

# **The September 25 Referendum on Kurdish independence in Northern Iraq: Between hope and contradictions**

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A referendum on the independence of the Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region of northern Iraq since 1991 and composed of three provinces, will take place on September 25, 2017.

The vote will not be binding, but will trigger the independence process if the yes votes win. The Iraqi central government, dominated by the Shi'a Islamic fundamentalist movement, Da'wa, and many states in the region, including Turkey and Iran, are opposed to this referendum. At the international level, Russia, the United States and the European Union are suspicious of this poll.

## **Opposition from Baghdad**

The Iraqi central government in Baghdad denounced the referendum as contrary to the Constitution. The Iraqi government is also opposed to the integration into the future Iraqi Kurdistan of the "disputed regions", particularly those in northern Iraq, including the multi-ethnic and oil-rich province of Kirkuk, claimed by both the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi government.

On August 29, Kirkuk Governor Najmuddin Kareem announced the participation of the city in the referendum after a majority of the provincial council voted in favor of taking part. However the vote was far from a consensus, quite the contrary. Only 24 of the 41 council members attended the vote, with 23 voting in favor of participating in the referendum. One abstained. The remaining council members - all Arabs and Turkmen - boycotted the vote. Instead, they issued statements denouncing the vote as "unconstitutional".

Iraqi Sunni MP Mohammed al-Karbouli, from the coalition al-Haq (the solution" declared that this decision was "a stark violation of the constitution and a determined move to confiscate the rights of the Arab and Turkmen in Kirkuk. The government should intervene to stop this violation". On his side, Iraqi Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi denounced this outcome as "wrong".

Kurdish peshmerga fighters seized control of Kirkuk in 2014 when the Iraqi army fled from Islamic State's offensive across northern and western Iraq. Hence, the peshmerga prevented the region's oil fields from falling into the hands of the jihadists.

The Iraqi Kurdistan region has a population of 5.5 million, of which about 4.6 million are Kurds. This population increases up to 7.7 million if the “disputed regions” are included.

We should remember however that one of the main provisions of the Constitution voted in 2005 stipulates that the central government should organize a referendum in the “disputed regions” before December 31, 2007, in order for the populations concerned to freely decide whether or not they belong to the Kurdistan region. The Iraqi regions populated mostly by Sunni Arabs have also not been able to decide by referendum whether or not they could transform their province into a federated region, in other words with more autonomy.

One of the last links between the KRG and Baghdad was the financial allocation to the Kurdistan region, which accounted for 17% of the Iraqi budget. However, that was ceased after January 2014. Since then, Iraqi Kurdistan has been hit by a deep financial crisis. That is not just because Baghdad ended its financial allocation. The decline in oil prices, corruption and clientelism also explain the economic difficulties. The poverty rate has increased dramatically among the population of the autonomous Kurdish region, while strikes in public services have multiplied in protest against late payment and / or reduction in wages.

Moreover, the region suffered from the military conflict with the troops of the Islamic State and the influx of large numbers of refugees from the invasions caused by the jihadist group.

## **Regional and International Oppositions**

The announcement of the referendum has also sparked opposition from neighboring states such as Turkey and Iran. Ankara and Teheran fear that such a process will have consequences for their own Kurdish minorities, who also suffer from the discriminatory and oppressive policies of these regimes. Turkey, which has excellent relations with the KRG and the Barzani family and is the first investor in Iraqi Kurdistan, denounced the referendum as a “terrible mistake” and reiterated its support for “the territorial integrity of Iraq”.

The United States, Russia and the main European states are also reluctant to support the idea of independence and are in favor of maintaining Iraq’s unity, despite very close relations with the KRG, notably in the fight against the Islamic State. The United States even tried to convince Kurdish officials to postpone the referendum. The Western states would like it to be postponed for several years, fearing that the vote would trigger a new conflict with Baghdad and turn into another regional crisis.

