRG Barzani's somewhat pro-US KDP and the somewhat pro-Iranian PUK.

Kurds in Iraq have always resented that the British gave Iraqi Kurdistan to the Kingdom of Iraq (the work of Sir Percy Cox), and institutionalized in the Treaty of Lausanne. The 1970 Autonomy agreement, which gave the Kurds a role in the gov't of Kirkuk (and possibility control pending a census) was abrogated by the 1974 autonomy statute that excluded Kurdish participation in governing Kirkuk (and Sinjar). Between the two Gulf Wars up to half a million Kurds were expelled from Kirkuk and surrounding areas and Arabs settled in their place. Many Kurds returned after Saddam was deposed, and now represent about half of the population of Kirkuk. After the Iraqi army fled before the June 2014 ISIS offensive, Peshmerga forces took the city, which they still control and which the KDP and PUK say will not be given up (same to a strategically lesser extent for the Sinjar area in Nineveh Province, which Kurdish forces recaptured 18 mos later).

In the post-Isis jockeying, Barzani and most Iraqi Kurdish groups want to keep control of Kirkuk, and at least a half share in its oil fields. In early March 2017 PUK forces briefly stopped the flow of oil from Iraq's state-run North Oil Co. (NOC) and the pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. NOC had taken over operation of the oil fields from Kurdish control, after several months of interrupted operations with the help and protection of Shia forces. In February 2017 the Iraqi Oil Ministry had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Iranian Oil Ministry that called for examination of a pipeline to export Iraqi crude from the Kirkuk fields to Iran's Abadan refinery.

Iraqi gov't officials argue that this alternative is necessary to offset the possibility of the pipeline to Ceyhan being interrupted. But this new potential pipeline would have to pass through Sulaymaniyah in the KRG, which the KRG is strongly opposed to (for all sorts of reasons, including giving both Iran and the Iraqi gov't more possibilities to meddle directly in Kurdish lands). PUK's ³Black Force,² has been deployed to NOC, with the support of KDP and all major Iraqi Kurdish parties. Baghdad has not paid Kirkuk province its share of revenues from oil sold from its fields since 2013.

According to Aso Mamand, head of PUK's local bureau in Kirkuk: ³Deployment of troops in Kirkuk is to show Baghdad that Kirkuk's oil is for the people of Kirkuk. We have deployed troops to prevent Baghdad from exporting Kirkuk's oil to Mosul and Baghdad. Baghdad wants to export Kirkuk's oil for the rest of Iraq while our people are in desperate need for it.² (In Aug 2016 the KRG announced that the Iraqi gov't agreed to split Kirkuk's oil revenues with the KRG. In Sept 2016, the Iraqi gov't denied a deal had been made; and Iraqi gov't has given no money from the oil fields to Kirkuk Province since 2013).

1. How have regional governments responded to Ma'soud Barzani's announcement of a referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence to be held in September?

Regional governments with domestic Kurdish populations (Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq) have made public statements against the announcement, all citing the preservation of Iraqi territorial integrity as an uncompromising obstacle to the referendum. While Turkey has the most to fear from the implications of the referendum announcement (i.e., hosting the most politically extremist and hostile Kurdish population), the rapprochement between Erbil and Ankara in the last few years is likely to survive Barzani's referendum. A security buffer from the instability of Iraq, the poker chip of strategic influence from a powerful sub-state actor, and the flow of petroleum are all reasons for Turkey to subtly continue relations with Erbil (Romano, 2017). As is the case with so many other unlikely alliances in the Levant, the mutual security and economic interests that an amicable Turkish-KRG relationship produce, is simply too valuable for either actor to lose; although not good enough for the KRG to jeopardize.

The Assad regime has their hands full with increasing escalation from US backed forces along deconfliction zones and so further response beyond a diplomatic denouncement is unlikely. The burgeoning Shia-nexus of security cooperation between Damascus and Baghdad is the underlying foundation of any decision-making process Assad will have in regards to the KRG. Due to the increasingly antagonistic relationship between Syrian Kurds and Damascus (sanctioned by the US), capitulating to domestic Kurds over the nominal affair of the referendum is unlikely to occur whatever the September results are. In Tehran, the Shia alliance holds just as much, if not more than in Syria and Iran may become the strongest advocate (on behalf of the Iraqi government) against the September Referendum and the accompanying fallout. This is because Iran stands almost nothing to gain from the vote and the announcement has harbored intense instability for Iranian interests. As the Shia dominated PMU (Popular Mobilization Units) seek a stronger foothold in Mosul operation and Iran provides more and more support to Baghdad, any challenge to the authority of the Iraqi government will be unwelcomed by Iran (Boghani, 2017). While the referendum may have the more intangible effect of mobilizing political discontent among Iranian Kurds, the most pressing concern for Tehran is their security relationship with Baghdad.

Barzani's announcement in relation to Gulf states come at the interesting moment of conflict with respect to the Qatari diplomatic crisis and may even present an opportunity for Gulf nations to apply proxy-pressure against Iranian interests in Iraq (Candar, 2017). Barzani has maintained good relations with the Saudi regime for several years and as the Saudi-Iranian conflict worsens, Erbil may become an asset to challenge the growing Iranian presence in the Levant. There have been muted signals from Riyadh that it supports the referendum (Bar'el, 2017) and this can be a backhanded response to Turkey's support of Qatar in the recent fracas in the Gulf as well as long term bet in the struggle against Iran. Outright support from the KSA for Kurdish self-assertion is unlikely despite the decaying Saudi-Iraqi relations that suffer further setback from the Qatari crisis (Channel News Asia, 2017), only because it would further push the Abadi government closer into the arms of Tehran.

2. How have different sub-state groups responded, to include different Kurdish factions in Iraq and across borders?

The Kurdish consolidation of territory and their campaign against ISIS have triggered small outbreaks of conflict between the Peshmerga and other sub-state groups in Northern Iraq and Syria as the rigidity of borders deteriorates. Most recently the PMU brushed against Kurdish forces in the Nineveh liberation effort and the Abadi government had to intercede (Malazada, 2017); disputes like this however, will be little influenced by the referendum. Some hardline nationalistic or ultra-religious Arabs often harbor a racist or political resentment towards Iraqi and Syrian Kurds for the usurpation of what they traditionally consider to Arab lands; Kurdish persecution of Iraqi Arabs has also occurred with little coverage in Western media (Human Rights Watch, 2016). A 2015 poll found 56% of Sunni Arabs and 78% of Shia Arabs want Kurdistan to remain an autonomous region, an opinion that is no doubt tied to the bloody history of conflict and insurgency between Arabs and Kurds (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2015).

