

Kurdish Referendum and its Failure:

By

Aziz Ahmed, Dr.Saeeda, Mengal, Mansoor Baloch

Abstract:

The purpose of this paper to highlight the factors that led to the failure of the recent Kurdish attempt to secede from the Iraqi state in a bid to secure their independence peacefully and lawfully but they failed to achieve their cherished dream due to many reasons. The finding of this paper suggest that the principal reasons behind the failure of Kurdish referendum were the autocratic personality of their leader, Masoud Barzani disunity among their rank and file, the regional countries and their interests and above all the level indifference and lack of support from Washington dug the grave of the Kurdish attempt, the paper also finds that this venture was untimely and will causes the central government to assert power, as well as the relation with turkey and Iran will remain strained. However, it suggests that the relation between the Kurds and the US will remain stable and friendly and any positive, unified future attempt by the Kurds for separation will receive considerable amount of support from Washington.

Keywords: Independent, Autonomous, Referendum, KRG, Region

Introduction:

Today, the Kurds, if not the only group, constitute the greatest majority population group in the world without their own homeland. They are scattered in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Surprising enough, the struggle of the Kurds predates these modern nation-states themselves. Or, to be more precise, the second struggle of the Turkish Kurds and the Turks began during the same time for self-determination CITATION GWY13 \l 1033 (DYER, 2013) . The Kurds and Turks in the decaying Ottoman Empire came together to use their numerical heft to pressure the Empires to liberate them. Similarly, during the peace conferences, the US president Woodrow Wilson also worked for the self-determination of the Kurds living in different territories. He was the only powerful idealist leader who advocated the principle of national self-determination to avoid any new Balkan crisis in the world – a new world of freedom and liberal internationalism spearheaded by the United States of America. His recommendations regarding the

Kurdish question were thoroughly considered and incorporated into the Treaty of Sevres CITATION GWY13 \l 1033 (DYER, 2013) . However, this clause was withdrawn when the Turks rejected this treaty and fought for independence on their own terms. The new treaty (Treaty of Lausanne) was not a one-sided treaty; the Turk leaders were part of the renegotiated treaty and they had promised the Kurds that they will raise the Kurdish question during the talks but went back on their words and betrayed the Kurds.

However, the Kurdish question and the suggestion put forward by Woodrow Wilson did not merely mean the Kurds living in Turkey. It meant the entire Kurdish populace and the historical territory they possessed CITATION Ann14 \l 1033 (Bostanci, 2014) . Similarly, the Turk leaders promised an independent Kurdistan but once they secured the new treaty, they turned their backs on the Kurds and asked them to accept autonomy instead. The Kurds knew that it was mere eyewash and vehemently rejected the offer. The Kurdish apprehensions proved right and the Turks never bestowed them regional autonomy. Instead the Kurdish culture, dress and language, was banned and a process of Turkization began CITATION Sam17 \l 1033 (Bayly, 2017) . However, the Kurds have fiercely resisted such attempts and retained and practiced their culture under all oppressive circumstance with great courage and zeal.

After that chance, the Kurds never got another opportunity or forum to voice their demand on international level. Those treaty days, the post-world war-I, were the final days and then the Kurdish fate was sealed forever. To date, the Kurds remained homeless and divided and dispersed. Though the aspirations and yearnings for independence continue to exist but they are isolated and lack all sort of unification, whether political or religious.

However, this paper is limited to the Iraqi Kurds. It will summarize their struggle within Iraq and explain the reasons why they want to separate from the mainland Iraq as well as the September referendum and its immediate failure.

Background to Iraqi Kurdistan Region:

Iraqi Kurdistan region was invaded by the Arab Muslims in the last quarter of the 7th century. After the Sassanian period, this region came under the rule of the Rashidun Caliphs and subsequently the Umayyads and the Abbassidis respectively. Similarly, the region fell under the control of the Iranian, Turkish and Mongol Empires for years. But all these external empire builders failed to assimilate the Kurds. The former resisted all these forces and retained their unique

culture, which is distinctly non-Arabic, and a sense of identity. Such aspirations provided them with a sense of purpose and goal to achieve CITATION Sam17 \l 1033 (Bayly, 2017) . It also provided the Kurds the required courage and patience to continue to resist the outside forces and maintain their distinct culture and identity.

