

Turkey threatens Iraqi Kurdish government with war

Halil Celik**27 September 2017**

Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) proceeded with an independence referendum Monday, in defiance of Baghdad, the three bordering countries, Iran, Turkey and Syria, as well as the US, the European Union, and the United Nations Security Council.

In response, the Iraqi government and especially Turkey have made bellicose threats. Turkey, which has led a brutal war against Kurdish secessionists in the country's southeast for decades, said yesterday that the referendum could spark an "ethnic and sectarian war." Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan denounced the KRG's decision to proceed with the vote as "treachery."

Washington has long acted as a patron of the KRG, its president, Masoud Barzani, and his Kurdish Democratic Party. The KRG's security forces, the *Peshmerga*, have served as shock troops in the US war against the Islamic State in Iraq—a war that grew out of Washington's use of Islamist militia to spearhead its regime-change war in Syria, and US imperialism's incitement of communal and ethnic divisions in Iraq in pursuit of a divide-and-rule strategy.

But Washington pressed for Monday's referendum to be cancelled or at least postponed. This is because it fears the vote could drag it into yet another sectarian conflict in the Middle East and divert attention away from its broader strategic goal of consolidating its hegemony over the world's principal oil-exporting region.

The current focus of the Trump administration and Pentagon is to forge an alliance to isolate and push back Iran across the region, prevent the establishment of a land bridge from Tehran through Syria to Lebanon by having pro-US militia seize territory in eastern Syria, and prepare for a full-blown military clash with Iran.

All these objectives threaten to be sidelined should a Kurdish independence bid trigger further instability in Iraq and the region.

Kurdish media outlets claim participation in Monday's referendum was very high in the three northern provinces that constitute the KRG—Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Dohuk—while limited in disputed zones now occupied by the

Peshmerga such as the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, where large numbers of Arabs and Turkmen, as well as other ethnic and religious minorities live.

There are reports that some 95 percent of those who voted supported independence, but final results are only expected Wednesday.

Despite repeated statements from Kurdish officials, anxious to appease their Washington patrons, that the vote was of a nonbinding character and that there are no immediate plans for independence, the referendum has provoked anger not only from Iraq's federal government, but also neighboring Turkey and Iran.

On the day of the referendum, Turkey decided to remove the KRG's broadcaster, Rudaw, from its satellite. It also blocked access to the country from the KRG via the Habur border crossing, with the exception of Turkish citizens, a preparatory step to the border's complete closure. A day before, Iran, at Baghdad's request, closed its frontier with the KRG and blocked all flights to and from the region.

Speaking to television channels Monday, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim stated that his government would decide on punitive measures against the KRG after talks with the Iraqi government. "Our energy, interior and customs ministries are working on [measures]. We are evaluating steps regarding border gates and air space. We will take these steps quickly," he said, adding, "We will from now on only consider the central government in Baghdad as a legitimate interlocutor, not the KRG based in Erbil."

Erdogan also threatened the Iraqi Kurds that Turkey could block their oil exports. The KRG exports an average 600,000 barrels per day through a pipeline running through Turkey to international markets. "There are several measures on the table," said Erdogan. "We have the tap. The moment we close the tap, then it's done."

Erdogan also implied a possible military intervention, saying, "We are now taking new steps. We did this with the Euphrates Shield Operation (the Turkish military incursion in Syria). We will not refrain from doing the same in Iraq."

Euphrates Shield, launched in conjunction with Turkish-aligned Arab militias, saw the Turkish army intervene deep into northern Syria in August 2016. While Ankara portrayed the mission as necessary to combat Islamic State, its true goal was to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish-controlled territory on its southern border. Turkey labels the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which have been collaborating with US imperialism in Syria, as "terrorists" because of their close ties to the Kurdish Workers Party, which has led the Kurdish separatist insurgency in Turkey.

Meanwhile, the military exercises launched by the Turkish army on the Turkish-Iraqi border on August 18 have reached their so-called "third phase" with the participation of a small contingent of around 30 Iraqi soldiers.

While voting in the Iraqi Kurd referendum was proceeding Monday, Iraq's parliament demanded Baghdad send troops to "disputed areas" of Kirkuk as well as parts of Nineveh, Diyala and Salaheddin provinces controlled by the KRG.

With the aim of intimidating the Barzani leadership, the AKP government moved forward a meeting of the Turkish National Security Council (NSC) and called for an extraordinary meeting of the Turkish parliament last Saturday to extend the mandate for cross-border military operations in Iraq for another year.

The Turkish NSC declared that "Turkey reserves its rights originating from bilateral and international agreements if this referendum is held despite all of our warnings." The Turkish parliament adopted the motion by a large majority, with the support of the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) and the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, as expected, voted against it.

Behind the opposition of Turkey's rulers to the independence referendum in the KRG lies the fear that the establishment of a Kurdish state on the southern borders of Turkey, regardless of its economic dependence on Ankara, would set an example for their "own" Kurds and strengthen Kurdish separatist sentiments in Turkey.

The same concern is shared by the Iranian ruling class. The *Washington Post* reported yesterday that Iranian Kurds demonstrated in support of the KRG's referendum in cities in western Iran.

Opposition to Kurdish nationalism is one of the main reasons for an increasing number of meetings between Turkish and Iranian officials in recent months. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Behram Kas?mi reacted to the KRG's decision to hold the referendum in similar terms to the Turkish government, saying, "Iran's open attitude towards this issue is to support the preservation of the national unity of Iraq with its territorial integrity."

During his visit to Ankara in August, the Iranian military

chief staff, Mohammad Bakiri, stated that Tehran shares the opinion of the Turkish government on the Iraqi Kurdish referendum and indicated that Iraq, Iran and Turkey would intervene jointly in case of independence.

The Iraqi government has from day one declared that it will not recognize the referendum. In his latest statement, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared that his government is prepared to intervene militarily, saying, "We reject the referendum now and in the future... any change in the borders unilaterally and forcefully would open the door to bloodshed."

Abadi has given the KRG a three-day ultimatum for all of Kurdistan's airports to be placed under Baghdad's control; otherwise an air embargo will be imposed. He has also demanded that Iraqi security forces be positioned at all border crossings between KRG territory and Iran, Turkey and Syria.

The barely concealed preparations of Turkey and Baghdad for a "military option" could easily spark a region-wide conflagration. Ankara has vowed that Turkey would intervene militarily if the Turkmen population in Iraq, especially in Kirkuk, is targeted.

Faced with imminent sanctions and the prospect of a military intervention, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, who recently sought to visit Ankara but was denied entry into Turkey, argued that Erbil "has never been a threat to Turkey and will continue not to be a threat."

Whatever the subjective wishes of the KRG politicians and their counterparts in Ankara, Baghdad and Tehran, the highly volatile situation in the region threatens to ignite a conflict that could rapidly escalate and drag the major imperialist powers into a region-wide war with catastrophic consequences.



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