Consequentially speaking, there is little widespread backlash among Arab sub-state actors against the announcement, and barring an unlikely secession of Kurdistan, this silence will continue. This is not due to a newfound support for Kurdish independence but rather, the announcement is viewed as an unsurprising development surpassed by more pressing concerns. Shia Sadrist and Sunni Arab Tribes around Iraq see this less as an assault on their citizenry and more as a political maneuver; the announcement can in fact, provide an opportunity to advance their own interests in the intricate chess game of internal Iraqi politics. While almost no sub-state actor (with the exception of extremist organizations) wants to see the collapse of the Iraqi government and sovereignty of Iraq infringed upon, they are all willing to tug away at the competency of the Iraqi government to their own strategic ends. A referendum for Kurdish independence opens the door for federalism and is mobilizing sub-state actors to act in kind, to ensure their security in the event of a major political crisis. Testing the political limits of the Iraqi government is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Kurds and the list of political parties and other groups have done the same, almost none would benefit from an existential challenge to the Iraqi government's authority.

3. How are the Kurds using the independence referendum to leverage their interests??

It is quite a longshot that the Kurdish referendum will hold any substantive legal bearing whatever the outcome and it is clearly an instrument of political posturing by Barzani. On face value, it is easy to surmise that the KRG is just making a mad dash for independence amid regional instability, but this assumes that the Barzani coalition receives no benefit from the yolk of Baghdad or that Kurdistan can achieve statehood without the support of Iraq. As autonomous as Kurdistan may be, Erbil will not be able to abort such a critical relationship as the one it has been enjoying with the Iraqi government. The economic benefits the current oil agreement (Rudaw, 2016) alone almost entirely negates the possibility of the KRG turning its back on Abadi, not to mention the crucial security coordination and other benefits both parties enjoy. It appears that Barzani is engaging in a manner of political grandstanding for a variety of reasons that will likely be missed by Western media swept up in the romance of "democratic fight for independence" narrative that Barzani is no doubt aware of and using to his benefit.

First and foremost among the reasons for the referendum is opportunity for a highly lucrative (in terms of political capital) domestic campaign that stirs nationalistic sentiment and support among the Kurdish community the world over. Whatever the likelihood of independence, the announcement itself is a historical event and it lends a wave of legitimacy for a troubled Kurdish government that has faced several significant political crises over the past few years (Ekurd Daily, 2017). Internal cohesion and removing the gusto from opposition to the current coalition government such as the Movement for Change party provide enormous upside for Barzani. In the less cynical view, the announcement may simply be a diagnostic tool

for Erbil to explore strategic options in the immediate operational theatres as well as long term policy options available to the KRG.

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Anonymous 1

Question 1.

Turkey's Binali Yildirim came out harshly against it, but unclear what Turkish presidency's position is. Abadi, US, UK, Germany put out similar warnings - that the referendum could distract from the fight against ISIS.

My impression is that the Iranians are not too worried about a referendum. I think they know it won't lead to internationally-recognized independence, but rather to more internal Kurdish divisions, which ultimately will strengthen their hand in the region as they can exploit those divisions to strengthen their influence over parties in eastern Kurdistan.

Question 2.

Goran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group declined to take part in the committee organizing the referendum; a Goran MP called the referendum ³Barzani's referendum.² What you see is that for perhaps the first time in Iraqi Kurdish modern history, the independence project - and thus, Kurdish nationalism itself - has been politicized.

A poll organized by Sulaimaniyah-based NRT showed that 33% would vote no in a referendum. I think a likely scenario may be low turnout.

Question 3.

The timing of the announcement many in part have to do with the culmination of the Mosul campaign, as once Mosul and Hawijah are retaken from ISIS, rationale for the peshmerga presence in oil fields west of Kirkuk will be weakened. Yet, I'm not quite convinced that holding a referendum in disputed territories would strengthen Barzani's hand in negotiations with Baghdad (as has been suggested). In fact, he risks the opposite - if the referendum provokes violent opposition from those against incorporating disputed territories into a KDP-led Kurdistan (e.g., Arabs, Turkmens, possibly certain factions in Sinjar) or if for security/logistical reasons the referendum can't be properly conducted in disputed territories, it could actually nakedly demonstrate the difficulties Kurdish forces face in trying to hold and govern ethnically-mixed territories.

I think that for Barzani, the referendum is largely domestically-oriented. It comes at a time that he faces a legitimacy crisis among his own Kurdish constituency, with the KRG still unable to pay salaries on time or in full, and rising domestic anger toward the political establishment, especially the two traditional parties (KDP and PUK), which in the west is largely contained by the threat of KDP use of force against demonstrators - this is not a tenable situation for KDP. The referendum is designed to rally nationalist support (I don't see this happening like it used to in the past, as your average Kurd is more focused on making it through the month without his/her paycheck than on independence) and to paint the KDP's Kurdish rivals into a corner in which they cannot come out against his political project because it is dressed up in nationalist colors. So far this seems to have largely worked vis-a-vis the PUK, but not toward some other rivals including Goran.

Zana Gulmohamad (University of Sheffield)

Governments' (including the US, UK, EU, Germany, Turkey, Iran and Russia) reactions and responses have not been supportive or encouraging of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) declaration of a non-binding referendum, which will take place on the 25th September 2017. For example, the UK Ambassador to Iraq Frank Baker said in a press conference in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), "The government of the United Kingdom does not believe that now is the right time to hold the referendum for the Kurdish Region".¹ British Foreign Minister Johnson said, "We understand the aspirations of the Kurdish people and continue to support them politically, culturally and economically within Iraq...But a referendum at this time will distract from the more urgent priorities of defeating Daesh, stabilising liberated areas and addressing the long-term political issues that led to Daesh's rise."² Another example, President Erdogan said that the independence referendum does not serve anybody's interests. He also said that, "a step toward the independence of northern Iraq is a threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq, and it is wrong".³ The political and diplomatic reasons for rejection vary: some call the integrity of Iraq's territories vital, others say it is not the right time because of the war on IS, or the referendum should be approved by Baghdad. However, they all conclude that the KRG should be discouraged in moving forward with the referendum. The Kurdish leaders have stated that they are not surprised by foreign governments' reactions. Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani said, "the foreign reactions are very normal".⁴

