

## **Independent Kurdish State in Middle East: An Upcoming Epicenter of Middle East Power Politics**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper is an attempt to encompass the geo-political and geo-strategic fault lines which could put the region in a perpetual strategic dilemma leading to initiation of a strategic tug of war between the Middle Eastern Powers. The author has highlighted various pros and cons of establishment of an independent Kurdistan and its implications on the entire Middle Eastern Region. Moreover the author has analyzed various practical reasons behind the non-establishment of an independent state. Furthermore last part of paper focuses on the global and regional reactions on the establishment of new Kurd state followed by few policy options.*

**Key Words:** Independent, Middle East, Kurds, Power, Control

### **Introduction**

Probability of an independent Kurdish State has come up high on cards, after the September 2017 independence referendum (Cafiero 2013) which if established will form a new epicenter of power politics in Middle East. September 2017 referendum was held to ascertain the will of people regarding an independent Kurd state in Iraq. The referendum, as expected, had about 92 percent favorable nod by the people ((KEC) 2017). Basically the taboo of Kurds being granted a separate state has been tarnished. Referendum to gauge Iraqi Kurds' will to get independence has sufficiently proved the Kurds' will. However, in spite of a favorable vote for getting a geographical state, there are considerable resentments in the region opposing the vote which might put the Middle Eastern states in a perpetual strategic dilemma. Iraqi Kurdistan had attained its autonomous status after 1991 Gulf War; however, due to change in power scenarios since then, it is also perceived that a massive war would precede creation of an independent Kurdistan state for all Kurds spread in different contiguous states of Middle East.

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## **Quest for an Independent Kurdish State: A Historical Overview**

Kurds missed the train of independence, when the modern day states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Kuwait were being negotiated with regard to their future borders under the auspices of 1920 'Treaty of Sevres'. The Sevres Treaty was negotiated and signed between the allied forces and defeated Ottoman Empire representatives at a place called Sevres, close to Paris in France. The Treaty was imposed upon the Ottoman Empire on August 10, 1920, which is remembered as worst Western effort to divide and destroy modern day Turkey. The division of Turkey was retaliated and Turkish War of Independence erupted, resulting into a 1923 peace treaty titled, 'Treaty of Lausanne' that recommended borders and limits of the modern Turkey Republic. The Lausanne Treaty superseded the 1920 Treaty of Sevres and did not mention any land for the Kurds as agreed at Sevres in 1920. As per the Lausanne Treaty, Turkey did recognize minority rights for non-Muslims based on the normative Ottoman's principle of giving preference to Islamic identity instead of nationality, thus leaving Kurds stranded without a piece of land or rights given to religious minorities (Gunter 2009).

The Kurds lost the opportunity of getting an independent Kurd land in Turkey, who could not get united to capitalize upon the Sevres Treaty's Articles 62 and 64 which recommended local autonomy for the Kurds populated areas in North Eastern areas of Turkey and even an independent State; if after one year of autonomy that the Kurds desired so (Martin van Bruinessen 2000). Despite a common goal of independent statehood, the Kurds in various countries were hardly unified on the basis of political, cultural and religious convergences (Martin van Bruinessen 2000). Due to ethnic and religious diversionary interests, Kurds could not fight their case well and were naturally left out of the border drawing process. However, it would be unjust to accuse the Kurds' disunity as the only hurdle in boarding fast running independence train, besides that it was a unison opposition by Turkey, Iraq and Syrian leadership; which never wanted to relinquish their parts of territories to form an independent Kurdish State.

## **Western Interests in an Independent Kurdistan: Issues & Concerns**

The West led by the US did oppose the September 2017 independence referendum by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on the pretext that the time is not strategically ripe for having an independent Kurd state which might dilute the efforts to contain ISIS. Besides that, there are other reasons too which did not let the US to support an independent Kurdistan; inter-alia, Turkey, Syria and Iran are against an independent Kurdistan in Iraq, Turkey might invade Kurdistan to suppress an independence movement in its own territory thereby further worsening the volatile security situation in Middle East, a Sunni Muslims

dominated independent Kurdistan could tilt the Iraqi demography in favor of Shia Muslims i.e. a state mirroring Iran and above all the international community's stance that remains supportive of maintaining territorial integrity of Iraq (KerimYildiz 2007).

*Firstly*, Iran has its protracted strategic interest of opening up to eastern Mediterranean Sea, through Shia dominated Syrian mainland; while in Lebanon, Iranian support of its likeminded hardliner ideological group Hezbollah would increase exponentially (KerimYildiz 2007).