The fall of the Ottoman Empire after the Great War changed the entire geopolitical scenario. The Iraqi Kurdistan region became part of the areas which were handed over to the British Empire as mandatory regions by the League of Nations. The Iraqi Kurds resisted under the British Empire but failed to achieve independence. After the British were gone, the Kurds were handed over to the Iraqi state, a predominantly Arab state CITATION GWY13 \l 1033 (DYER, 2013) .

Under the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussain, the Kurds were inhumanely treated. Because of the continuous resistance, the Kurds were subjected to brutal torture and state-sponsored genocide. At the same time, the Iraqi Government, using old tactics, displaced the Kurds to minimize the effects of resistance. The oppressive regime of the Saddam Hussain did not earn international rage because the leader of the Western west, the United States of America found the Iraqi dictator beneficial against the Iranian regime CITATION MUR17 \l 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) .

But things changed during the 1990s during the Gulf War. This was the beginning of the post-Cold War era and the US was asserting itself as the sole superpower in the World, especially the Middle East. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the United States formed a military coalition of the Western powers and forced Saddam Hussain out of Kuwait. With this, the good days for the Iraqi Kurds began CITATION JEN13 \l 1033 (KRAJESKI, 2013) . The Kurds have been struggling for freedom for decades but no big power has ever paid attention toward their misery; of course, the United States President, Woodrow Wilson's concerns during the post-War settlements are an exception.

During the Gulf-War, the Kurds proved beneficial for the coalition forces. For this reason the US turned its attention towards the Kurds. Soon the UN imposed a no-fly zone over the Kurdistan region which proved debilitating for the Iraqi central government CITATION Den17 \l 1033 (Ross, 2017) . However, this was a gift from the gap for the poor Kurdish activists. With the help of the US funds and arms, the Kurds build all the required structure a region needed to function without any constraints. The Kurds build their own societal structure and began to live all autonomous of the influence of the Iraqi government CITATION JEN13 \l 1033 (KRAJESKI, 2013) .

Similarly, during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Kurds supported the western powers and earned a great deal of moral and economic support from the European and Western capitals. Such moral, political, diplomatic and economic support aided the Kurds in various ways to stabilize themselves and establish new economic and political structures and build communication and trade infrastructures inside the region CITATION Gal17 \l 1033 (Dalay, 2017) . The Kurds were also supported and facilitated by the Turkish government for material purposes. The Erdogan government facilitated the Kurds with Turkish engineers and CEOs to build big business structures, road links and oil facilities CITATION Ran16 \l 1033 (Alaaldin, 2016) . The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) became a great asset for the Turks – they not only provided the Turkish country with oil and gas but also helped counter the PKK CITATION Ran16 \l 1033 (Alaaldin, 2016) . In 2005, the Iraqi Kurds achieved autonomy and self-rule from the Iraqi Government.

Circumstances were favoring the Kurds all the time, it seemed. After the rise Islamic State (IS), the Kurds became indispensable for the coalition forces. The pictures of the Kurdish forces fighting the fanatic Islamic fundamentalists sent a positive picture of the Kurds across the globe, especially the European and western worlds. The US helped the Kurds militarily and economically to fight to Islamic State CITATION Sam17 \l 1033 (Bayly, 2017) . The Kurds were the only moderate forces in the entire region and an indispensable stabilizing factor in the Middle East. They were also being seen as a counterweight to the rising influence of the Republic of Iran.

The financial and military support from the western and the business links with the Turkish government emboldened the Iraqi Kurds to revisit their desire and demand of complete independence from the Iraqi state. The president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) thought that it was a golden opportunity to call for a referendum and announce independence from the Iraqi oppressive state CITATION Den17 \l 1033 (Ross, 2017) .

The September Referendum:

Barzani and his Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) consulted Trump administration in before announcing the date of referendum. Cognizant of the US support, Barzani thought it better to take his supporters into confidence before taking any concrete step. However, the US was unwilling to respond quickly. At the end, a State department spokesperson announced that “the time was inopportune” and cautioned the Kurdish leader to refrain from taking such a step. But Barzani did not cave in. Analysts from the region argue that Barzani

wanted to consolidate his hold on power CITATION Gal17 \ 1033 (Dalay, 2017) .

The referendum took place on 25 September and the Kurds overwhelming voted in favor of independence. However, the regional and international powers did not welcome the move. They warned that the Kurdish referendum may lead to further disturbance in the region. The foreign ministers of Iran, Turkey and Iraq released a joint statement against the Kurdish Regional Government actions CITATION She17 \ 1033 (Raj, 2017) . And the Turkish government warned of severe consequences. So was the mood the central Iraqi government. Only the Israeli government supported the Kurdish referendum CITATION MUR17 \ 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) .

