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Turkey and the KRG After the Referendum: Blocking the Path to Independence

The Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) decision to proceed with the controversial referendum on independence on September 25, despite Turkey's serious and sustained objections, has provoked a serious crisis in relations between Ankara and Erbil. It remains to be seen whether the October 29 resignation announcement by KRG President Masoud Barzani, who was denounced by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 3 for "ruining with his own hands a relationship that used to go quite well," will be enough to facilitate a restoration of the close ties which had been developed during the past decade.

After it lost control of Kirkuk to Iraqi central government forces on October 16, the KRG offered on October 24 to "freeze" the referendum result, something it had previously resolutely rejected. However, Erdogan chose to back Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Abadi's immediate rebuff of this offer and followed up the next day by reaffirming that his "stance on the KRG's illegitimate referendum decision remained unchanged." On October 26, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu characterized Erbil's move as "inadequate" and called for "the cancellation of the referendum."

Parallel to the deterioration of relations between Ankara and Erbil, the referendum has also led to a rare alignment between Turkey and its regional rival Iran as the two countries coordinated their backing of Baghdad's tough response. While it is unclear whether this will continue, it is interesting to note that, in contrast to its continuing cooperation with Tehran, Ankara had limited contact with Washington at a time of growing tensions between the U.S. and Iran.

The Gathering Storm

After Barzani declared his intention to proceed with a referendum on independence on June 7, the Turkish Foreign Ministry responded by characterizing the decision as a "grave mistake" which "would benefit neither the KRG nor Iraq." Erdogan then followed up by publicly calling on Barzani numerous times to cancel the referendum and sent Cavusoglu and National Intelligence (MIT) chief Hakan Fidan to Erbil in August and September respectively to try to persuade him to do so. Referring to these efforts during his United Nations General Assembly address on September 20, Erdogan explained that he had dispatched his delegates to tell Barzani not to "make this mistake" as it would "drag the region into an endless ethnic and sectarian war," while reminding him that Turkey had "helped whenever he was in need." However, he continued, these efforts were in vain and that the Turkish response would be determined accordingly at a special National Security Council meeting after his return to Ankara.

While chiding Barzani from New York, Erdogan spoke to Abadi on September 18. Erdogan emphasized in the phone call his "commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq," and stated "his country's keenness to collaborate with Iraq for the region's security and stability." He also pledged that Turkey would provide the central government "full support in all its steps." This was particularly significant as the two leaders

had differed sharply in the past over Ankara's growing cooperation with Erbil in spite of Baghdad's objections, as well as on other issues. For example, on October 11, 2016, during their public dispute over the presence of Turkish troops in Bashiqa, Erdogan insulted Abadi by saying "you are not at my level, my equivalent or of the same quality" and stated that his "screaming and shouting is of no importance to us...know that we will do what we want." On a broader level, their dispute was a reflection of growing sectarian tensions in the region. After centuries of Sunni domination, Iraq had been under Shia leadership since the ouster of Saddam Hussein in 2003, while Turkey increasingly positioned itself as a defender of the Sunnis in lands previously under Ottoman control, especially in Syria and Iraq. On October 18, 2016, for example, Erdogan stated that he had a "historical responsibility" to protect "our Sunni Arab brothers and Turkmen brothers."

The KRG referendum was on the agenda of the September 21 meeting between Erdogan and U.S. President Donald Trump in New York. The White House readout afterwards stated that the two leaders had "reaffirmed their rejection of the planned referendum." The U.S. position had been conveyed to Barzani in Erbil a week earlier by Special Presidential Envoy Brett McGurk and Ambassador to Iraq Douglas Silliman. They offered Barzani a way out of the crisis by conveying the draft of a letter which would have been sent by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson if he decided to postpone the referendum. Nevertheless, Ankara was not convinced of the sincerity of the U.S. In fact, the referendum helped to reignite long-held Turkish conspiracy theories stretching back to the First Gulf War of 1991 about a long-standing American plan to set up an independent Kurdish state beyond Turkey's southern borders that would eventually expand to include southeastern provinces in Turkey. During a September 26 address, for example, Erdogan warned the KRG leadership that they were in danger of becoming "others' puppets to be thrown away" after they outlived their usefulness. On September 30, he said that he "knew very well that the game played in Northern Syria was aimed at completely isolating Turkey from the Middle East," and "the referendum in Northern Iraq was also part of the same project."