On the 7th of June 2017, the decision to hold a referendum was made as a result of a meeting between major political parties and key officials headed by the President Masoud Barzani and the Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani. The President and PM are from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The meeting also included officials from the Patriotic Union Kurdistan (PUK) (a fraction within the PUK do not support the referendum for independence at this time unless internal Kurdish problems are settled), Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM), Kurdistan Communist Party, Kurdistan Toilers Party, Kurdistan Toilers and Workers Party, Kurdistan Development and Reform Party, Erbil Turkmen List, Iraqi Turkmen Front, Turkmen Development Party, Armenian List in Kurdistan Parliament, Assyrian Democratic Movement, and Assyrian Chaldean Popular Council.⁵ However, key and opposition political parties Gorran (Change Movement) and Kurdish Islamic Party (Komal) have neither attended the meeting nor approved the declaration of referendum. There are on-going negotiations with Kurdish opposition parties to have a unified voice. It is unclear how this will evolve as both sides (government and opposition) have complicated conditions.

One of the meeting's outcomes is committees have been formed that include all key political parties' representatives for the referendum and post-referendum. According to the KRG's President's senior advisor Hoshyar Zebari, the referendum covers the KRG's territories as well as so-called disputed areas if their local

¹ Rudaw (2017) "UK: Now is not right time for referendum, Baghdad first must authorize"
<http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/english/kurdistan/120620173>

² Rudaw (2017) "British FM says Baghdad must agree with Kurdish independence process"
<http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/english/kurdistan/130620176#sthash.HPhoe2gG.dpuf>

³ Hurriyet Daily News (2017) "Erdogan says Iraqi Kurds' independence referendum 'does not serve anybody's interest'" <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/erdogan-says-iraqi-kurds-independence-referendum-does-not-serve-anybodys-interest.aspx?PageID=238&NID=114280&NewsCatID=510>

⁴ Rudaw (2017) "PM Barzani: Foreign reactions to Kurdistan referendum are 'very normal'"
<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/110620172>

⁵ Rudaw (2017) "Kurdistan Region to hold independence referendum on Sept 25"
<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070620171>

councils have agreed to take part in the referendum.⁶ Hawrami, the President's advisor, said the question put to voters would be, "Do you want an independent Kurdistan?"⁷

On the 10th of June 2017 President Masoud Barzani met with 19 small political parties based in the KR-I but are outside the government and the Kurdistan Parliament (KP).⁸ This was in an effort to broaden the coalition and support for independence. On the 13th of June 2017, the KDP and the PUK decided to activate the KP, which had not convened since October 2015 and invited Gorran to participate in the process. Previously Gorran had been sidelined, including their Speaker of Parliament and a number of ministers. These efforts are to create unity in the Kurdish house, however, there are pending complicated issues regarding the Presidency's extension terms, position and powers that the opposition objects to and tries to change.

On the 18th of June 2017 the PUK's – one of the two major parties that rules the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – leadership council announced conditional support for the referendum. The conditions are to reactivate the Kurdistan Parliament – currently inactive – and pass a law to approve the independence referendum.⁹ Although, the PUK supports the referendum for independence the latest formal decision might complicate the process, as it requires more compromises, concessions and negotiations between the major Kurdish factions to settle their differences on the KRG's governance. One of the underlining reasons for the PUK's notion is to be more inclusive, particularly including Gorran in the process.

Two days after the referendum announcement, the federal government of Iraq rejected unilateral moves by the KRG for independence. Iraqi government spokesmen Saad al-Haddithi said, "No party can, on its own, decide the fate of Iraq, in isolation from the other parties."¹⁰ Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi said on the 13th of June 2017, "Every part of Iraq has aspirations and has a dream, and we respect that, even if we disagree with it." he added "We live in one homeland and they are our partners...the Kurds' ambitions for independence at this time is not opportune."¹¹ This is not the first time that PM Haider al-Abadi has rejected a Kurdish referendum as "not the ripe time", he did so in a press conference in April 2017.¹²

Former PM and current Vice President Nouri al-Maliki is against the referendum as he stated it is for dividing Iraq.¹³ His statements are not surprising as previously there have been plenty of clashes between him and Erbil. The Chairman of the Popular Mobilization Forces Falah al-Fayad has said that he told the Kurdish leadership that referendum for independence is not realistic and Iraq and the region is not ready

⁶ Al Hadath (2017) "Interview with Zebari" <http://www.alhadath.net/alhadath/videos/2017/06/10/-للحدث-زيباري-عن-موقفه-حول-الامور-التي-سيتناولها-الاسبق-لل-اسئلة-الاسئلة-الاسئلة.html>

⁷ Reuters (2017) "Iraqi Kurds plan independence referendum on Sept. 25" <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idUSKBN18Y284>

⁸ Rudaw (2017) "Barzani meets with political parties outside the government and parliament" <http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/100620177>

⁹ Rudaw (2017) "PUK conditions support for referendum on reactivated parliament" <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/180620173>

¹⁰ Reuters (2017) "Baghdad rejects Kurds' move to press for independence unilaterally" <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idINKBN190155>

¹¹ Kurdistan 24 (2017) "Iraqi PM calls Kurdistan's independence referendum 'untimely'" <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/eca7bf1d-5121-4708-82fa-8e76c9ceb277>

¹² Rudaw (2017) "Abadi: Now is not the time for Kurdistan independence referendum" <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/180420173>

¹³ Al Quds (2017) "Al-Maliki expresses that Kurdistan's referendum divides Iraq" <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=735867>

for this referendum.¹⁴ Over the last year, many of the Shia key figures, including Ammar al-Hakim leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and the Iraqi National Alliance, have expressed their dismay over the referendum.¹⁵

Although Kurdistan's independence is a shared aspiration for all major Kurdish political parties and people, the issue for calling for independence by the KDP leader is not new. Masoud Barzani has been calling and lobbying for a referendum for a few years, particularly since the rise of IS and the deterioration of Erbil and Baghdad's relationship. Masoud Barzani is determined to pursue independence without significant delay; he will not hold back unless there is significant internal and/or external pressure. It is critical to note that this issue is very dynamic. Every day an external actor or one in Iraq responds to this event.

¹⁴ Al Mayadeen (2017) "National security advisor talks to Al Mayadeen"

<http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/59245/> ال-إعلان-أبواب-على-ن-ح-ل-لم-ي-ادي-ن-ال-عراق-ي-ال-وطن-ي-ال-أمن-م-ت-ش-ار

¹⁵ Reuters (2017) "Iraq's Shi'ite ruling coalition opposes Kurds' independence referendum"

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-politics-kurds-idUSKBN17M1CF>

Question 1.

