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## **The Challenges of Establishing a Kurdish State in Northern Iraq**

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**T**he current situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is complicated, resulting from several diverse political predicaments and because of the consequences a potential Kurdish State would have on the geographical units adjacent to it. Although the referendum held in the region on September 25, 2017 represented a significant political development after a long experience of autonomy, the consequences of the referendum process have been very severe on the geography of the Kurdish region. Also, future Kurdish ambitions have been hindered, as regional neighbouring powers, such as Turkey and Iran, have exerted all possible efforts to thwart Kurdish independence, given their security calculations and threats.

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, major political and security developments have been disturbing Iraqi statehood and regional stability. The latest of these developments was the Kurdistan Region's referendum on independence which was met with extensive disparagement leading to its annulment, even though the result was in favour of secession. However, this concession has not waived what the region's parties believe as their right to self-government.

### **First: Crises of the Kurdistan Region's Referendum**

The Middle East has been witnessing, for some time now, a state of severe conflicts and clashes resulting from the absurdity of geographical boundary drawings (i.e. Sykes-Picot Treaty 1916/Treaty of Sevres 1920/Treaty of Lausanne 1923) that have steered the region towards ethnic and national disasters. One of the most significant implications out of this geographical re-engineering is that countries such as Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria have been left with a fragmented Kurdish population that has not been integrated into the political framework in the aforementioned states. The Kurds are a key party as they represent the fourth largest ethnic group in the region after the Arabs, Turks and Persians, but are fragmented and held hostage by the regional and international interests of these four countries.

These, four countries have viewed the Kurds as a national security threat and have resisted any Kurdish ambitions for separation. With the passage of time, along with changing strategic interests, the attitude towards Kurdish independence has changed as well- mainly in Iraq and Syria. Post 1991, as Iraq was in a fragile situation, the Kurds were given self-rule under the patronage of the U.S. After the U.S occupation of Iraq in 2003, this political status was constitutionally confirmed in 2005. In Syria, the collapse of the internal situation in early 2011 led to the Kurds withdrawing from Damascus' and becoming, to an extent, independent from the central government. As weak governments, Baghdad's and Damascus's control over the Kurds' and geography has weakened; thus, the Kurdish issue continues to remain a thorn for Iran and Turkey.<sup>(1)</sup>

Predominantly, political and institutional developments, along with military and economic growth, the historical claims for Kurdish statehood have risen one again. Since the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923- Kurdish leaders have wanted a Kurdish state to remove all the historical injustices and reverse the geographical and historical position that they have found themselves in for almost a century.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **1- Motivations Behind the Referendum**

There are many variables that specify the timing of the referendum and constitute the basis for this escalating situation. The most significant variables are:

#### **A. Barzani's Ambition:**

The Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP), President Masoud Barzani, attempted to employ the concept of Kurdish nationalism, in particularly the Kurdish demand for a

state to legitimize his existence in power for a longer period. When the referendum issue got out of control and the Iraqi army with supporting forces marched forward to enact constitutional authority over disputed areas, the political conditions deteriorated in Kurdistan, which prompted the President of the Kurdistan Region to step down from office on October 30, 2017.

### **B. A New Bargaining Chip Pre-2018 Elections:**

The Kurdish leaders from the KDP-, particularly Masoud Barzani, believe that the 2018 central elections in Iraq must not commence without a Kurdish bargaining chip to double their political and economic advantages from Baghdad. And to intensively increase the pressure to impose a 'de facto' policy on Kirkuk and the rest of the Nineveh plains. With these objectives in mind, the referendum demand surfaced to reach their target.

### **C. Increasing Political and Military Growth of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)**

The emergence of the PMF, with growth in its political and military power, along with its political wings seeking power in Baghdad is a variable that threatened the Kurdish leadership. The referendum ploy, to an extent, was utilized to undermine the PMF and raise voices for its removal from Kurdish territories.

### **D. Hiding Corruption**

There are deep economic interests in the Kurdistan Region, with leading figures of Barzani's government threatened by extensive anger over economic corruption. The referendum emerged as a guise, to shift public opinion and to distract it from the government's failure to manage domestic affairs and to overcome the rampant corruption that exists.