*Secondly*, West and its Sunni allies in the Middle East would never like to have a Kurd State which is under Shia Iran influence. Contemporarily Iraq, which is demographically dominated by Sunni population, is being ruled by a Shia dominated government who toe their policies' lines with Tehran on different international issues. The claim is further strengthened by the fact that currently almost 75 percent of the Iraqi Armed forces are of Shia origin, which is supplemented by more than 100000 Iranian militiamen operating in different parts of northern Iraq. Virtually more than 60 percent of Iraq is being dominated by the Iranian popular forces.

*Thirdly*, ultimate elimination of the ISIS forces from Iraq and Syria or Levant could be facilitated by an independent Kurdistan. The elimination of ISIS needs two pronged effort. First prong relates to the kinetic effort that would seek ferocious support of the Kurdish Peshmerga- the Iraqi Kurds Armed Forces and the second prong pivots around role of moderate Sunni Kurdish population who are not the hardliners and do not support ISIS's *mujahedeen* hardliner approach. It is a known fact that the Peshmerga has come up as an effective fighting force that defeated the ISIS in 2016, albeit, with substantial support of the Iran militiamen. Sequel to the demonstrated professionalism by the Peshmerga, it is widely believed that total ISIS defeat shall not be possible without the Kurd Forces' full involvement; which if granted independence shall have increased stakes to fight out ISIS being tangent to their hard earned sovereignty.

*Fourth*, the US and its allies, contrary to the Saudi interests, have been supportive of true liberal democracy. Iraqi Kurd Region and its contemporary government of KRG champion their liberal democratic norms. There have not been much of indicators of any hostile or conservative demonstration of hardliner policies (KerimYildiz 2007).

*Fifth* and the foremost western strategic interest in an independent Kurdistan pertains to the secure and assured access to the fossil fuel reserves of northern Iraq i.e. Kurdistan. It may be recalled that Iraq has the second largest oil reserves among the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting

Countries (OPEC) countries. Losing them into the hands of hard-negotiators having Iranian influence might put the US and its western allies' growth in doldrums. Already the Iran has secured two-third of the Iraqi fossil fuel reserves through manipulating the proxies of its like-minded factions. Thus, it is in the US interest to keep the reserves in the hands of allies and friends and not the enemy – Iran (KerimYildiz 2007).

### **Non-Establishment of a Kurd Independent State: Issues & Concerns**

Following are the main reasons behind the non-establishment:

#### **Lack of Common Grounds among the Largest State less Ethnic Minority- The Kurds**

Non-Arab Kurds are the largest stateless ethnic minority in the world (KerimYildiz 2007) with an estimated population of around 30 million. However, under no single construct the Kurds are found united in their approaches towards various issues or else getting them an identity (Cafiero 2013) which they need as a must for bringing an independent State into being. Kurds are found to be divided by a multiple ethnic, political, economic and cultural factors (Cafiero 2013).

Ethnically Kurds are third largest group in the Middle East after the Arabs and Persians (Roy 2011). Majority of Kurd ethnic population is residing on the margins of south eastern side of Turkey (19 percent of the total Turkey population), northern parts of Syria (8 percent of the total Syria population) and Iraq (15-20 percent (Dahlman 2002) of the total Iraqi population), north western half of the Iran (9 percent of the total Iran population) and south western parts of Armenia. The mountainous land where Kurds reside is commonly known as Kurdistan- Land of the Kurds (Map-1).Linguistically also, Kurds speak Kurdish language which is akin to the Iranian Persian ascent. Within Kurds there are two major groups i.e. Kurmanji and Gurani Groups having considerable numbers of sub dialects. (Roy 2011).



Source: <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/10/21/357737290/who-are-the-kurds-and-whats-their-role-in-mideast-politics> (Map-1)

Along the religious lines, there is diversity of faiths among the Kurds. About 60 percent (Dahlman 2002) of the Kurdish population are Sunni Muslims who follow Shafii School of Islamic thought, yet Sunni Sect does not make it an ethnic religion which can get the Kurds unified. It is important to indicate that the other Sunni Muslims in the adjoining States of the Kurds' land follow Hanafi School of Islamic thoughts. The difference of sub sects within Sunni Sect also contributed towards diversions in their endeavours especially the independence. Moreover, Kurds in Iraq also claim that they neither follow Saudi nor Iranian brand of Islam, they consider themselves more moderate Muslims and religiously tolerant (Dahlman 2002). This indicates the emerging secular nature of Kurdish aspirations in the religious domain (GalipDalay 2015). Besides Sunnis, Shias are second in numbers (15-20 percent) among the Kurd population. The Kurd Shia population exists along the Iranian border i.e. south eastern half of the Iraqi Kurdistan who follow Iranian way of practising Shia school of Islamic thoughts (GalipDalay 2015).