Regional and international governments have issued statements opposing the decision by stressing the unity of Iraq. An announcement like this would have triggered more aggressive responses in the 1990s and probably until up until the ISIS takeover. It is not surprising that Iran and Turkey are the most opposed. The statement of the government of Turkey considers the referendum as a “grave mistake.” A key question is whether there is a difference between the public statements of these countries, and what they privately discuss with the Kurdish leadership. There has been speculation that the Kurds would not make such an announcement if there was no tacit approval from at least Turkey. There is talk about Iranian and Turkish threats in private meetings with the Kurdish leadership. There are different scenarios at play here:

- 1- These countries might find it sufficient for now to only issue statements, and apply incremental pressure and take other action as things move forward. Should it remain a non-binding referendum that would not be followed by actual independence, then regional actors will see the situation as manageable domain, and will not see value in hurting relations with the Kurds by applying strong pressure at this point. At a time when every regional power is seeking to expand its influence through other actors, diminishing influence with the Kurds will be the absolute last option. The Kurds are an important part of the fight against ISIS and the regional geopolitical calculations of the regional powers, and none of them wants to lose influence in the KRI.
- 2- Most of the regional governments know that Iraq and the broader region has changed significantly, and that things will not go back to where they were before the Arab Spring and the advances of ISIS. These countries may have privately signaled to the Kurds that while they would not support independence *publicly*, they would not oppose it in practice either. Some news reports suggest otherwise in the case of Iran and Turkey.

From the Kurdish perspective, as long as there is no public “No” and no opposing steps taken, especially from countries like the United States and Turkey, then that is not bad news.

How have different sub-state groups responded, to include different Kurdish factions in Iraq and across borders?

Answer:

Non-Kurdish Iraqi politicians, party leaders, tribal leaders, and others have publicly called for the unity of Iraq as their way of opposing the referendum. Some have also elaborated that the Kurds cannot unilaterally decide on independence, and that all Iraqis should be asked. Some political leaders, like former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, current Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Saleem al-Jubouri, and leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces more explicitly rejected the referendum in reaction to the announcement setting the referendum’s date and statements made by the Kurds in recent months. It is unclear if any of these leaders privately expressed a different view to the Kurdish leadership, whether in support or more strongly opposing. Iraq has entered an election season, so political leaders will be making statements that will be more appealing to their bases – e.g. showing themselves as strong and patriotic. They may also attempt to appeal to regional countries whom they believe would oppose independence.

Independence is a genuine goal and a central piece of Kurdish nationalism and patriotism. It would be hard for any Kurdish individual, party or group to openly oppose or practically obstruct even if they disagree with

the political intentions behind the announcement. Intellectuals and political leaders who may not be supportive of the current leadership of the Kurdistan Region, and consider the referendum move as a cover for legitimacy, are trying to tie holding the referendum to other demands, such as the reactivation of the regional parliament, and revising the law of the presidency.

How are the Kurds using the independence referendum to leverage their interests?

Answer:

The Kurds and the Kurdish leadership could leverage the independence referendum in different ways.

First, a “Yes” vote would prepare the Kurds for practically going for independence supported by a popular vote, not just the decision of political and government leaders. This could be seen positively as a collective national decision given the significance of the decision, but also shouldering a collective responsibility should there be adverse consequences.

Second, the Kurdish leadership has exhausted its previous threats to Baghdad that it would break away if certain demands are not met. In recent years, such threats did not mean much to Baghdad, because they were seen as not being serious and/or not representative of the vast majority of the Kurds. Therefore, a “Yes” vote would strengthen the hand of the Kurdish leadership in any negotiations with Baghdad that they are truly prepared to secede if their demands are not met. They would not need as much time to go prepare if they have the vote in hand. The Kurds may hope that the vote would put them in a better position with the international community in terms of seeking their support in a re-negotiated position in Iraq – where they will have more control over disputed territories, energy, defense, foreign relations, and may be even airspace.

Third, the vote could also have a rallying effect to help with domestic politics of the Kurdistan Region, which has been affected by a series of political, economic, and security challenges with divisive effects. Many in the international community, Iraq, and the wider region believe independence is not possible and the move is mostly aimed at domestic political gain. The Kurds will likely be pragmatic and deal with all scenarios, including remaining within Iraq as long as the alternative is not viable, but they are also genuinely exploring within their own internal conversations and with others, within and outside Iraq, whether there is a “good time” to declare independence. Circumstances may never become “better” from their perspective, thus pushing them in the direction of true independence.

Amjed Rasheed (Durham University)

1. How have regional governments responded to Masood Barzani's announcement of a referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence to be held in September?

The Kurdish officials emphasised on the concept of "separation" than "division" from Iraq in their statements, hinting that the referendum is a natural right, and based on the principle of self-determination, as they have been forced to be part of Iraq. The referendum is a democratic process, says a Kurdish official, and we expect that no democratic country will oppose it. The same senior Kurdish politician stated that the yes for an independent Kurdistan does not mean an automatic separation from Iraq, and we expected this level of regional and foreign reaction. Hoshyar Zebari, a former Iraqi minister, said that the " we are not talking about independence, we are talking about the referendum". He declared that this process will be done by peaceful means. "You will hear people saying we are for Iraq's unity, territorial integrity, we want a dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil, we understand all this", he said.

The federal government in Baghdad confirmed that it opposes any efforts by the authorities of the Kurdistan region to hold the referendum and seek independence from Iraq. Iraqi officials oppose the unilaterality of the referendum. The Iraqi prime minister, al-'Abadi said that all the Iraqi should have their say on the future of Iraq. "Any position or step taken by any party in Iraq must be based on the Constitution and any decision on the future of Iraq, which is constitutionally defined as a single democratic and federal state with full national sovereignty, must take into account the relevant constitutional provisions," government spokesman Sa'ad al-Hadithi said. The Kurdish officials argue that it is the central government that has not been following the Constitution.

Turkey also showed its opposition to the Kurdish referendum. The Turkish prime minister, Binali Yildirim told the journalists that the Kurdish referendum is an "irresponsible", the Turkish foreign minister said that the referendum is a "grave mistake". However, the Islamic Union party in Kurdistan region stated that the region has received assurances from Turkey that the latter will not interfere in the Kurdish domestic affairs if the region separates from Iraq.