After the Vote

Immediately after returning to Ankara on September 21, Erdogan chaired a special NSC meeting which characterized the referendum as "illegitimate and unacceptable" and stated that Turkey "reserved its rights" to respond in accordance with "bilateral and international agreements." On the day of the referendum, Erdogan made a point of reiterating his support for the "current law in Iraq" and said that, irrespective of the result, it was "null and void" and "illegitimate." Ankara then underlined its position by organizing military exercises along the shared border with the KRG, which were subsequently joined by Iraqi troops, and suspending the broadcasting licenses of three Kurdish networks. On September 27, three Turkish airline companies stopped scheduled flights between Turkey and Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports, and on October 16, Turkish airspace was closed to all flights to and from the KRG.

Erdogan had pointedly noted in his speech on September 25, that Turkey had "supported the KRG during its most troubled times when there was no one else on its side" and "kept them on their feet." The following day, he said that the referendum decision, "which was made without any prior consultation or meeting, is a betrayal to our country in a period when our relations were at their best level in history." Referring to Ankara's crucial role in helping Erbil to export its oil directly through Turkey beyond the supervision of Iraqi central authorities, Erdogan warned "the moment we close the valve, it is over, all their income goes out of the window." For good measure he added, "once our trucks stop working in northern Iraq, they will not be able to find food and clothes."

After a number of years following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, during which Turkey had opposed the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, Ankara had chosen to develop close economic and political relations with the KRG. According to the KRG Ministry of Trade and Industry, the total trade between Ankara and Erbil was valued at “\$5 billion in the first six months of 2017,” and was projected, before the referendum crisis, to hit \$10 billion by the end of the year. This was facilitated greatly by the deal reached in December 2014 whereby Ankara allowed the KRG to directly receive revenue from the sale of oil produced within its territory, as well as in adjacent areas that it occupied, through Turkey.

Although the Habur border gate, the main crossing point between Turkey and the KRG, remained open after the referendum, Erdogan warned on October 19 that talks with Baghdad were “continuing on what will be done... We have not shut the border yet but this could happen too at any moment.” On October 25, Erdogan met with Abadi in Ankara and declared that they had “reached a positive point as a result of the talks we have held and the steps we have taken as Turkey, Iran and Iraq.” Prime Minister Binali Yildirim followed up after his own meeting with Abadi by saying that Turkey would be “transferring control of the Habur border gate to the central government of Iraq” as part of its policy of supporting the central government in acquiring “airports and border gates from the regional government.” On October 31, he announced that the crossing had been “handed over to the central government” as Turkish TV cameras recorded Iraqi officers, backed by Turkish troops, moving into the border crossing facilities from Turkey.

Misreading Erdogan

While it is clear that Barzani made a number of serious miscalculations with respect to the referendum, his misreading of Erdogan’s likely response may have been one of his most significant. To be sure, the two men had previously enjoyed good relations, underlined by Barzani’s numerous visits to Turkey to meet with Erdogan and the latter’s visit to Erbil in 2011. In November 2013, Barzani had even been invited by the Turkish leader to participate in a major joint event in Diyarbakir during Erdogan’s ‘Kurdish opening.’ After Erdogan had praised Barzani as his “dear friend” during the ceremony and said that it was because of Barzani that he was “able to salute our siblings in the Kurdistan region,” Barzani responded by hailing “Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood.” The extent of the growing closeness was emphasized by the raising of the KRG flag alongside the Iraqi flag on numerous occasions, most recently during Barzani’s last visit to Turkey on February 26, 2017.

In a December 21, 2012 interview with Time Magazine, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani had emphasized the KRG’s recognition of Turkey’s crucial importance in any future bid for independence when he said “First of all, we have to convince at least one country around us. Without convincing them, we cannot do this. Being landlocked we have to have a partner, a regional power to be convinced.” He then referred obliquely to the U.S. factor by saying that the KRG also needed “a big power to be convinced to support that.” However, when Masoud Barzani finally made the push for independence, neither Ankara nor Washington were where he wanted them to be. He gambled that the Turkish government would not take any action that would disrupt its economic and strategic relationship with Erbil. While these were indeed important for Erdogan, they were far outweighed by other factors.