### **E. The End of ISIS and Declining Publicity**

After the end of ISIS, the Kurdish arena was clear of any direct threat (except for what some Kurds believe as the PMF threat) leaving the Kurdish leaders without a national cause to rally the Kurds around. As a result, the parliamentary elections of Kurdistan scheduled to be held on 1 November 2017 were delayed with the parliament of Kurdistan deciding to extend the duration of its legislative session for another eight months. This political gerrymandering paved the way for the referendum which was very crucial for Kurdish leaders, as it allowed them to lead a national issue that is not negotiable for the Kurds and to develop support for the KDP, in the forthcoming elections.

## **2- The Fundamentals of Establishing a Kurdish State in Northern Iraq**

The Kurds believe that the variant geographical, political, demographic and institutional conditions existing in the Kurdistan Region make it

qualified to objectively meet the necessary transformation requirements and to have a state of their own. The former US National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger has backed the emergence of a Kurdish state, “The Kurdistan Region formulated the concept of autonomy in a way that cannot be distinguished from the state except through a microscope.” This means that the Kurdistan Region has passed the stage of self-government and arrived at a semi-state. Consequently, the calls for secession increased because the Kurds believe that the fundamental variables they possess can transform the region into an independent state <sup>(3)</sup>. These fundamentals can be discussed as follows:

### **A. Economy**

It is one of the most vital fundamentals, any state depends on to ensure its continuity, survival, and growth. The Kurdistan Region has vast areas of diverse geography, several oil fields with a production capacity exceeding 550 thousand barrels per day in 2014, along with oil fields controlled by the region in Kirkuk and the Nineveh Plains, resulting from the Iraqi army’s withdrawal. That gave the region the opportunity to double oil exports to one million barrels per day, formally and informally. On the other hand, since the discovery of oil within the Kurdistan region, after 2006, the Kurds have sought to develop an economy independent from Baghdad. Erbil entered negotiations and long disputes with Baghdad because the region did not pay the levies of its oil exports to Baghdad. The region gets 17% of the Iraqi federal budget; However, the reality is quite the contrary, Kurdistan has not received, since 2005, its complete allocation of the federal budget because it –unilaterally- exported oil without handing over revenues to Baghdad. The region’s oil revenues were deducted from the region’s 17 percent entitlement. Yet, the region, in 2014, reached an advanced stage in oil exports which led to a sharp decline in prices; thus, Baghdad completely cut off the region’s allocation after long-standing legal disputes over the region’s legitimacy of exporting oil or not.

However, the collapse in oil prices worsened the economic situation in the region; with it being unable to pay the salaries of the region’s employees who number 1.5 million out of 4.5 million persons for six months. Therefore, it is possible to say that the Kurdistan region enjoys a single-sided oil economy as the main basis for its revenues, along with some domestic tourism coming from other Iraqi provinces. It is notable that the share of the Kurdistan region was reduced to less than 13% of Iraq’s budget for 2018, that led the Prime Minister of Kurdistan Region Nechirvan Barzani to propose a project of handing over all oil revenues to Baghdad in return for receiving a 17 percent share of the national budget.

### **B. Institutions of Governance**

Although, the Kurdistan region has been through turbulent legislative processes, this has not undermined the fact that this institution is still critical

to a new state. The parliament of the Kurdistan Region was established in 1992 by 105 deputies; 6 other deputies were added for minority affairs, so the total number remains as 111 deputies. It exercises a set of general supervisory powers over the executive branch and enacts a set of important laws related to the general policies of the Kurdistan region such as; the adoption of laws relating to oil/gas and elections

But the parliament is fragile and weakened by chronic political crises in the region and clashes between the various political forces. The parliament has been suspended since 19 August 2015 because of severe disagreements over the extension of Masoud Barzani's second term in office in 2013 and over the form of the government. The Speaker of the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament, Yousef Mohammad Sadiq (Gorran Movement), was prohibited from entering Erbil, which resulted in the parliament being suspended, since then until the period preceding the referendum of September 25, 2017. An emergency session was held at the parliament to pass the decision and hold the referendum on time over the disputed areas.

The region has its own institutional foundations- though relatively new - there are various ministries such as the Peshmerga Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. As well as many other institutions such as; universities, schools, and a large number of government departments— significantly independent from Baghdad.

