

## The potentially profound and widespread consequences of September's Kurdish independence vote . By Feisal Amin Rasoul Al-Istrabadi\*



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There is so little doubt that the referendum called for September on Kurdish independence from Iraq will pass overwhelmingly that it seems a waste of resources to hold it at all. To be clear, I do not oppose it: if Iraqi Kurds wish to declare their independence, they have that right. Principle aside, however, as a matter of policy, it is a spectacularly bad idea, one that is likely to plunge the region into further chaos for decades to come.

Several Arab states have been quietly encouraging Kurdish independence. At first flush, this is understandable. Since 2003, Baghdad has cultivated close relations with Tehran, and as tension between these two rival blocs has risen, some Arab elites believe that weakening Baghdad is a means of indirectly weakening Tehran. This calculation is mistaken.

It is true that some of the post-2003 elites have been close to Iran. Much too close, although it is also true too many states in the region refused to engage with Iraq after the US-led invasion 14 years ago. But Haider Al Abadi, Iraq's prime minister, is attempting to recalibrate Iraq's relations with Saudi Arabia and the Arab states. Now is not the time to weaken Baghdad by dividing the country, just as Iraq is on the brink of defeating

ISIL and standing on its own two feet. Weakening Baghdad at this moment immeasurably strengthens Tehran.

To the extent that neighbouring states think that the Kurds are farther from Iran than some of the parties in Baghdad, they are mistaken. Both of the two Kurdish parties that are at the centre of the referendum movement have close ties to Iran. One of them is particularly close to Tehran. Any hope for the future of Kurdistan after independence would mean appeasing this large and powerful neighbour. By the same token, diminishing Baghdad's political and economic strength will leave the remaining Iraq ever more dependent on Iran, negating any effort by Mr Al Abadi or a future prime minister to return Iraq to what it most needs now in its foreign policy: balanced and closer ties with its Arab neighbours.

An independent Kurdistan strengthens Turkey. With the existential dangers that an independent Kurdistan poses to the Turkish state, its incentives to undermine Erbil are obvious. Moreover, Iraqi Kurdistan, a landlocked country whose only outlet for its oil and gas reserves is through Turkey, will be placing its economic head into a noose made in Ankara. It will certainly be in Turkey's interests to tighten that noose periodically, undermining efforts to enhance regional economic stability. Of course, Iran will also have every incentive to undermine an independent Kurdistan, given its own restive Kurdish population. Independence for Iraqi Kurdistan could enhance Turko-Iranian cooperation, which would not augur well in the current regional political climate.

While, again, I do not oppose Kurdistanian secession in principle, several actions taken by the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government establish that the move would be highly destabilising to the Middle East. That, in any event, is the history of secession movements, as established, for instance, by the work of the University of Pennsylvania's Nicholas Sambanis. He has shown that secessions tend to exacerbate, not resolve, tensions and are far more likely to spur international armed conflict between the newly independent state and the remaining

predecessor state, while also making it more likely that civil wars within the newly independent state will emerge. Secessions do not solve underlying problems. Think South Sudan or the former Yugoslavia.

There are many issues that are likely to erupt between an independent Kurdistan and Iraq. Iran has just decreased the flow of the Lesser Zab river into Kurdistan and, in turn, the KRG has unilaterally reduced water flows to the rest of Iraq. While such issues may be an irritant within a state, they become infinitely more complicated and are much more likely to trigger international armed conflict in the event of secession. That the Kurdistan leadership has so quickly revealed its willingness to engage in such brinkmanship is a cautionary tale: the last thing the Middle East needs is the possibility of its first war over water resources. It also underscores how easily Turkey or Iran could manipulate the two states into armed conflict, with the likely consequence of drawing in other regional powers.

Territorial disputes between Baghdad and Erbil, especially the massive oil fields of Kirkuk, acquire an entirely new dimension in the event of Kurdistan independence. There will almost certainly be conflict over where the border lies with respect to these areas, an issue of far, far less significance while the territorial integrity of Iraq is maintained. This is to say nothing of the tensions between the Kurds themselves: the speaker of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament has been barred from returning to Erbil and parliament itself has been suspended for nearly two years. These internal fissures could themselves erupt into a destabilizing force, especially as the KRG is in economic extremis, unable to pay its debts to oil companies and requiring US assistance to pay the salaries of its security forces. It should be recalled that the Kurdish civil war of the mid-1990s was over economic resources. And, as Sambanis's work shows, minorities within Iraqi Kurdistan - Arabs, Turkomen, Assyrians, among others - are likely to demand the same rights against a newly independent Kurdistan that the latter demanded from Iraq. This raises the real possibility for prolonged internal conflict that could also draw in regional powers.

The fate of Iraq must, in the final analysis, rest in the hands of Iraqis. But it is in the interests of all Iraq's Arab neighbours to encourage national cohesion, an Iraq truly at peace with itself and its neighbours, an Iraq focused on economic well-being. The alternative - a divided and weakened Iraq - will almost certainly increase tensions and instability throughout the region for generations.

*Feisal Amin Rasoul Al Istrabadi is the founding director of the Center for the Study of the Middle East at Indiana University. He was ambassador and deputy permanent representative of Iraq to the United Nations from 2004 until 2007*

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