Iran also announced that it opposes the Kurdish referendum. Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi said that "The principal and clear position of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to support Iraq's territorial integrity and solidarity". Qassemi emphasised to the timing of the referendum. "Today, Iraq more than ever needs peace and national consensus and differences between Erbil, and Baghdad must be settled within the framework of dialogue and national understanding and in compliance with the Iraq Constitution," he said.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries have not reacted to the Kurdish referendum either. Saudi Arabia and UAE, appear to have endured a Kurdish state earlier, especially that the referendum is sponsored by the UAE, as the al-Araby website claims. Jordan has not commented on the issue either, but apparently, it also supports the Kurdish inspiration of establishing their state. In general, there is no public Arab opposition to the referendum so far.

The US rejection of the Kurdish referendum was also on the timing of it. "We appreciate the aspirations of the legitimate Kurdistan region to hold the independence referendum but its action may divert attention from the war against Da'ash," the State Department said.

Russia discouraged the KRG decision to hold the referendum. The Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Aria Zakharova stated that "Russia supports Iraq's unity and territorial integrity, provided that the legal rights of all ethnic and religious groups are respected, while the Kurds are one of those groups,".

Germany had also declared its opposition to holding the referendum. Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel told Reuters that "We can only warn against one-sided steps on this issue. The unity of Iraq is on the line," he continued, "I call on all sides to seek dialogue, to find consensus for dealing with open questions, and not to reignite conflicts in the disputed areas of Erbil and Baghdad,"

2. How have different sub-state groups responded, to include different Kurdish factions in Iraq and across borders?

Most of the Iraq political forces disagree on holding the referendum in Kurdistan. The Union of Forces bloc, a Sunni majority bloc in the Iraqi parliament said that the referendum pushes everyone to the abyss. "The insistence of the Kurdish parties on holding a popular referendum for separation from the homeland and the annexation of some cities and provinces such as the province of Kirkuk to this plan is the first seed to divide Iraq" they declared. The Kurdish official reacted by saying that they will ask the provisional councils in the "separated/segregated" from the Kurdish areas, [best known as disputed territories], and if they want to take part of the referendum, and if these areas decided to take part of it, says a Kurdish official, we will do a referendum there too.

The State of Law bloc, a Shi'a led bloc in the parliament rejected the referendum in the Kurdistan region. Al-'Alaq, a member of this bloc said in a press statement: the Iraqi political blocs expressed their rejection of the referendum as it leads to the division of the country. He added that the National Alliance [a Shi'a led alliance inside the parliament that consists of several Shi'a blocs] put forward the formation of a joint committee to resolve all the disputed issues between Baghdad and Erbil.

The Citizen bloc, affiliated to the supreme council of the Islamic revolution led by 'Ammar al-Hakim, stated that: "The referendum is "the dreams of poets" between of Iran and Turkey, and these two countries will never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state"

3. How are the Kurds using the independence referendum to leverage their interests?

The Kurdish officials declared that the referendum will take place and there is no way not to do it. The Kurdish officials declared that the 2003 Iraq is a dead project and that they have worked relentlessly for a united Iraq, but the situation with Baghdad has reached to a deadlock. The Kurdish leadership does not use the referendum as a tool to leverage their interests or to use it a pressure card against Baghdad. It genuinely believes that it is a time of the Kurds to achieve their inspiration and dream to become an independent state.

It seems that that have also expected this regional and foreign reaction. The PM Barzani said: "the reactions of the countries are very normal...It is not a big reaction There is nothing in it that could cause concerns,". President Barzani said to the press, "I say only this: Congratulations to the people of Kurdistan. I call on them to head to the ballot box on September 25 and vote and determine their own fate".

A committee has been formed by several Kurdish political parties to manage and sponsor the referendum process. Two political movement, Gorran or Change Movement and the Islamic League (Komal), have rejected to take part of the committee and it is expected that they may join in these coming days.

How have regional governments responded to Masood Barzani's announcement of a referendum on Iraqi Kurdish independence to be held in September?

As expected, the regional response has been unanimous, at least in substance. Countries who have reacted to the Kurdish declaration of holding an independence referendum on September 25, 2017 have reiterated their support for Iraq's territorial unity.

The United States voiced such a position through the State Department spokesperson, repeating U.S. support for "a unified, stable, democratic and a federal Iraq," adding that the timing of the referendum was counterproductive in that it distracts from finishing off ISIS. She did, however, recognize the "legitimate aspirations" of the Kurdish people. The U.S. is concerned that a Kurdish defection would weaken Abadi and embolden his rivals, who are closer to Iran and would undercut long-term U.S. security relations with Iraq. The UK foreign ministry echoes U.S. position in a statement and warned against the destabilizing effects of Kurdish unilateral action.

Turkey's President Erdogan described the Kurdish move toward independence as a "threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq," and hence a "wrong" move. Using harsher words, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim characterized the KRG move as "irresponsible" and his foreign minister said it was a "grave mistake." Similar to Turkey and the United States, Iran reiterated that they see the KRG as part of Iraq and that Kurdish referendum move is unconstitutional and will destabilize the country.

Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi had criticized the Kurdish timing as well, and his office stated that it is not up to Kurds alone to decide the fate of Iraq's borders.

KRG officials have so far shrugged off the criticism, which they said were expected. So far, there are no signs of backing down.

Pressure on the KRG will mount, however, if they insist on holding the referendum in disputed territories that both KRG and Baghdad claim. A referendum that takes place in the three, pre-2003 KRG provinces would be less aggravating to Baghdad and KRG's neighbors.

How have different sub-state groups responded, to include different Kurdish factions in Iraq and across borders?

The Kurds are of two camps. Of the five main Kurdish parties in the parliament, three are for the referendum and two oppose it. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) met with KRG president Masoud Barzani on June 7, along with a group of smaller parties and minority groups, to set the date for the referendum (September 25) and elections (November 6).

Gorran, which commands the second largest bloc in the Kurdish parliament and the Islamic Group (Komal), did not attend the meeting with Barzani where the decision to hold a referendum was made. Gorran and the KDP are in a bitter dispute over Barzani's presidential term, which expired in August of 2015. When the parliament sought to unseat him, KDP forces blocked the speaker of parliament, a Gorran member, from entering the capital city of Erbil in October 2015, effectively shuttering the parliament. To Gorran, the

decision to hold a referendum should come from the parliament, which requires reactivating the legislature. The PUK and KDP agreed on reconvening parliamentary sessions but limited to passing a referendum legislation and electing a new speaker. Gorran rejected the proposal.