### **C. Military and Security Entities**

The U.S, Germany, along with friendly states provide military assistance to the Kurdish government that exceeds \$800 million distributed in the form of equipment, weapons, troop training, security advise, and military air cover provided by the International Coalition for Peshmerga forces in the war against ISIS— the U.S. contribution is \$400 million.

The military and security experience of the Kurdistan Region results from a long period of armed action in various fronts inside and outside Iraq. The Kurdistan Region has its own military force; the Peshmerga (forces protecting the region) which means in the Kurdish language 'the challenge of death' and consists of approximately 37,000 soldiers, along with a security force tasked with maintaining the internal security of the region called Asayish (which means in Kurdish 'stability'), along with traffic police and a reserve force, as well as semi-independent bodies such as the anti-terrorist unit "Deshi Teror".

The Peshmerga has a diverse array of military equipment: light, heavy, and medium weapons such as tanks, helicopters, heavy guns and advanced early warning devices, as well as- AK47, M4 and G3 rifles; fighter aircrafts, RBG7,

RBG29; AT4 missile launchers; defense system Stella-2 and SA-16 Gimelt; T55, T62, T72 tanks; military trucks and Humvees; Toyota, Nissan and Land Rover combat vehicles; 122 mm guns; 122 mm howitzer; 82 mm/81 mm mortar; and ZU-23-2 and KS-30 anti-aircraft guns.

Recently, Peshmerga forces were trained by regional and international trainers inside and outside the region. A group of training camps by international partners were formed to train the Peshmerga forces, predominantly for the post-ISIS phase in Mosul and other provinces. The Peshmerga has fought many battles in various areas of the Southern region in the Nineveh Plains, also it has achieved numerous victories under intensive air cover provided by the international coalition forces. The Peshmerga and Iraqi forces are criticized because of their withdrawal from some areas of Nineveh Plains, especially Sinjar, leaving the Yazidi community without protections from ISIS, which led to the capture of 6,500 Yazidi women and the death of approximately 1500 Yazidi citizens because of their helplessness in resisting ISIS.

#### **D. Geographical Location**

The Kurdistan Region has diverse geographical features varying from one area to another, with a great amount of natural minerals, groundwater, and a considerable amount of oil in Erbil, Daquq and Sulaymaniyah, with the region depending mainly on oil revenues from oil fields in the disputed areas in Kirkuk Nineveh Plains, Diyala, and Salah Uddin.

The region has vast untapped agricultural lands, but it does not have any clear strategic plan to effectively use these capabilities despite having favorable agricultural conditions. The region also produces many crops and enjoys a relatively mild climate in the summer compared to low temperatures in winter, particularly in the mountainous areas. Although there are no accurate statistics on the population of the Kurdistan Region, it is approximately 4.5 -5 million people.

#### **E. Governance Experience**

For more than 47 years, i.e., since March 11, 1970, the Kurdistan Region has been practicing a type of self-government that started with limited capabilities and evolved into a semi-state in Iraq; having an array of benefits and privileges, establishing unofficial diplomatic relations with variant states, organizations and intercontinental companies. The governance experience with its presidency, prime ministry, parliament, and judiciary has been a major catalyst towards independence. The preparedness of these institutions and their independence from Baghdad -despite the violation of some clauses of the Iraqi constitution- stands out as the most important element in the feasibility of Kurdish independence.

## **F. The Internal Repercussions of the Kurdistan Region's Referendum**

After Masoud Barzani insisted on the necessity of holding the referendum on time - despite the warnings about the consequences and risks of what may result- the referendum was held on September 25, 2017, beginning a new phase of conflict between Baghdad and Erbil and between Erbil and regional/international powers. This conflict was ended by Baghdad's decision to enforce the federal authority on the territories controlled by the region, post 10 June 2014, as a result of the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from these territories.

