

Turkey threatens war over Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum

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The Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) independence referendum slated for today has further escalated dangers of a major war in the Middle East. Threats from Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara, as well as warnings from the United States and European Union (EU), are raising the question of another possible military intervention, this time against Iraqi Kurds.

The Turkish government—which has for more than two years launched military operations against Kurdish nationalist parties, both at home and in Iraq, devastating Kurdish-populated towns in Turkey and forcing tens of thousands of Kurds to flee their homes—is leading the charge.

On Saturday, September 23, in an extraordinary session during which the chairman intervened to silence the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) spokesperson, the Turkish parliament extended the government's mandate for military action another one year. This mandate permits the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to deploy troops to Iraq and Syria.

Thus the Turkish parliament has opened the door for a Turkish invasion of the KRG. It attacked the referendum as part of “efforts to break the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, which would endanger Turkey's national security.”

During the parliamentary debate, spokespersons of the ruling AKP and its de facto partner, the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), sharply criticized the referendum, calling for its cancellation, and attacking the KRG's President Barzani.

The spokesperson of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) also declared its support to the motion, however only after criticizing the AKP's foreign policy in the Middle East, including its active participation in the US-led wars in Iraq and Syria. The

HDP was the only party that stood against the motion, arguing for the Kurdish people's right to self-determination.

The Turkish parliament's decision came only hours after a meeting of Turkey's National Security Council (MGK) chaired by Erdogan on late Friday, September 22. The MGK issued a written statement warning that “Turkey reserves its rights based on international conventions.” This is an open threat of not only diplomatic and economic sanctions, but also a military intervention.

Speaking to reporters on the same day, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim also said Ankara would “not refrain from using its natural rights. ... This referendum is an issue of Turkey's national security.”

Presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalın then issued a statement warning the KRG that the referendum would “have serious consequences.” On September 23, he wrote on his Twitter account that “Erbil should immediately correct this grave mistake that will trigger new crises in the region.”

Since September 18, the Turkish army has held military exercises in Turkey's Sirnak province, as a sign of Ankara's “determination” to avoid the emergence of an independent Kurdish state inside the current boundaries of Iraq. The Turkish army had already deployed troops, tanks and artillery to the Iraqi and Syrian border.

The Iraqi government in Baghdad has also threatened to intervene militarily against the KRG if the referendum results in violence. As the Turkish parliament debated the motion, Iraqi Chief of Staff General Othman al-Ghanimi arrived in Ankara to meet with his Turkish counterpart General Hulusi Akar and discuss the KRG referendum and Iraq's territorial integrity.

Akar reportedly plans to meet with his Iranian counterpart, Major General Mohamed Baqeri, to discuss events in Iraq and Syria and moves against the Kurdish-nationalist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which since 1984 has waged guerrilla war against the Turkish state. The Iranian Chief of General Staff had already paid a three-day visit to Ankara, in August 15-17, to discuss possible common military operations "against terrorist organizations" in the KRG.

The Iranian Chief of Staff also warned the referendum "would be the basis for the start of a series of tensions and conflicts inside Iraq, the consequences of which will affect neighboring countries. So, for this reason, the authorities of the two countries [Turkey and Iran] are emphasizing that it is not possible and should not be done."

While the Turkish, Iranian and Iraqi governments regard the referendum as a serious threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq, the KRG's Western allies, including Washington and the EU, are mainly criticizing its timing. They cite the need to concentrate on the ongoing fight against the Islamic State (IS).

The Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, on the other hand, has openly supported the KRG's referendum on independence.

The growing threat of sanctions and or military action from Ankara, and repeated warnings from Baghdad and Tehran, as well as the Western powers, however, have apparently not impressed the KRG's President Masoud Barzani. He said on Saturday that they would not renounce independence, whatever the cost.

First elected in 2005 by the Kurdish regional parliament and in 2009 by popular vote as KRG president, Barzani's term of office in fact ran out in August 2015, after a two-year extension. Having presided over a de facto government since then, the corrupt Kurdish leader faces ever growing popular opposition—in part, over his regime's economic and financial dependence on Ankara, which brutally suppresses its own Kurds, and its slavish obedience to the US and European imperialists.

By pushing for the independence referendum, Barzani is playing the card of nationalism to disorient Kurdish workers, poor peasants and the youth, who have repeatedly paid the price of the decades-long maneuvers of the Kurdish nationalists with the imperialist and regional states.

The Iraqi Kurdish referendum and Ankara's military deployment along the border only fan the flames amidst ongoing war and growing ethnic and sectarian divisions, in Iraq and Syria and across the region.

Ankara has long been preparing to launch another military adventure in Iraq or Syria—with or without collaboration of, or even against, the Barzani leadership. This now also threatens to ignite a military conflict with the troops of Ankara's NATO allies, now operating on the ground with Kurdish forces. With all its unforeseen consequences, such an invasion would lead to a dangerous military escalation that could easily get out of control.



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