Camil Bayik of the PKK has told a reporter that “no one should oppose” the KRG referendum.

How are the Kurds using the independence referendum to leverage their interests?

The Kurds see a window of opportunity to achieve their statehood dream that is closing on them as their role, and hence leverage, in the anti-ISIS campaign winds down. Many KRG leaders are also concerned about the rising role of Shia militias in Iraq. For example, a scenario that alarms the Kurds would be for Nouri Al-Maliki to return at the helm of the Iraqi government. Al-Maliki, who is increasingly warming up to Iran, has been advocating an anti-Kurdish stance and calling for an end to rule by consensus in favor of one by the shia majority.

KRG leaders also count on their investment in international relations and business to blunt the expected opposition to their push for more autonomy. Nonetheless, the immediate result of the referendum won't be a unilateral declaration of independence. Kurds have gained more from patience, gradualism and creating facts on the ground than from bouts of bold action.

Emboldened by the referendum mandate, the Kurds will negotiate with Baghdad for more sovereign rights, including over selling oil, control of KRG's air space, and access to credit. They would also seek to legitimate their control of disputed territories, like Kirkuk, which the Iraqi army abandoned in 2014. About half of KRG's oil exports are sourced from Kirkuk. Such a mandate should soften any international resistance of Kurdish demands, the KRG hopes.

Hoshang Waziri (Independent)

The Kurdish referendum is extremely a messy question because of its multi-level complexity. First, I want to point out that Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is no longer an accurate nor useful term to characterize the Erbil Authorities, especially after the expelling of democratically elected speaker of Parliament, and all Change "Gorran" Movement's ministers by Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masood Barzani, in Fall of 2015.

This move led to consolidation of powers in the hands of KDP, and to unilateral control by KDP over the government in Erbil the capital and all its political decisions, including the call for referendum and its timing.

KDP officials have been trying to assure regional governments that a birth of a neighboring Kurdish independent state would not represent a threat to their interests, and most importantly would not impact the situations of their Kurdish minorities.

Good Kurds and Bad Kurds

Despite these repeated reassurances, a loud and clear rejection was the general regional answer to the referendum decision.

[Iran](#) announced on Saturday that Kurdistan referendum will "exacerbate" Iraq's problems, calling for "dialogue and national reconciliation in accordance with the Iraqi constitution".

Turkey had declared a similar stance by calling the referendum decision "irresponsible" and "grave mistake".

But the rejection of these two regional powers might play out differently. In an interview with [al Monitor](#) in Dec. 2016 KRG Prime Minister summarized Turkey and Iran's attitudes by saying "Talk of Iraqi Kurdish independence red line for Iran, but not Turkey."

Due to its excellent relations with KDP leaderships and Barzani family in particular, Turkey might eventually soften its rejection and turn a blind eye to an independent state declared and led by Barzani.

Turkey has always viewed KDP as a "good Kurd," and KDP has sided many times with Turkey in its war against the "Bad Kurd" represented by Turkish Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK.) And that's what mainly matters to Turkey when it comes to Kurdish issue.

On the other side of the region, Iran is different. KDP has had a historical animosity with Iran especially during the Kurdish civil war in 1990s when Iran sided with KDP's traditional rival Patriotic union of Kurdistan (PUK.) Iran will not be happy with a smaller Shia led Iraq, and it will not remain idle before an independent Kurdish state, taking in consideration its great capacity to move and project power in Iraq.

Iran will try to create as many obstacles and difficulties it can to stop the birth of a Kurdish state including tighten economic noose and ultimately pushing some of armed Shia group within Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) operating near or in disputed territories in both Mosul and Kirkuk into armed conflicts with Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

Deformed State

During the last year or so, KDP officials have worked on many different levels to achieve the referendum decision, the regional level was not the most critical one, but rather it was getting all Kurdish groups to rally behind Barzani's call. But it didn't work out.

Both Change Movement and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) refused to attend the meeting on June 7, where the referendum was set for Sep. 25.

The unsolved Kurdish internal divisions, especially between Sulaymaniyah based Change Movement and KDP, and the hidden classical territorial struggle between PUK and KDP, plus the long unsolved explosive case of Kirkuk - strongly controlled by PUK- and other disputed territories, will all impact and determine the shape and geography of the future independent Kurdish state.

If the internal crisis persisted, and the gap between Erbil and Sulaymaniyah widens further, the Kurd might witness a birth of a deformed state missing limbs.

Christine van den Toorn (American University of Iraq Sulaimani)

The referendum will increase divisions in the KRG, between KDP and PUK (Erbil and Suli) as well as intra PUK politics, and between KDP and the opposition, Gorran (and PUK and Gorran). It is a polarizing issue. It will also increase divisions between the political elites and the people (people in Suli and Garmien who are against the referendum).

It moves the Kurds and Iraq further from a negotiated settlement. The referendum will allow the Kurds much more leverage, increase, if that is possible, their maximalist approach toward Baghdad and the KDP toward other Kurdish parties and the public.

It also moves the Kurds closer to independence, even though they say it doesn't concern that, it does. This will further destabilize regional balance.

1. There seems to be somewhat of a consensus forming in the analyst and official community that Turkey has not said no, and is OK with this. Still seems up for debate. Turkey has interest in maintaining KDP rule in the KRG (their main ally, anti PKK, allied w Nujaiifi/ Turkey's Iraqi Sunni Arab friends, bulwark against Shia Iraq/ Iran, gas, other economic interests (exports) etc.) and if they think the party and their vassal state is challenged, they might allow for a referendum to secure and maintain their position in power.

Iran would not have agreed to the extent Turkey has, but if Turkey is on board, and this is seen a fait accompli they might accept and work within this new paradigm to bolster Baghdad and PUK influence. They also have their own problems right now.

The US, UK, EU and international countries have come out against it, though it has been a rather light reaction which is one factor that has led many locals to believe that they are not actually against it. That is what is interesting here – local perception is that the US and everyone else actually don't care and/or support it. This is partly bc they can't conceive that the KDP would ever go against the US et al. and partly because of the way the KDP has presented it on the main media outlets. On Twitter, FB, and in Rudaw, etc. it either isn't mentioned what they think or it is stated that the US and the EU etc. support the referendum.