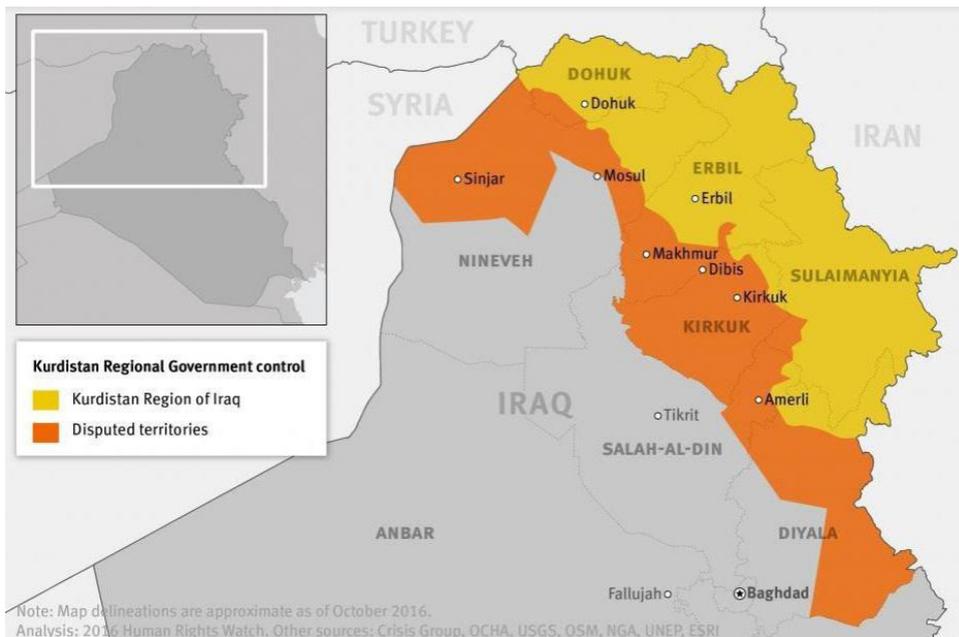
After a long series of internal and regional attempts and international pressures on Erbil to cancel or freeze the referendum – at least for two years- Baghdad decided on October 14, 2017 to give Erbil a 48 hours deadline to evacuate the disputed areas in Kirkuk, Diyala, Saladin, Nineveh and Sulaymaniyah . The leaders of the Kurdish political forces met on the evening of October 15, 2017 at the so-called Dokan meeting to discuss what could be done to manage and contain this brewing crisis, but the conclusion of this meeting was neither to cancel nor even temporarily freeze the result of the referendum.

In the meantime, the Iraqi forces of various military units and formations were mobilizing near the town of Tuzkurmato south of Kirkuk under a large media blackout. The forces moved at sunrise, October 16, 2017, entering Kirkuk and taking over the sovereign facilities and oil fields after an agreed withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). A day later, the Iraqi forces advanced in Saladin, Diyala and the Nineveh Plains; consequently, Iraq completely took over the disputed areas -which had been under the control of the region since 2003 and expanded post June 2017- the region returned to its known boundaries within its 'three' governorates: Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah- with some other areas.

It seems that the U.S was completely unable to prevent the PMF supported by Iran to enter the disputed areas between Baghdad and Erbil. This situation seemingly forced Washington to engage in difficult decisions, so not to 1- lose its ally in Baghdad 2- not to undermine its new project; to support moderate Shiite and Sunni political forces to challenge and foster a balance of power with Iran. Subsequently, the U.S backing was given to Prime Minister Haider Abadi to lead the process of imposing law, redeploying Iraqi forces in the disputed areas, stamping Baghdad's authority on sovereign facilities such as oil installations, border crossings and airports. It is quite clear that Washington made this move to block the PMF from leading this process, that would have further strategically leveraged Tehran in the region.

**Map. 1 The yellow colour shows the borders of the Kurdistan Region before 2003, and the orange colour shows the disputed territories, that were dominated by the region post 2003 and recently, withdrew from them after law was imposed by the federal authority in Baghdad.**

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Source: conducted by the researcher

The Kurdistan Region lost more than 55% of oil exports equivalent to 14 thousand square kilometers of land after the Iraq authority imposed its authority on the disputed territories and international crossings, along with closing airports. The decline of the region’s oil exports reached about 250 thousand barrels per day. This number is expected to fall over time due to the non-resolution of some disputed territories till now, which contain several oil fields in Faysh Khabur and Shekhan District.

More than 90% of the indicated areas in map 1 is controlled by the Iraqi authority except for Faysh Khabur Northwest of Iraq (negotiations are carried on for join administration which may end up with Baghdad’s administration). The significance of each territory according to its economic revenues or as being a logistical link can be clarified as follows:

**A. Khanaqin:** is one of the most important border gates of the Diyala province with Iran, which is a major line of contact between Baghdad on the one hand, and along the eastern border with Iran on the other hand. It contains huge amounts of oil, classified as the second largest oil reservoir in disputed northern Iraq after Kirkuk; as it has the huge Neft Khanah oil field (in Persian Neftishah) running deep into the Iranian territory (shared oil field) and a huge natural gas reservoir, the estimated oil reserve is nearly 700 million barrels.