Kurds are divided on two patterns of society – tribal (Ashiret) and non-tribal Kurds (modernized). Ashiret, stands for a tribe or group of tribes. Traditional Kurds take pride in being part of an Ashiret which was believed to be a source of unification for Kurds. However, over a period of time, governments in states having considerable population of Kurds encouraged their migration so as to dilute their pride. Due to the migratory trend, the traditional Kurds' strength has seen a continued decline thereby diluting the popular demand of an independent Kurdistan (Ofra Bengio 2017).

## **Arabisation of Kurdistan Dominated Areas**

Kirkuk being oil and water rich area remains a bone of contention between the KRG and Baghdad relationship. Ethnically, Kurds dominated the area after the end of World War I i.e. around 1920. Thereafter, when the new Iraqi State came into being, various governments in Baghdad had intricately shifted the demography of the area in favour of Arabs. The Arabisation of Kirkuk included Arabs' settlements in the area by giving incentives and privileges while discriminating Kurds (Ofra Bengio 2017). The Arabisation of Kirkuk by settling Arabs from central and southern Iraq has restricted the KRG effectiveness in the town thus encouraging Baghdad's increased influence (Ofra Bengio 2017).

## **Strategic Competition for Control over Oil and Water Resource Rich Kirkuk**

Kirkuk is a heterogeneously ethnic and rich in hydrocarbon (oil and gas) city in northern Iraq and is strategically important for Kurdistan independence. Historically, due to its sandwiched location between great Empires of Persia, Arabs and Ottoman, all had laid territorial claims on Kirkuk for only one primary reason – the oil and water reserves. Iraqi Kurdistan enriched with one of the major oil reserves makes the Iraqi Kurdish region lucrative for the US and rest of the Western world too. The oil rich Kirkuk area is a continued source of contention between the Iraqi Government and the KRG.

Turkish Kurdistan is blessed with mineral rich mountainous areas and two important rivers moving through it. The two giant water sources i.e. Rivers Euphrates and Tigris are originated in Turkish part of the Kurds Land and from there these two rivers enter into Syria and Iraq. It is believed that due to global warming process, future wars shall be water wars. Turkey and Iraq has made series of dams on these two river sources which negatively impacts upon the troika bilateral relationships. Kirkuk, besides its oil reserves is also important from water resource as well.

As expected right after the independence referendum by the KRG Iraqi armed forces invaded Kirkuk in the southern Kurdistan on October 17, 2017 and pushed back the Peshmerga forces. The Iraqi armed forces had support of the Iranian militia which is an indicator of the US, Iraq and Iran being on the same side of the same page with regard to their joint opposition to an independent Kurdistan.

## **Opposition by the Regional States in the Middle East**

Middle Eastern States like Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq do not welcome the idea of a separate Kurdish State. This is so because a separate Kurdistan would air

same kind of separatist movements in their respective areas which could get intensified due to geographical contiguity of areas with majority Kurds' population. Therefore, these states have been using all means including military to have Kurdistan issue under control in their respective territories (David Zucchini and Eric Schmitt 2017).

## **Global and Regional Reactions on KRG Independence Referendum**

The motive of the KRG to hold the recent referendum was to refresh their demand for a separate independent Kurdish State. Subsequently, once they had a majority YES by the Kurdish people, they intended to enter into negotiations with the Baghdad for settlement/distribution of the assets. Iraqi Government in Baghdad was the most vocal opposition to the Kurd referendum and its results. The referendum was considered as a direct threat to the sovereignty of Iraq. Haider al-Abadi, Iraqi Premier stated in Iraqi Parliament that "[he shall] never have a dialogue about the referendum's outcome with the KRG.... preserve citizens' security [and] defend Kurdish citizens inside or outside the Kurdistan Region" (David Zucchini and Eric Schmitt 2017).

At the international level, the United Nations Security Council had warned against holding the referendum as the process might dilute global efforts to fight ISIS militants in which the Peshmerga forces had contributed most tangibly. Security Council also noted that any armed reaction by the stake holders against referendum results would impede the United Nations' efforts of bringing back displaced people to their homes (Dahlman 2002).

Turkey- region's most strong State, has never been supportive of an independent Kurdistan right next to its south eastern borders. Turkey has also marked its Kurdish Nationalist Party (PKK) as a terrorist organization. Turkey officially opposed the referendum process before and after its occurrence. Turkey foreign ministry stated (Özcan 2004) that, "[Turkey is] dismayed [on independence referendum being] undertaken by the KRG leadership who insisted on holding the referendum despite all the warnings of Turkey and of the international community and thereby endangered the peace and stability not only of Iraq, but also that of the region. Turkey stressed that, "the KRG will have a price and within this framework [Turkey] has identified the sanctions that will be levied against the KRG in the [Turkish] National Security Council" (Özcan 2004).