2. **Kurds in Sulaimani and Garmien**, either don't care, are against it, or are virulently against it. People are angry. They will either not vote or vote no. Many predict this – without fraud – will lead to 30% or more either voting no or not voting at all. Fraud however is guaranteed, and happens in all elections (increasingly) here, esp. in 2013 and 2014. This will lead to increasing divisions between Erbil and Suli, PUK and KDP and the political elites, parties and the population (especially bc most PUK leadership though not all are tacitly supporting it, there are a few exceptions).

Local populations in the DIBs, disputed territories are polarized, either very for it or very against it, and this polarization falls on ethnic or ethnosectarian lines. It will certainly be divisive, and cause tensions/ violence.

Among Kurds in DIBs, the no/ don't care you find in Suli dissipates a bit (PUK DIBs I mean), where there are more nationalist Kurds who have more of a stake in this going north. That said, the DIBs Kurds might see this as possibly causing more violence and conflict in their frontwards.

Sunni Arabs in DIBs This really is not good timing for the Sunni Arabs in DIBS and in the KRG. Right now, most of them prefer the Kurds to the Shia militias near their areas (though that is not totally true bc some have joined Hashd). Also we know there are some deals like between Nujaifis and KDP. So, this is the Kurds chance to solidify the Sunni Arab vote. But nearly every friend, colleague I have that is Sunni Arabs from the DIBs or from non DIBs, even friends from other groups, say the Sunni Arab support for the Kurds is ephemeral and transient. As soon as ISIS is defeated, and especially if there is as many seem to imply, a new chance or opening for Sunni Arabs in Baghdad and Iraq, they will go back to siding with and supporting Baghdad. So while this will give the KRG more leverage, as they will be able to say the Sunni Arabs support us – this will only be true in the short term.

Minorities/ non Kurds in DIBs (mostly Ninewa) Again, while Kurds say that all minorities want to live under the KRG, this is wildly untrue. Some do, some want to be under Iraq (I'd argue the majority) but more and really everyone just wants autonomy and to be left alone, and possibly united. Many (maybe most) minorities and populations E, and NE of Mosul want to be united as one province or Region – Sahel Ninewa (Hamdaniya, Bartella, Bashiqa, Shaikhan Tel Kayf.) This is a big issue because KRG has built a berm between Bashiqa and Bartella. This referendum will further solidify the divide, polarize local populations and lead to zero sum, maximalist attitudes and approaches rather than negotiated settlements.

In DIBs, non-Kurds and some Kurds see this referendum as an imposition.

3. **It's all about Kirkuk.** Many say this is all about the DIBs, especially Kirkuk and of course really maintaining control over Kirkuk's oil fields. It reminds me exactly of 2008. The Kurds made serious gains in DIBs from 2003 to 2007, but then after the end of the sectarian civil war and defeat of AQI, Maliki sent Iraqi forces up to take back the territories and Kurds had to withdraw, ie from Kirkuk and Khanaqin area. They, the KDP, are determined that this will not happen again. This referendum gives them a card, legitimacy to stay in Kirkuk if and when ISF or Hashd or whatever Shia militia try to kick them out. Also, this time, if push comes to shove, they will fight, not retreat this time.

Another point is that it gives them leverage in Baghdad, if they stay in Iraq. This is just like in 2005 when they had a referendum and 98% voted for independence, the KDP and PUK used this to leverage positions, favorable deals in Baghdad.

Of course, there is the most common and obvious reason which everyone knows and talks about that this is the way to distract Kurds from the real problems of the KRG – no salaries, massive debt, all the v serious oil problems (the Dana gas case, presales, Roseneft) and that Parliament hasn't met for 2 years. Because after ISIS, everything comes to the surface.

A few say that this is a real serious step to independence. While most say, and this is how the Kurds are selling it to the US and Baghdad and to everyone, this is not serious, just a referendum, not a big deal. But this could be a real step to independence. Because they are risking the US, angering all their allies, so the payoff must be big.

Biographies

Scott Atran



Scott Atran received his B.A. and Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University (and an M.A. in social relations from Johns Hopkins). He is tenured as Research Director in Anthropology at France's National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Institut Jean Nicod – Ecole Normale Supérieure, in Paris. He is a founding fellow of the Centre for Resolution of Intractable Conflict, Harris Manchester College, and Department of Politics and International Relations and School of Social Anthropology, University of Oxford. Scott also holds positions as Research Professor of Public Policy and Psychology, University of Michigan; and he is Director of Research, ARTIS Research.

Previously, Scott was assistant to Dr. Margaret Mead at the American Museum of Natural History; Coordinator "Animal and Human Communication Program," Royaumont Center for a Science of Man, Paris (Jacques Monod, Dir.); member of the Conseil Scientifique, Laboratoire d'Ethnobiologie-Biogéographie, Museum National D'Histoire Naturelle, Paris; Visiting Lecturer, Dept. Social Anthropology, Cambridge Univ.; Chargé de Conférence, Collège International de Philosophie; member of the Centre de Recherche en Epistémologie Appliquée, Ecole Polytechnique, Paris; Visiting Prof., Truman Institute, Hebrew Univ., Jerusalem; Leverhulme Distinguished Visiting Prof. of Anthropology, Univ. of London-Goldsmiths.; Presidential Scholar, John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Scott has experimented extensively on the ways scientists and ordinary people categorize and reason about nature, on the cognitive and evolutionary psychology of religion, and on the limits of rational choice in political and cultural conflict. He has repeatedly briefed NATO, HMG and members of the U.S. Congress and the National Security Council staff at the White House on the Devoted Actor versus the Rational Actor in Managing World Conflict, on the Comparative Anatomy and Evolution of Global Network Terrorism, and on Pathways to and from Violent Extremism. He has addressed the United Nations Security Council on problems of youth and violent extremism and currently serves in advisory capacity to the Security Council and Secretary General on combatting terrorism and on ways to implement UN Resolution 2250 to engage and empower youth in the promotion of peace. He has been engaged in conflict negotiations in the Middle East, and in the establishment of indigenously managed forest reserves for Native American peoples.

Scott is a recurrent contributor to The New York Times, The Guardian and Foreign Policy, as well as to professional journals such as Science, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, and Behavioral and Brain Sciences. His publications include Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology of Science (Cambridge Univ. Press), In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion (Oxford Univ. Press), The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature (MIT Press, with Doug Medin), and Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What It Means to Be Human (Penguin). His work and life have been spotlighted around the world on television and radio and in the popular and scientific press, including feature and cover stories of the New York Times Magazine, The Chronicle of Higher Education, Nature and Science News.