To begin with, Erdogan was angered by Barzani’s refusal to heed his public calls for the postponement of the referendum. Beyond his characteristic unwillingness to let any slight go, Erdogan was also conscious

of the negative impact on his charisma, as well as on his carefully cultivated image as an all-powerful leader fully in control at home and immensely influential beyond Turkey. Erdogan could therefore not accept being perceived as a weak leader unable to persuade a small and dependent entity below his southern border not to pursue the goal of independence despite his repeated warnings.

His reaction was also influenced by developments in Syria. On the day of the referendum, for example, Erdogan stated that Turkey would “not allow the establishment of a terror state in Syria” as these developments would be “a matter of our state and nation’s survival for us.” It was clearly not politically feasible for Erdogan to fail to react to the KRG’s bid for independence as he was so strongly opposed to the emergence of a similar Kurdish belt in northern Syria controlled by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed component the People’s Protection Units (YPG) linked to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terrorist organization which has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984. On November 1, Erdogan gave voice to concern that the PYD would “expand its corridor to the Mediterranean Sea” and that Ankara would “never allow such a scenario.” Erdogan pointedly referred to Turkish military action as part of the Euphrates Shield operation in northern Syria, which had effectively prevented a contiguous Kurdish area immediately beyond the Turkish-Syrian border, and warned that, just as in Syria, Turkish troops “could suddenly move one night” into northern Iraq.

Israel’s open backing for KRG independence was another factor in shaping Erdogan’s reaction. After seeing TV footage of Iraqi Kurds waving Israeli flags on September 30, Erdogan said, “this shows one thing, that this administration has a history with Mossad, they are hand-in-hand together.” Similarly, after his meeting in Tehran with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on October 3, during which his Iranian host referred to the effort “to create a new Israel in the region,” Erdogan characterized the referendum as “a Zionist plan.”

Kirkuk’s inclusion in the referendum was a grave error from Erdogan’s perspective. Although beyond the official borders of the KRG, it had been occupied by Kurdish peshmerga since June 2014 after ISIS had moved into Mosul and its status had remained undetermined because of the failure to hold a separate referendum in accordance with Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution. Often described by Kurds as their “Jerusalem” and branded by Barzani in February 2015 as “a city in Kurdistan with its Kurdish identity not debatable,” its symbolic importance was enhanced by surrounding oil fields which increased the amount of oil the KRG was able to sell in world markets. However, Kirkuk’s ownership was also claimed by Arabs and Turkmens and when Kirkuk’s provincial council voted 24 to 22 on August 29 to participate in the referendum, all nine Turkmens and four Arab members boycotted the vote.

For his part, as far back as April 4, Erdogan had asserted that Kirkuk was “historically a Turkmen city regardless of whether some accept it or not,” and accused the KRG of enacting policies construed as “an act of occupation.” On September 14, Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin stated that “Kirkuk was not a part of the Kurdish region” and that “the attempt to create such a de facto situation is unacceptable.” The following day, Erdogan again drew attention to the special status of Kirkuk and denounced Barzani for “engaging in an effort to conduct certain operations there despite knowing our sensitivity.” On September 28, Erdogan stated that the referendum had “ignored the rights of Turkmens” and that Turkey’s forceful response was due to its desire to achieve “the best for all the region, Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens.”

Playing on Turkish sensitivities, Abadi accused the KRG of bringing in PKK fighters into Kirkuk on October 15. This drew an immediate reaction from Ankara which noted with approval “the Iraqi

government's statement that no tolerance will be shown to PKK members in Kirkuk and that the mobilization of these groups will be considered an act of war." The following day, after Iraqi forces, backed by the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces, quickly reclaimed the city from the Kurds, and Erdogan declared on October 18 that "those who act by disregarding the structure of the region, which is composed of many different identities, with hysterical and opportunistic haste, will be held to account by history" and warned Barzani to "stay in the area within the northern Iraq regional administration." Ankara also declared its support for Baghdad's plans to rehabilitate the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline as part of its effort to regain control over the export of oil through Turkey from northern Iraq. At the same time, Yildirim confirmed during Abadi's visit widespread speculation that Turkey and Iraq had "agreed to open a second border gate," beyond the control of peshmergas, at a place called Ovakoy west of Habur.