It is noteworthy the Washington despite voicing against the referendum announcement has not shown a great deal of displeasure over KRG's referendum. In fact, they indicated that this referendum is illegal and could be a source of distraction for them and others who are involved in fighting against the IS (Sally Nabil 2017).

Moscow's position viz-a-viz referendum is unclear. They have not opposed to the happening nor totally rejected it. In fact, Russian approach towards Kurdistan independence has been ambiguous. Russia, one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council is among the first few countries who opened its consulate in Erbil. The Consulate-General of Russia in the Kurdistan Region, Victor Simakov, stated that, "[Russia] supports a country in the context of international law with the name 'Iraq,' and this will help fight IS more effectively". However, supported an independent Kurdistan with a caveat and stated that, "...each nation has the right to determine its destiny.....independence is the right of every nation....It's for the different Iraqi components to decide on this matter. [Russia] support[s] whatever decision they make, provided [there is no outside interference]" (Sally Nabil 2017).

Precedent wise, China keeps a low profile with regard to indigenous independence movements; however, it does support independence drives in case it is mutually agreed by the parties (Sally Nabil 2017). With regard to the Kurdistan referendum, Beijing maintained that it supports the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq and that a dialogue should be held between the Erbil and Baghdad (Xalid 2015).

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are also taking diplomatic positions and have offered to mediate between the KRG and Baghdad. A Saudi delegation has already met with Barzani, who thanked the Saudis for their involvement but did not indicate whether he would suspend the referendum as a result (Xalid 2015).

Israel has openly voiced its support for an independent Kurdistan. In fact, it has strong economic ties with the KRG. It is estimated that since 2015, Israel met its almost 77 percent of oil requirements from the KRG (Samuel Ramani 2017). Israeli support to the KRG referendum has geopolitical connotations. Besides oil flow, an independent Kurdistan commensurate with its late 1950s' foreign policy's cardinal 'Periphery Doctrine'. The doctrine sought Israeli non-Arab allies in the periphery against the Arab Core (Xalid 2015).



## What if an Independent Kurdistan is established?



Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41382494> (Map 2)

Demand and resolute for an independent Kurdistan seems to be gearing up. September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017 independence referendum by the KRG has initiated a new debate and has affected stability in the region. The KRG which had gained control on the areas south of its constitutional jurisdiction including Kirkuk is being contested and a military conflict had already been initiated within three weeks of the disputed referendum. Only Israel has openly voiced its support for an Independent Kurdistan. The support has a historical context. In 1948, many of the Kurdish Jews fled to Israel from the existing Kurdish areas. By this token, Israelis maintain that Kurds are faced with same sort of situation that Jews faced in pre-Israel era i.e. high in numbers with no state (Samuel Ramani 2017).

Alongside, it is widely believed that since 1960s, Israel has been discreetly providing money, training and other military hardware assistance to KRG on the basis of their shared status of ethnic minority status in the Middle East (Jeremy Bender 2014). Moreover, geopolitically Israel's support for an independence seeking Muslim State is natural and logical. An independent Kurdistan would provide advantage to Israel in terms of Israel's secured oil flow besides getting a foothold through a pro-Israeli Kurdish Government next to its staunch enemies i.e. Iran, Syria and Iraq. Israel has also found an opportunity in the form of Kurdistan independence issue for diverting the attention of Middle Eastern States from Israel. This shift of focus would allow Israel to further its agenda of speeding up the settlements in Palestinian territories thereby facilitating its move towards 'Greater Israel'. In the above context of Israeli-Kurdish receptivity, an independent Kurdistan is perceived to be a "Second Israel" in the Middle East (Andoni 2017). Battle for occupation of hydrocarbon rich Kirkuk shall enter into perpetuity, in case the Iraqi Kurdistan is granted

independence without settling the disputed territory of Kirkuk (Samuel Ramani 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The missed independence opportunity as was proposed in the Treaty of Sevres still haunts Kurds. Redrawing of the sovereign States' borders including Iraq seems stark; however, referendum has initiated a process that, eventually, might lead to a concerted effort towards Kurdish statehood (Andoni 2017). An indigenous or foreign hand supported independence movement by the Iraqi Kurds could result into spiraling security situation. Foregoing, an independent Kurdistan could only appear on map if there is a failure of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran nation state systems (Andoni 2017).

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