## **A capitalist and corrupt ruling class**

The vast majority of Iraqi Kurds support the idea of independence. Some discordant voices call for the postponement of the referendum and oppose the political leadership of the KRG which is dominated by the following parties: 1. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani, the son of Mustapha Barzani, a legendary figure of the Iraqi Kurdish rebellion, and 2. the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is dominated by the former president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani. These two parties have been sharing power for a quarter of a century in Iraqi Kurdistan, despite periods of bloody conflict between them that killed more than 3,000 persons in the 1990s.

Massoud Barzani is nevertheless the strong man of Iraqi Kurdistan. He and his family monopolize a large number of political positions. A U.S. State Department cable leaked by Wikileaks noted that “The KDP consists of family clans, operating very much like a mafia organization. For example,

Massoud Barzani's uncle is Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, his nephew/son-in-law is KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, and his son Masrur is Head of KRG's Intelligence Directorate". Massoud Barzani still governs the KRG despite the end of his official mandate in August 2015. President Masoud Barzani's term in office actually ended in 2013 after serving two four-year terms and was then extended for two years by an act from the then KDP-PUK dominated parliament.

The political system in Iraqi Kurdistan was suspended in October 2015 after an attempt to turn it into a parliamentary system that would have greatly diluted Barzani's powers. All other democratically elected institutions were frozen or controlled by the party of the "unelected" president. There are and have been also attacks and actions of repression by the KRG security forces against journalists, activists and political opponents critical of its policies, as well as against protests movements.

Following the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian protests, another political party, the Movement for Change, called for the resignation of the Cabinet and the disbanding of the Kurdistan Regional Government. In February and March 2011 protests against the KRG were violently repressed, two protesters were killed and several others were wounded. The party Movement for Change (known as Goran), which played a leading role in these protests and demanded the resignation of the Cabinet and the disbanding of the KRG, was also the target of the repression. The KRG security forces burnt down several buildings belonging to Movement for Change, including a TV and radio station. In October 2015, the KDP imposed a suspension on all Gorran members of government and dismissed the Gorran peshmerga minister and his adviser.

The historical political relations between the State of Israel and the Barzani family must also be condemned. Moreover, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Mossad agents or former Israeli soldiers have been quietly training Kurdish security forces. The KRG has also sold large quantities of oil to the State of Israel in recent years through international trading companies and without the approval of the authorities in Baghdad. In this affair, this oil passed through an oil pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, on the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey, allied with the Kurdish government of Massoud Barzani, has facilitated this long-standing affair. Ankara opened an account for Erbil in the Turkish public bank, Halk and stored Kurdish oil waiting for buyers. KDP Peshmerga forces are being trained by Turkish Special Forces in the Kurdish city of Zakho.

On its side, the PUK maintains good relations with Iran and has coordinated its peshmerga operations on some occasions with Shi'a Islamic militias controlled by Iran in the past, notably in Diyala Province.

## **Conclusion**

It is certain that through this referendum, these two Kurdish parties of the KDP and PUK, intend to strengthen their political and economic power and above all to try to divert popular anger against their neoliberal, clientelist and corrupt management of affairs. There should be no illusions about the emancipatory potential of these parties allied to the various international and regional imperialisms. They also often acted against the Kurdish populations and political forces present in other countries.

We must nevertheless support the possibility for the Kurdish people in Iraq to decide their own future in total independence, in other words the right to self-determination, including separation from the Iraqi state. It is important, however, that the rights of ethnic (Arabs, Turkmens, Assyrians) and religious minorities (Christian, Yazidi, etc) also be guaranteed in the process of independence.

The right to self-determination for all oppressed people is a fundamental element of their liberation. For decades, this right has been denied to the Kurdish people who have suffered from the violent repression and oppression imposed by the chauvinistic regional states and betrayals of various imperialist states.

Let us therefore support the self-determination of the Kurdish popular classes in Iraq while opposing the bourgeois and authoritarian leadership of the KDP and PUK.

**Joseph Daher**, September 4, 2017

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\* September 8, 2017:

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2017/09/08/referendum-on-kurdish-independence-in-north-iraq-between-hope-and-contradictions/#more-14134>