**B. Tuz Khurmatu:** this town is important because it is a pivotal linking point

between Kirkuk Khanaqin and Baqubah and has a diverse population including Kurds, Arab and Turkmen. Now it is under Saladin Governorate, in the past it was under the At-Ta'mim Governorate (Kirkuk). The strategic importance of this town is that it connects supplies and roads, as well as military, civilian and trade transportations. It is located between Khanaqin center to the south-east and the center of Baquba from the south to Baghdad.

**C. Altun Kupri:** the world's fifth largest holder of oil reserves, along with the oil fields of Jambour, Bai Hassan, Papa Karkar, Khabbaz. Therefore, it is considered one of the most important cities given the disputed economic resources. Kirkuk reserves are estimated at 14% of Iraq's oil reserves, the third largest in the world after Saudi Arabia and Iran, estimated to have about 35 billion barrels. The city officially exports around 750,000 barrels of oil per day and can be increased to 900,000 barrels. It has important sovereign facilities such as the North Oil Company (NOC), North Gas Company (NGC) and K1 airbase. It also contains a huge natural gas reserve estimated to be approximately 75% of the total Iraqi gas reserve, equivalent to 248 billion cubic meters, but 70% of it is ruined while extracting oil because of shared fields or associated gas, along with the poor drilling equipment.

**D. Makhmur and Kuwair:** Makhmour and Kuwair (administratively under Makhmur) are a logistical link between the areas of Mosul, North Saladin and Kirkuk. The importance of these towns stems from the fact that they are in the East and West of Iraq, also they have great agricultural capabilities, and a strategic focal point of roads and transportations. They were administratively under the Erbil Governorate, then annexed with the Nineveh Governorate, later in 2003, then they became one of the disputed territories.

**E. Mosul Dam and its Geographical Implications:** It is the largest dam in Iraq and a huge strategic water reservoir, producing good amounts of electricity equivalent to 1052 megawatts. Also it is the largest hydroelectric station in Iraq. There are many oil fields (41) around the dam near the area of Zammar Wana, its production exceeds 16 thousand barrels per day. It is an important logistical transport area because it is directly connected to the south of Mosul, the west of Talafar and Sinjar and the north of Faysh Khabur.

**F. Sinjar and Rabiah:** it is one of the most important border areas with Syria as Rabiah has Ayyubiyah, the most significant crossing. Sinjar is militarily difficult due to the spread of PKK elements on its mountainous strip (Mount Sinjar). Also, it is a significant logistical link with Syria and a trade route with Turkey to Tel Afar and Mosul.

**G. Faysh Khabur:** it is an international transit town in the Iraqi-Syrian-Turkish triangle (belonging to the province of Dohuk) with a Christian (Chaldean), Kurdish and Yezidi population. Its importance was revived and increased after

the Kurdistan region's referendum on 25 September 2017. It is the gate the Iraqi government attempts to seize to break the siege imposed by the Kurdistan Region against Baghdad through the crossing of Ibrahim Khalil towards Turkey. It is planned to open a direct trade gate between Baghdad and Ankara through the area of Nisibin or Afokai near Khabur. Therefore, Khabur has a special significance if it is controlled by Iraqi forces to launch the direct crossing of the Baghdad government through the border with Syria and up to Khabur towards Turkey.

**Map No. 2 Shows the most important areas controlled by the federal government and the areas it seeks to control.**



Source: conducted by the researcher

## **Second: The Turkish-Iranian Position on the Referendum and the Repercussions for the Kurdistan Region**

The Turkish-Iranian reactions to the referendum were tough and violent; both countries strongly objected to the referendum and the possibility of the Kurdish state. These two positions can be explored as follows:

### **1- Turkish-Iranian Endeavors to Thwart the Referendum**

A major joint exercise, was one of the most significant procedures Iran and Turkey had undertaken involving the Iraqi, Turkish and Iranian armies at the

common border, Northern Iraq on numerous occasions (inside the Turkish territory near Zakho, Iraq). Also, Iran's Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) started maneuvers near Iran's border with Iraq, plus the closure of borders and the complete coordination with the Iraqi government was undertaken to thwart this separatist attempt.