The Iraqi government warned the KRG of military action over the disputed areas. Following the referendum, the central government moved against the Kurds. Backed by Iran and the Shiite militias, the Iraqi military marched toward the oil-rich Kirkuk region and occupied it CITATION MUR17 \ 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) . The US, though against the rising influence of Iran in the region, stood unstirred CITATION Den17 \ 1033 (Ross, 2017) . The Kurds left to hold on their own. Finding themselves in between a rock and hard place, the Peshmarga did not even put up a fight and withdrew. Not only Kirkuk, the KRG lost the control of many border crossings it has previously controlled. The KRG was in trouble. For taking over the crossings, the Iraqi forces needed the support of Turkish forces which was provided easily, as Turkey was equally against the decision of the KRG CITATION MUR17 \ 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) .

Following such defeat and defame, surprising all, Barzani resigned and transferred his powers to the regional government CITATION Gal17 \ 1033 (Dalay, 2017) . No Kurdish leader has ever resigned from power in this way. The resignation of Barzani seems to be welcomed with silent celebrations in Turkey, Iran and the US. But wait, the Kurdish leader has not left entirely; he has merely handed over power to his family CITATION MUR17 \ 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) .

Why the Referendum Failed?

The foremost reason behind the failure of the Kurdish referendum is that it was not wholly supported by the Kurdish political parties. This referendum was the brainchild of Barzani; he has not consulted other Kurdish leaders, especially the opposition, the Talabani group. Neither the PUK nor the Talabani family supported the referendum CITATION MUR17 \ 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) . Apart from this, the Kurdistan region was highly factionalized when the referendum

was going to be held, all because of Barzani's policies. He had excluded everyone. Secondly, there were some disputed regions under the Peshmerga which provided an excuse to the Iraqi government and the regional countries to delegitimize the referendum CITATION Zai17 \l 1033 (al-Ali, 2017) . However, the Gorran openly opposed the referendum. Moreover, the relations between PUK-Gorran were also marked with opposition and ill-will. Just before the referendum, Barzani banned the speaker of the parliament from entering the Capital. The reason behind this tussle was that they were set to oppose Barzani's term during the parliamentary session. All these circumstances contributed to the failure of the referendum CITATION Gal17 \l 1033 (Dalay, 2017) .

Similarly, the Kurds, including the armed forces, were not much happy with Barzani for two reasons. One, Barzani was helped brought to power by the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussain, someone who gassed thousands of Kurds in Halepec in 1988 CITATION MUR17 \l 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) . Two, during the Kurdish civil war when the Peshmerga removed Barzani from power, he asked for Saddam's help. The forces of Saddam slaughtered thousands of the Kurdish forces to restore Barzani to power. Such actions had left Barzani highly controversial in the Kurdistan region as a whole. This was obvious during the Iran-supported militia capture of Kirkuk, home to Turkomen, Arabs and Christians CITATION Sam17 \l 1033 (Bayly, 2017) .

Second, the Kurdish leader made a strategic blunder, says Dennis Ross, therefore, the Trump administration left them in the limbo. He argues that Trump tried to convince Barzani, the Kurdish leader but he did not listen CITATION Gal17 \l 1033 (Dalay, 2017) . The referendum was ill-advised, fated to fail. Also, the time was inopportune. Despite the geopolitical reasons, the Kurds feel that "America's word is no good". They also believe that the US sacrificed its long term partners for its so-called national interest; the Russians are still standing by Assad, but Americans, as usual, left the Kurds in the lurch CITATION Den17 \l 1033 (Ross, 2017) .

Third, the referendum was held in such a time that it failed to grab the attention of international community. Focus of the international actors as well as civic workers was fixed on the Islamic State. The Kurdish referendum hardly attracted any attention. Meanwhile, the international society considered the action of the Kurdistan Regional Government a distracting act and disregarded it, all against the ambitions and wishes of the Kurds. However, the reality was something else. The Kurdish leaders did not think that his will be taken as a distracting action. He considered the time better for the referendum because the Iraqi

government was not willing to negotiate on key issues. At the same time, the Kurds thought that the international community will extend support to their desires, as the Kurds have recently supported the European and western powers to overcome the militant Islamic group of IS. But they were cornered, their sacrifices were ignored. Moreover, the international society, regimes and actors blamed them for diverting attention from the Islamic State and causing troubles in the volatile region, which, of course, was not the aim of the Iraqi Kurds. Their desire and action was genuine. It was not a new tactic but a historical dream and for which they have sacrificed a lot more.

