

Washington condemns Kurdish referendum as Iraq mobilizes its army

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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has issued a statement denouncing last week's referendum on Kurdish independence held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The vote, which resulted in a large majority backing Kurdish separation, has increased tensions throughout the Middle East, with Turkey and Iraq openly threatening KRG authorities with military violence.

According to official KRG results, over 92 percent of voters backed separation from Iraq. Turnout in the referendum stood at 72 percent.

Tillerson declared that “the referendum and the results lack legitimacy.” He went on to stress Washington's support for “a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq,” and urged “Iraqi Kurdish authorities to respect the constitutionally-mandated role of the central government.” The central government should reject “threats or even allusion to possible use of force,” he added.

The Trump administration's position has taken KRG leaders by surprise. KRG President Masoud Barzani hoped to secure the support of the imperialist powers for an independent Kurdistan. The referendum question, which spoke of forming a state out of the KRG and “Kurdistani areas outside the region's administration,” was worded so as to sanction the expansion of a would-be Kurdish state to include energy-rich Kirkuk and other areas not formally within the KRG's borders and which are home to large numbers of non-Kurds—the vast majority of whom oppose forced incorporation into a separate Kurdish state.

Washington has a long relationship with Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party, has backed the KRG with military and financial aid, and has made use of the KRG *Peshmerga* as shock troops in fighting the Islamic State in Iraq.

Nevertheless, it views the KRG's independence-bid, at least at present, as cutting across its drive to establish unfettered US domination over the world's principal oil-exporting region.

During his visit to the Middle East in May, President Donald Trump made clear that his administration's chief

goal is to isolate, push back and prepare for a military confrontation with Iran. The establishment of an independent state by the KRG would not only complicate the formation of the Saudi-led Sunni Arab alliance Trump hopes to marshal against Iran. It could also drag the US and its allies into an ethnic and religious communal war over the partition of Iraq.

Washington has signaled that it could dramatically escalate its military-strategic conflict with Iran in coming days. Under US law, Trump must decide by October whether to certify Tehran's continued compliance with the 2015 Joint Cooperative Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Iran nuclear accord—something Trump has all but publicly announced he will not do. Such a move would not only place Washington on a fast track to war with Iran, but intensify already sharp divisions with the European powers, who support the nuclear deal.

With this in mind, the Trump administration has brought pressure to bear on its regional allies to adopt a hard line against the Kurdish referendum. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who initially hailed the vote and declared Tel Aviv's backing for Kurdish independence with a view to gaining an ally on Iran's western border, has since reversed his position and lined up with the United States.

The central government in Iraq together with the neighbouring powers are also opposed. With the full support of Turkey and Iran, the Iraqi government demanded the KRG cancel the Sept. 25 referendum and threatened it with sanctions, international isolation and possible military action.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has since warned of an impending Iraqi military intervention in the KRG and curtly dismissed Barzani's appeals for talks on the KRG's future.

In a statement last Friday, the Iraqi Defence Ministry indicated that it would take control of the external border posts held by the KRG from the Iranian and Turkish side, “in coordination” with Ankara and Tehran. According to the statement, the implementation of the Iraqi government's

decision to take over all border posts and airports was “proceeding in coordination with the related authorities and neighbouring countries, as planned.”

Last week, the Iraqi parliament urged the Baghdad government to send troops to take control of oilfields held by Kurdish forces, and called on foreign governments to close their diplomatic missions in the KRG’s capital, Erbil.

On September 29, Turkey imposed a ban on flights to the KRG. The Iranian government has also participated in the ban, with an additional sanction of temporarily prohibiting Iranian oil firms from doing business with the KRG. According to media reports, almost all foreign airlines have suspended their flights to the KRG, obeying a request from Baghdad, which controls Iraqi air space.

The Turkish government, which fears that an independent Kurdistan in Iraq could set an example for its own Kurdish minority, against which Ankara has been waging a brutal war since the 1980s, has repeatedly threatened the KRG with the imposition of economic sanctions. Ankara also raised the prospect of cutting the KRG’s access to international markets, and has launched military exercises on the Turkish-Iraqi border as a direct threat of military intervention.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also gained the support of the main opposition Union Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

The MHP has even declared its readiness to send 5,000 “Grey Wolves”—members of its notorious youth organization that was guilty of killing thousands of leftists in the 1970s—to Kirkuk to “free the Turkmens” from the KRG.

The Turkish government is continuing to issue provocative threats over the KRG referendum. Erdogan, who previously said the vote could trigger an “ethnic war,” reiterated on Saturday that the KRG authorities would pay the price for it. Speaking to AKP members in Erzurum, he said, “They are not forming an independent state; they are opening a wound in the region to twist the knife in it.”

In reference to Ankara’s development of strong commercial, financial and military ties with the KRG in recent years, Erdogan said, “We don’t regret what we did in the past. But since the conditions are changed and the Kurdish Regional Government, to which we provided all support, took steps against us, it will pay the price.”

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, for his part, said Saturday that Ankara will no longer deal with Kurdish authorities in Erbil: “From now on, our relationships with the region will be conducted with the central government, Baghdad.”

There is a real danger that disputes over the KRG’s future could serve as yet another flashpoint for military conflict, triggering a war that might not only include neighbouring

states, but also the major powers.

While US imperialism bears chief responsibility for destabilizing the Middle East in a series of reckless and ruinous wars, its European rivals are increasingly seeking to assert their own interests in the region.

French President Emmanuel Macron said that the KRG and Baghdad should remain united in their priority to defeat the Islamic State (IS) and stabilize Iraq. According to media reports, a source in Macron’s office said that Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had accepted an invitation to visit Paris on Thursday for talks on the issue.

Russia, whose ties with Turkey have strengthened over recent months, has refused thus far to condemn the vote. President Vladimir Putin visited Ankara last Thursday for talks with his Turkish counterpart Erdogan on the latest developments in Iraq and Syria, as well as economic and commercial relations between Turkey and Russia. This included Turkey’s decision to purchase the Russian S-400 missile defence system. Ankara has already made an advance payment, according to Russian officials, and delivery of the system is supposed to begin within two years.

In respect to the KRG referendum, Putin confined himself to briefly mentioning a statement recently issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry on the referendum, stressing that this reflects Moscow’s position. The written statement from Russia’s Foreign Ministry declared that Moscow maintains its “unwavering commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the friendly Iraq and other Middle Eastern states,” while respecting “the national aspirations of the Kurds.”

Next to Turkey, which has built the KRG’s infrastructure, Russia is one of the main investors in the Kurdish autonomous region. In June 2017, the KRG signed a 20-year-long deal with Russia’s Rosneft to cooperate on the exploration and production of gas and oil. State-owned Gazprom is also currently engaged in three oil projects in the region. Their two main rivals in the KRG are the US’ Exxon Mobil and France’s Total. According to the KRG’s Ministry of Natural Resources, the region has an estimated 45 billion barrels of oil reserves and 5.66 trillion meters of natural gas.



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