Iran led by turkey had to an extent, political agreements with political parties in Iraq to hinder this Kurdish step. The leaders of the KDP talked about an agreement between Qassem Suleimani, Hadi Amiri and Bafel Talibani (the son of the former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani), which forced Peshmerga forces of the PUK (under Bafel Taliban's party) to withdraw, leaving the KDP forces to challenge Iraqi troops that were moving towards the disputed areas. Consequently, the forces collapsed in 'less' than two hours then withdrew from an area estimated to be 14 thousand square kilometers; the region lost about 400,000 barrels of oil exported from these areas, in less than two days.

Also, flights were suspended at the regional airport except for special flights, monetary transactions were adjourned, dozens of companies and banks were shut down to increase pressure on the region by Baghdad, with direct regional support, to cancel –not to freeze- the results of the referendum.<sup>1</sup>

The bid of these two countries succeeded because of the posture of the international powers particularly the U.S and France, as they partially withdrew their support without any interference, and the Iraqi forces with the support of the PMF entered the provinces of Kirkuk, Diyala, Nineveh and Salah Uddin.

## **2- The Turkish-Iranian Dilemma**

Turkish and Iranian strategic thinkers believe that the present northern region of Iraq is inseparable from the geographical regions of their territories as it is a geopolitical Kurdish extension that needs to be permanently controlled and organized so that their national security will not be threatened. Both governments believed that a Kurdish referendum would drag them into many problems, as the Kurds within their boundaries would follow suit. Thus, Iran's posture was strongly opposed to the referendum held in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq on September 25, 2017. Iran's posture stems from its national security paradigm and from the challenges that would arise for Iran's role and influence across the region.

Teheran exerted all efforts possible to thwart the referendum by using its influence and political relations in this regard. The Commander of the Quds Forces, Major General Qassem Suleimani, sought to exploit his influence in Kurdistan to dissuade the Kurds of what they had declared.<sup>2</sup>

The Iranian-Turkish posture resisting the secession of the Kurdish region stems from the massive geo-security danger resulting from a potential secession that

would break the balance of military and security power in the region. Also, the fact that the establishment of a new Kurdish state at their borders would provoke Iranian-Turkish concerns of having an “Israel” near their borders especially with the current upsurge in Israeli-Kurdish relations, that may eventually threaten their security.

Turkey has expressed repeatedly its concern about the concentration of PKK in the Kandil Mountains of northern Iraq and their positioning in between Sinjar and Sulaymaniyah, giving the PKK accessibility and mobility in the region. Turkey believes a Kurdish state would empower the PKK, as it would now have a Kurdish state as a “Safe Haven” from which it could meddle in regional affairs. Iran’s concerns over a Kurdish state results from its fear that the region may transform into a stronger focal point of opponents’ that would threaten its national security. Along with several U.S.-Israeli projects aimed at dismembering the region into mini feuding states, which would uphold Israel’s stability.<sup>3</sup>

The Turkish policy of “Dumping Trade” contributed in improving the economic power of the region in the last six years. Some estimates indicate that Iraqi-Turkish trade volume in 2014 amounted to about 14 billion dollars, 9 billion of it only with the Kurdistan Region; as there are about 3000 economic companies with the Turkish consulate managing many economic affairs within the region. The Ibrahim Khalil border crossing along with several unofficial border crossings have greatly contributed in the flooding of goods from Turkey to the Kurdish region, as well as military bases scattered across the province of Dohuk, particularly in Kani Masi, Sarsink and Bashiqa. Turkey has stationed 1200 soldiers with small arms and light weapons in these areas since 1983. Also, the Turkish forces signed a protocol with the Kurds to train the Kurdish Peshmerga and strengthen their combat capabilities (the agreement was renewed after the referendum). However, when the referendum nearly commenced, the Turkish consulate closed until further notice. The Turkish policy of flooding the Kurdish region with trade was designed to pressure the Kurdish government to dissuade it from moving towards secession.<sup>4</sup>