Looking Ahead

On October 19, Erdogan noted that the major Kurdish reversal in Kirkuk was a product of internal division by saying that the two main factions were "at odds with each other, accusing each other of selling them out." This was publicly acknowledged by Barzani himself during his resignation speech on October 29 when he put the blame for the loss of Kirkuk and its oil resources on "the high treason" of rival political factions. It is significant that Barzani's unbending insistence on holding the referendum was tied by his main political opponents, the Gorran Movement and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), to his desire to hide growing problems concerning his leadership. In fact, Barzani's term in office had ended in 2013 and he had stayed in office as a 'war time leader,' even beyond a controversial two-year extension by the KRG parliament in 2015.

Instead of strengthening Barzani, the referendum weakened him considerably as Gorran and the PUK took the opportunity to blame him for its consequences. On November 6, for example, Gorran spokesperson Shorsh Haji referred to post-referendum events as a "catastrophe" and called for "an interim salvation government whose only mission will be to negotiate with Baghdad and prepare for a new election." Nevertheless, Barzani told Newsweek on November 7 that he believed that "independence was still possible." However, he implicitly acknowledged the irreversible loss of Kirkuk and pledged to avoid bloodshed "as long as they are not changing the status" of the KRG. The fallback position was confirmed by a vote on November 14 in the KRG parliament "to respect the interpretation of the Federal Supreme Court of the First Article of the Iraqi Constitution" that "the Republic of Iraq is a federal, independent and fully sovereign state and this Constitution is a guarantor of the unity of Iraq."

In addition to loosening Barzani's hold on power, the referendum also put the KRG in a much weaker position than it was before the vote and effectively destroyed of any hope of a successful independence bid in the foreseeable future. In the face of joint action by Turkey and Iran, along with the Iraqi central government, the KRG found itself isolated and vulnerable. This was underlined on November 5 when the Iraqi Council of Ministers approved a draft budget for 2018 that would reduce the KRG's revenue share from 17 percent to 12.6 percent, further undermining Erbil's ability to pay the wages of its bloated public sector and peshmergas. Nechirvan Barzani noted that the troubled KRG economy would face additional strain as "more than half of the Kurdistan Region's oil has been reduced." It was reported that the oil output had dropped from 600,000 to 250,000 barrels a day in the month following the referendum. To

make matters worse, according to a report by Amberin Zaman on October 5, the KRG also has an outstanding debt of \$18 billion, of which \$1.8 billion is owed to Turkish businessmen.

As a result of Ankara's engagement with Baghdad, the KRG no longer possesses its pre-referendum ability to operate independently of the central government with Turkish help. However, Erdogan has not burned all his bridges with the KRG as he does not wish to see it brought completely under the control of Abadi. The Habur border gate is still being manned on the Kurdish side by KRG officials and, despite premature announcements by Iraqi oil officials, the reduced export of Kurdish oil forces is still in accordance with prior agreements with the KRG. Trade between Ankara and Erbil has also not been impeded and Turkey was the first country to send aid after an earthquake struck the region on November 12.

Erdogan clearly wants to see a KRG chastened but still dependent on Ankara after the resolution of the current crisis. Consequently, we are now entering a new era in relations between Turkey and the KRG in which Ankara balances its relationship with Erbil with its new cooperation with Baghdad. On November 21, Erdogan praised the relationship with the Iraqi central government and then stated that if the Kurdish leadership "had not made such a great mistake, we would have maintained good relations with them as well."

It is entirely possible that the relationship will be conducted in the future with Nechirvan Barzani, who was rumored to be skeptical of the push for a referendum. He said on November 6 that he wanted to travel to both Ankara and Tehran in the hope that they would "help us solve our disputes with Iraq." He was also quick to thank Turkey in a statement following the earthquake as "they did what was expected of them as they have helped the people of the Kurdistan Region during the hard times." It is worth noting that he had previously enjoyed good relations with Erdogan and had last met with him in Ankara on November 23, 2016. Significantly, it has been reported that Nechirvan Barzani has been trying to use numerous Turkish intermediaries to try to repair the relationship with Ankara.

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