

COMMENTARY

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The Iraqi Kurds' Independence is Decades Overdue

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The Iraqi Kurdish referendum vote for independence, scheduled for 25 September, is more than likely to pass by an overwhelming majority of the Kurdish population. Sadly, however, not a single country (with the exception of Israel) expressed its support for the Kurds' impending historic decision to finally, realise their decades-old dream of establishing a state of their own. Although the passage of the referendum will not automatically lead to statehood, it represents a crucial step forward that opens the door for negotiations with the Shiite-led government in Baghdad to reach an agreement.

Regardless of how difficult these negotiations will be, and notwithstanding the opposition to the referendum even by the Kurds' allies, especially the US (presumably because it is ill-timed), the Kurds must remain resolved to proceed as planned, which is decades overdue.

To put things in perspective, a brief historical account of the Kurds' plight is warranted. The Kurds are an ethnic group originating from the Middle East and are predominately Sunni Muslims, speaking a distinct language and sharing a singular cultural identity despite being scattered across four countries. For centuries, the Kurds have been the largest stateless ethnic group (currently 30 million) in the Middle East, living under various empires and despots where they have faced discrimination and oppression while being denied the right to enjoy their unique culture.

When the Kurds did attempt to establish a homeland, their efforts were short-lived—an independent Kingdom of Kurdistan that emerged in the aftermath of World War I lasted less than two years (1922-1924) before it was parcelled out between Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. In

1946, Iranian Kurds (with the support of the Soviet Union) declared a republic called Mahabad, but it collapsed in the same year when Iranian forces retook the territory.

Unsurprisingly, the four countries that oppose Kurdish independence are the worst offenders of Kurdish human rights. They have systematically and ruthlessly, oppressed their Kurdish minority, which left an indelible mark of resentment and disdain toward their countries of residence.

Turkey houses the largest Kurdish community (15 million, approximately 18 per cent of the Turkish population). They have been fighting to preserve their ethnic identity and way of life consistent with their long and rich cultural heritage. The abuse of the Kurds under the brutal reign of Turkey's President Erdogan is hard to enumerate. A UN report documented human rights violations including killings, disappearances, torture, destruction of houses, and prevention of access to medical care, while leaving the area in ruins. Scores of Kurdish journalists are in jails and a dozen Kurdish parliamentarians were arrested, while collective punishment tactics are employed against Kurdish towns and villages.

The eight million Kurds in Iran (nearly 10 per cent) officially enjoy political representation but have historically experienced profound socio-political inequality, which emboldened the militant wing of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iran (KDPI) to turn to violence. In recent years, the conflict between the two sides has further intensified, forcing many Kurdish civilians to flee.

In Syria, the two million Kurds (about nine per cent) have largely been politically inactive under the Assad regimes. In the past five years, they have taken advantage of the civil war and established a semi-autonomous region, which Turkey vehemently opposes, fearing that it could prompt its own Kurds to seek autonomy à la the Iraqi Kurds.

None of these countries have the legal or moral right to oppose the referendum. At this stage, the Iraqi Kurds must fight with all their might to preserve their inherent right to be free and independent, because the time of their continued subjugation must come to an end.

There are seven million Iraqi Kurds (roughly 15 per cent of the population), who have been the target of persecution from day one following the establishment of the state of Iraq in 1922. The Kurds were mercilessly victimised under Saddam Hussein's regime, which killed at least 50,000 Kurds during the 1980s; more than 5,000 men, women, and children were gassed to death in 1988. Since 1991, they have consolidated autonomous rule under American protection, which gave the Kurds space to build an autonomous region which now enjoys all the markers of an emergent independent state.

Years of subjugation, mistreatment, discrimination, and brutal repression left the Iraqi Kurdish community determined to never again, subject themselves to the whims of any Iraqi government. Kurdish nationalism is the real engine behind their drive toward statehood, and they will never compromise that regardless of the near-universal opposition to their political independence.

Every Kurdish political party, including President Barzani's traditional rival the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and many other affiliates to the main parties, hold fast to the objective of an independent nation.

President Barzani rejected a warning from the US that pursuing independence at this juncture will further destabilize the region and irreparably divide Iraq. "When" he said, "have we ever had stability and security in this region that we should be concerned about losing it? When was Iraq, so united that we should be worried about breaking its unity? Those who are saying these, they are just looking for excuses to stop us."

The irony is that while the Iraqi, Iranian, and Turkish governments want their Kurdish communities to be loyal citizens, they never understood that the Kurds' allegiance to their respective countries depends on the way they are treated, the freedoms they are granted, and the civility they are accorded. To demand from the Kurds unconditional loyalty while robbing them of their basic human rights is the height of hypocrisy and falsehood.

Moreover, the raging madness in the Middle East further strengthens the Kurds' resolve to seek, fight, and die to establish autonomous rule, if not independence, as is the case in Iraq.

The Iraqi government will eventually resolve to negotiate with the Kurds with the objective of establishing an independent state, provided, that Kirkuk is not included. Kirkuk is a contentious issue because of its huge reservoir of oil, and nearly half of its population are Arabs and Turkmen. Although Barzani insists that Kirkuk must be included in the referendum, he must abide by the results and work with the Iraqi government to negotiate a mutually acceptable solution.

The US and the EU must demonstrate that human rights, freedom, and democracy are the inherent rights of every ethnic group wherever they may reside, especially when they are grossly mistreated and their basic civil and human rights are, systematically violated. Otherwise, preaching the gospel of human rights but denying it to the people who have been subjected to persecution and marginalization is hypocritical, deceitful, and sinister.

The US' hypocrisy is particularly daunting because the Kurds have and continue to, faithfully fight side-by-side the US and its allies against ISIS. Rejecting their quest for self-determination

after years of suffering brutalization by successive Iraqi regimes, especially under Saddam Hussein, is unconscionable and shameful.

The US and EU must be in the forefront in supporting Iraqi Kurds to achieve independence, and bring an end to the historic travesty that has been inflicted on all 30 million Kurds.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/iraqi-kurds-independence-decades-overdue/>

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