Iran’s influence in Sulaymaniyah is more apparent as Turkey’s influence stops at the borders of Dohuk and Erbil. Iran has a greater ability to influence the economy there. The trade volume between Iran and the Kurdish region is about five million dollars along with its political influence across Sulaymaniyah. Iran usually dictates the political trends of parties such as, the Gorran Movement and the PUK. Also, Sulaymaniyah has good relations with Baghdad, unlike Erbil and Dohuk that are controlled by the KDP, and Sulaymaniyah has a highly significant border crossing towards Iran which is its economic lifeblood and vital for the region’s trade. After the referendum, Iran threatened to undertake a series of actions to restrain the region’s ambitions. As a result, the positions of Kurdish

political forces in Sulaymaniyah were conflicting, hesitant and divided. The political forces considered mainly their domestic interests, particularly the upcoming parliamentary elections and utilized the referendum for political leverage in the upcoming elections. This posturing may threaten the future relationship of Sulaymaniyah with Iran.<sup>5</sup>

### **Third: The Future of the Kurdistan Region under Turkish-Iranian Positions**

The Kurdish ambition of establishing an Kurdish state faces many difficulties and challenges, whether inside or outside the region, opening many options for the future. In this context, the following factors are highlighted:

#### **1- Internal Challenges to Establish a Kurdish State**

##### **A. Political and Administrative Dismembering and a New Geographical Dismemberment**

Generally, all Kurdish political forces agree on the necessity to constantly demand self-determination. However, disagreements between the political forces might lead to the end and dismemberment of this potential future state especially given the administrative, political, geographical and partisan disagreements which may lead to two political administrations in the region.<sup>6</sup>

##### **B. Partisan Clashes**

Despite the unity that the region tries to display to realize self-determination, the domestic political situation of the Kurdistan Region shows the opposite. The disagreements and tensions that exist between the various political parties greatly affect the project itself. The disagreements evolve around the appropriate timing for the emergence of a new state and on future relations with Baghdad. The KDP, controls the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil, and has adopted the state project since 2003, considering it as a key priority of the party. While the PUK, has a relatively different vision and has adopted a project different to that of the KDP. The differences between the two hinged over the timing of the referendum and the procedures required to carry out the referendum and how to respond to threats by regional powers. Also, the PUK believes that KDP lacks the capability and its main motivation was political leverage rather than to advance the interest of the Kurds. Despite this, the PUK acknowledged the draft referendum, but consistently avowed that the referendum would not lead to any outcome.<sup>7</sup>

##### **C. Lack of Confidence in Project Implementers**

The Gorran Movement is recognized as being an important player amongst the political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It also vetoed the referendum, as it believed it would offer no practical interest to the region but rather increase the popularity of Masoud Barzani who is not trusted by the rest of the parties. Also, many political forces expressed reservations about the referendum and agreed to join at the very last moment, such as the, Kurdistan Islamic Group and

smaller parties. They believed that there was no objective justification to hold the referendum at the time.

#### **D. Multiple-Administrations for a Geographically Confined Territory**

The political map of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq designates that there are two major administrations; one in Erbil and Daquq, and the other in Sulaymaniyah, Halabja and a part of Kirkuk controlled by the PUK. Under regional pressures, especially from Iran, Sulaymaniyah argued that the referendum doesn't currently support the region's interest.

#### **E. Deepening the Kurdish-Kurdish Disagreements with Regional Tools**

The rising Turkish influence via its trade and investments across Daquq and Erbil along with Iran's penetration in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja contributed in deepening the Kurdish division in Iraq thwarting any Kurdish unity.

### **1- Regional and International Challenges**

The Turkish-Iranian position, along with no support from major international powers contributed, no doubt, towards the Kurds' failure in secession. This can be explored as follows:

#### **A. Capability of Encircling the Rough Terrain**

When analyzing the Kurdish geopolitical reality in Iraq, it unfolds the common fact that the Kurdistan Region is surrounded by harsh geographical facts from the four sides (Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq) and has no entree to the sea which makes it tough to establish a state, as it would be landlocked and held hostage by hostile neighbouring states. Also, the economic supplies of the region are strongly connected to the countries opposing the project, and secession at this time may harm region. Also, over time, it could collapse under the severe economic crisis it has suffered since the decline of oil prices post 2013 and its military battle with ISIS which has been costly.<sup>8</sup>

#### **B. Lack of Geographical Feasibility**

It is important to know that there is no value for any economic resource within a closed reality that cannot be marketed during difficult times. Nor is there any value for any financial support unless the Kurdish government or the "virtual" Kurdistan state can import the necessary goods and services, along with overcoming the rough terrain surrounding the region.