Weston Aviles

Weston Aviles is an analyst at NSI, Inc. He studied criminology and political science at Arizona State University (BS) with minors in Middle Eastern history and economics, and certificates in political thought and leadership, international studies and religion and conflict. Weston then studied Government at the InterDisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel graduate school with a focus in counter-terrorism and security studies (MA). His graduate studies focused on Arab Spring dynamics, international security in the MENA region and radical Islam. Weston is an alumni of the University of Virginia's Semester at Sea program and has participated in several academic programs in Israel to study terrorism and counter-terrorism. Weston is now an analyst for NSI and continues a research focus on Middle Eastern politics and conflict studies.



Zana Gulmohamad



In February 2013 I began my PhD at the Politics Department at the University of Sheffield, UK and am currently teaching in the political science department there. My research title is: "Iraq's foreign policy post-2003". I am a former Research Fellow at the American University of Kurdistan. I have an MA in Global Affairs and Diplomacy from the University of Buckingham, UK, and a BA in Political Science from the University of Sulaymaniyah - Kurdistan Region of Iraq. I worked for six years (2005-2011) in the Kurdistan Region Security Council - Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq.

I had substantial responsibilities as executive manager and a security analyst in matters related to security, intelligence, data analysis, security technology, foreign relations (receiving delegations and official trips abroad) and teaching staff. My capabilities have built up over years of training and interaction with security and intelligence corporations, governments and their security and intelligence services. They include states such as the US, the UK, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

My articles have been published by journals and think tanks such as CTC Sentinel, Jamestown Foundation "Terrorism Monitor", The National, Open Democracy, E-International Relations, Global Security Studies, Your Middle East, The New Arab, and Middle East online. I have presented conference papers in the UK, the US and the Middle East. Please go to my website to view the links to my articles www.zanagul.com and www.zanagulmohamad.com

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Sarhang Hamasaeed

Sarhang Hamasaeed is the director of Middle East Programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP). He joined USIP in February 2011 and works on program management, organizational development, and monitoring and evaluation. His areas of focus include political and policy analysis, conflict analysis, dialogue processes, reconciliation and post-conflict stabilization, and ethnic and religious minorities. He writes, gives media interviews to international media, and is featured on events and briefings on Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East. He provided analysis to NPR, Voice of America, Al-Jazeera America, Fox News Al-Hurra TV, Radio Sawa, Kurdistan TV, Kurdsat TV, Rudaw, Al-Iraqiya TV, NRT TV, Skynews Arabia, the Washington Times, PBS, and CCTV. He is a member on the Task Force on the Future of Iraq, and was member of the Rebuilding Societies Working Group under the Middle East Strategy Taskforce, both initiatives by the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. He regularly gives a lecture at the Foreign Service Institute on ISIL and Challenges to Governance in Iraq.



Hamasaeed has more than 15 years of strategy, management, and monitoring and evaluation experience in governmental, nongovernmental, private sector, and media organizations.

As a deputy director general at the Council of Ministers of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (2008-2009), Hamasaeed managed strategic government modernization initiatives through information technology with the goal of helping improve governance and service delivery. As a program manager for the Research Triangle Institute International (2003-2004), he managed civic engagement and local democratic governance programs in Iraq. Hamasaeed has worked as a planning and relations manager at Kurdistan Save the Children (1997-2002). Hamasaeed has also worked for the Los Angeles Times and other international media organizations.

He holds a Master's degree in International Development Policy from Duke University (2007) and is a Fulbright alumnus.

Amjed Rasheed

Dr. Amjed Rasheed is post-doctoral research fellow at the Institute of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies-Durham University. His research interest is on Kurd, Arab and Muslim Politics. His current research is on Daesh's political and religious discourse in the Arab world.

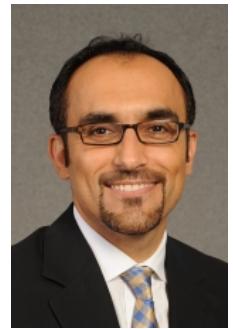
Christine van den Toorn

Christine van den Toorn is the Director of the Institute of regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS). She has over 10 years of academic and professional experience in the Middle East, 8 of which have been spent in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). She has conducted fieldwork all over the KRI, with a particular focus on disputed territories in Ninewa, Diyala and Salahddin, and has published articles and reports in leading publications like Foreign Policy, War on the Rocks, Iraq Oil Report, Inside Iraqi Politics, Daily Beast and Niqash as well as delivered talks on her research. Ms. van den Toorn has also conducted baseline reports and social impact assessments for international oil companies operating in the KRI and disputed territories, working with teams of student researchers from AUIS. She served in the United States Peace Corps in Morocco and holds an MA in Middle East History from the University of Virginia, and taught the subject at AUIS for 4 years. Ms. van den Toorn speaks Arabic,

which she studied at Middlebury College, Georgetown University, the University of Damascus in Syria and the French Institute for Near East Studies in Damascus.

Bilal Wahab

Bilal Wahab is a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on governance in the Iraqi Kurdish region and in Iraq as a whole. He has taught at the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani, where he established the Center for Development and Natural Resources, a research program on oil and development. He earned his Ph.D. from George Mason University; his M.A. from American University, where he was among the first Iraqis awarded a Fulbright scholarship; and his B.A. from Salahaddin University in Erbil. Along with numerous scholarly articles, he has written extensively in the Arabic and Kurdish media.



Hoshang Waziri



[Hoshang Waziri](#) is a writer and a researcher. His writings appear in Arabic newspapers such as al-Hayat, al-Esbuiya, Assafir and in English in Open Democracy and the Sentinel. In addition to his research and writing, he has written plays and theatrical essays. His collection of political essays, *Between Two Iraqs "Bilad Mabayeen Iraqain"* was published by Noon Publishing House in 2014.

Sarah Canna

Sarah Canna applies her open source analytic skills to regions of vital concern to US Combatant Commands, particularly the Middle East and South Asia. To help military planners understand the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play in evolving conflict situations, she developed a Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) tool, which is designed to rapidly respond to emergent crises by pulsing NSI's extensive subject matter expert (SME) network to provide deep, customized, multidisciplinary analysis for defense and industry clients. Prior to joining NSI, she completed her Master's degree from Georgetown University in Technology and Security Studies. She holds a translation certificate in Spanish from American University and has been learning Dari for three years.