Finally, the regional countries immediately opposed the move. Opposition from the countries where Kurds live was obviously due to fears; they are afraid that an independent Kurdistan in Iraq might provide their own Kurdish population with an incentive and embolden them to launch a new wave of resistance against their respective governments, despite the fact that the Iraqi Kurds never used any pan-Kurdish ideas during the entire referendum campaign. And it is hard to believe that an independent Kurdistan in the region was going to support the Kurds else. Though these states overreacted but their reaction did blow the Kurdish independence dreams. It is speculated that the opposition from Turkish authorities castrated Barzani. It is bolstered by the fact that the Kurd prime minister has been trying to engage Erdogan but the later is unwilling to sit with him, because he is not his equal, the Turkish leader is reported to have said.

The Future:

After the referendum, the future of the Iraqi Kurdistan seems to be distressing for the Kurds. So far, this action has infuriated the central Iraqi government but in the future it may cause divisions among the Kurds. Also, the consequences of the referendum will significantly impact the relations with the regional governments like Turkey and Iran. However, the failure of the referendum might not invite any role from Israel; if ever such a thing happens, it will prove disastrous for the Middle Eastern region.

The central government has issued a notice to cut the share of the Iraqi Kurdistan region in the 2018 budget, seems to be a move to punish the Kurds for the referendum on independence CITATION Qan17 \l 1033 (Qantara, 2017) . However, such a move may further damage the compromise and relationship between Baghdad and Erbil, causing new tensions for the country. The relations are already strained after the central government's military operation in the Kirkuk region. According to reports the share of the region will be 12.6 from 17, a significant cut which will cause unknowable constraints. This will

significantly undermine the political and economic situation in the Kurdistan region.

It is argued that the political scenario in the region is dark and it may lead to emergence of two equally autonomous Kurdish regions in northern Iraq – one under Barzani and KDP in Erbil and the other under PUK, based in Sulaymaniyah CITATION MUR17 \l 1033 (SOFUOGLU, 2017) . Though such a scenario is not new to the region but reversal of political system might damage the gains the Kurds have achieved. Two governments in the region would cause serious problems, overwhelmingly related to natural resources and revenue sharing.

However, the consequences of the referendum might not impact the relations between the KRG and the United States. Just after the resignation of Barzani, the one man authoritarian leader, the US officials announced a press release welcoming his resignation. It shows that the US will support any future Kurdish independence aspiration only when it is forwarded and campaigned for by a mature Kurdish leader enjoying the support of the entire Kurdish population. Barzani was not only controversial inside the Kurdish populace but he was also seen with suspicion by the US authorities. It is argued that the US felt that the Kurd leader was overexploiting the relationship in a bid to consolidate his own power in the region; therefore, the US did not embrace his call for referendum.

Conclusion:

The Iraqi Kurds have gained self-rule in 2005 after the Iraqi invasion of 2003 by the US and its willing few. In a short time, the Kurds, with financial and diplomatic support of the US, established a functioning political and administrative system. Establishing connections with the Turkish government, the Kurds increased their trading opportunities and built a working societal set-up of their own where they could live according to their own customs and cultures. However, emboldened by the turn of circumstances, the ambitious Kurd leader, Barzani thought it was time to end the region's relation with the Iraqi state. His plans, ill-devised to say the least, backfired and a September 25 referendum earned mammoth opposition both from foes and friends and miserably failed. Several factors came together to dash the Kurdish aspirations for independence. They included the overarching and authoritarian personality of Barzani, regional pressure, especially from Iraq, Turkey and Iran, lack of support from the Kurdish friends like the United States and Europe, lack of interest from the international community and the international regimes. All these factors came together to stop the Kurdish dream from materializing. Certainly the referendum will

impact the future of the Kurds. Such implications will be divisions among the Kurds, emergence of two autonomous regions in the Kurdish region and certain restraints from the central government. The central government has already announced budget cuts for the region. However, the relations between the United States and the Kurdistan Regional Government will remain friendly and the US may extend support to any unified Kurdish struggle headed by a mature and popular Kurdish leader.

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