Turkey and Iran have long considered the Kurdish situation in Iraq as an issue extending up to their territory. There is no geographical separation between them given their mutual security concerns in this regard. Thus, the Turkish-Iranian strategy has depended on many economic, political and even military methods to control the region to prevent the emergence of a threatening Kurdish state in the region.

### **C. International Refusal**

With the exception of South Sudan in 2011 and the declaration of its secession with undisputed international support, there is no change in the map created by the colonial powers post Sykes-Picot 1916. The collapse of successive political governments and the emergence of new ones - has not had any significant bearing on the regional map, which shows, to an extent, that there is no real wish, at the moment, for new state projects to emerge on the ground.

Stemming from this fact, it was expected the Kurdish plan to hold a referendum would be given a cold shoulder. However, the U.S rebuff was not strong and decisive because of the intersecting and conflicting interests between the U.S institutions. For example, the U.S President Donald Trump, through the White House Spokesman, denounced the referendum and covertly asked for it to be cancelled. Also, he said the U.S would not stand with one side counter to the other. The U.S State Department's was explicit, in its denunciation and it advised political dialogue instead of irrational decisions that would undermine the War on Terror. Whereas, the U.S Congress backed the referendum, under pressure from the Kurdish and Israeli lobby in Washington.

The EU, Russia, China, U.K., and Arab states expressed their wish, at the very least, for dialogue to avert destabilization in the region . Over-all, the Kurdish referendum did not receive any overt international support, nor from the United Nations or other international organizations- it was only Israel that announced its positive posture on the referendum.<sup>9</sup>

#### **1- Future Scenarios**

Given the internal and external challenges the Kurdistan Region faced in the start of its separation plan, holding the referendum, and the repercussions that followed, the future of the Kurdistan Region can be confirmed by the following scenarios:

##### **A. Establishment of a Kurdish State**

The harsh geographical environment surrounding the region clearly unfolds without a shadow of doubt that a Kurdish state would be encircled and suffocated– when it is established. Also, the region's forces would collapse in military battle with the Iraqi federal forces.

However, the possibility to establish a Kurdish state can to some extent be achieved via two conditions. The most important one is having entree to the outside world to break the tough geographical encirclement. However, even if this condition is met and the region is able to improve its institutional, economic, military and political conditions, the emergence of a Kurdish state would still be extremely tough within a range of 5-15 years. The fruition of a Kurdish state is fundamentally linked to complex, contradictory and difficult regional

dimensions, with two relatively strong states in the region (Turkey and Iran) resisting such a state.

The second condition is grounded on the possible regression of Iran and Turkey, permitting a Kurdish state to emerge without much resistance from these states.<sup>10</sup>

### **B. Stepping back from the Dream of a State**

All lines of evidence indicate that the existence of an independent Kurdish state will not be welcomed within its surroundings. Taking into consideration the prosperity enjoyed by the region between 2006-2013, the Kurdish per-capita income reached six times more than the previous rate. It is well realized that the Kurds cannot endure any siege enacted by the neighboring countries. The statements of Kurdish officials post referendum, clearly indicate the possibility to step back from the secession. Masoud Barzani broadcasted that any punishment done by any state should be directed to him and not to the Kurdish people. He also called on the Kurdish officials to sit down at the negotiating table to resolve this issue. Barzani, was willing to 'indirectly' freeze the referendum to avoid a blockade or economic crises in the Kurdish region.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the projected Kurdish state is just around the corner to be ruined. The hoped state within the existing geopolitical realities is a distant dream, especially after the military campaign by Baghdad which seized the vast areas of the 'disputed territories', which had been under the Kurdistan Region's hold since 2003.

This geographical change deprived the region of strategically significant territories. The sequence of this political, military and strategic transformation forced Masoud Barzani to step down and to distribute his powers to Kurdistan's parliament and the Kurdish Prime Minister. Apparently, the Turkish-Iranian role was quite clear during all of what happened, on the back of regional and international support, and via the withdrawal agreements signed with the National Union Party' forces from Kirkuk.

## Endnotes

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