

AN INDEPENDENT KURDISTAN?

The World Says Nyet!

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"I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against the uncivilized tribes... it would spread a lively terror."

Winston Churchill upon a Kurdish uprising in Iraq of the 1920s

On September 25, during a referendum, ninety three percent of the population of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan voted for independence.

In a confused world wracked by fears of nuclear war, and accelerating crippling economic and political crises, the Kurdish referendum (and the Kurds) became immediately a welcome punching bag for high and low.

From Baghdad, Ankara, and Teheran to Washington, Ottawa, and London reactions to the prospect of Kurdish independence ranged from open threats of war and annihilation to ice-cold "diplomatic" rebuffs stressing the "inviolability and sovereignty" of the disaster zone still being called "Iraq" in deference to the British post-WWI creation then named the British Mandate of Mesopotamia.

Massoud Barzani, Kurdistan's president who pushed for the referendum, has been telling Western journalists that the vote for independence is not the anteroom to immediate statehood but, rather, the launching pad for negotiations toward that ultimate goal to be reached at some future time.

Yet, despite a long history of the Kurds being abandoned repeatedly by well-wishers and proponents of self-determination, Barzani and his supporters failed to assess properly four pivotal elements when attempting to read the international situation:

- FIRST, they failed to estimate accurately the depth of feeling in the West *against the nation state* best demonstrated currently by the determined and relentless assault upon national sovereignty by the “greatest democratic experiment of all time,” the European (dis)Union.
- SECOND, in order to negotiate you need partners willing to do so—and, right now, the Kurds have none;
- THIRD, they repeated the mistake of believing that fighting and bleeding on the “right side” will win them the support necessary to launch their own state, and
- FOURTH, they placed too much confidence on the West’s pronouncements in support of representative democracy as the one and only system of political organization worth defending at all costs.

Kurdish assessments, despite the Kurds’ long and brutal experience with those aiming to exterminate them, also failed to see the obvious that was coming: the mere idea of Kurdish statehood immediately pushed together Erdogan, Turkey’s neo-sultan, Haider al-Abadi, Iraq’s shaky prime minister only recently smacked and humiliated by Ankara, and the Iranian mullahs whose theocratic regime maintains a dim view of both Iraq and Turkey now gingerly moving to partner with Teheran to crush the Kurds.

This hasty partnership of convenience is already hard at work to browbeat Iraqi Kurdistan. Military forces from Turkey and Iraq, as recently as this past summer menacing each other on the Turkey-Iraq border, are conducting joint training exercises along the same frontier to demonstrate how easy it is to invade Barzani’s territory.

Erdogan has threatened “to starve” the Kurds and interrupt their oil exports (the only pipeline capable of carrying Kurdish oil abroad passes through Turkey). “They are not forming an independent state, they are opening a wound in the region to twist the knife in,” the neo-sultan [announced](#) during a speech in eastern Turkey.

Bagdad has imposed an air embargo on Erbil cutting the Kurds connection to the world by plane. And the mullahs are making threatening noises and [mobilize](#) their collaborators inside Iraq to seize the oil-rich Kirkuk region from Barzani’s “separatists.”

Against this backdrop, the coup de grace to the referendum was delivered by the United States. In a terse statement, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [said](#) “The vote and the results lack legitimacy and we continue to support a united, federal, democratic and prosperous Iraq.” This blunt rejection was couched on a call to Baghdad “to reject threats or even allusion to possible use of force [against the Kurds].”

A Canadian [news story](#) on the referendum perfectly summarized the present Western attitude toward *anyone merely thinking* along Kurdish lines:

As a rule, ethnic nationhood is a terrible idea – an idea that, after it sprang into popularity in the late 19th century, was responsible for many of the worst atrocities and horrors of the 20th. Because no territory has ever been truly multi-ethnic, nationhood tends to multiply, rather than end, the violent repression of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. And it tends to press its populations into homogeneity and away from pluralism, the opposite of what makes nations succeed.

Further down, however, the same story offers an important caveat of this absolute rule of “ethnic nationhood is a terrible idea.”

There are exceptions to the rule – cases where the physical and political threat to a minority group is so devastating and total and potentially genocidal that the only viable solution is the creation of a new state, in which they are a majority. Ethnic states have become tragic necessities exactly three times in history: The creation of Armenia in 1918, of Israel in 1948 and of Kosovo between 1999 and 2008.

But the Kurds,

--having suffered immense mistreatment and genocidal attacks beginning in the 19th century;

-- And being presently exposed to who knows what terrible predicament, as the Assad regime appears to prevail, and Erdogan braces for total war against them,

-- are *prominently qualified* to seek their own state because of *exactly yet another “tragic necessity” about to happen.*

The only current hope for Iraqi Kurdistan rests with the eternal Turkish-Iranian rivalry that remains beyond the influence of temporary expediencies like the reluctant convergence because of the referendum.

If, by some shrewd device, Barzani succeeds in kindling this rivalry in a manner that helps to augment mutual suspicion and fear between Ankara and Teheran, as they both plan ways “to snuff out” the Kurdish “threat,” then Erbil could live to fight another day. And that the current “rapprochement” between Ankara and Baghdad suffers from deep suspicion, separating Sunni Erdogan from Baghdad’s Shiites, offers some additional hope.

The ultimate destiny of the Kurds, however, rests with the U.S. and Russia. Despite Tillerson’s cold shoulder, it would be an extraordinary American maneuver to allow the disintegration of the three Kurdish governorates, enjoying full autonomy for a quarter century in northern Iraq, under military attack.

The mere thought of such an event brewing could also mobilize Israel despite PM Netanyahu’s [“muzzling”](#) Israeli government officials regarding the referendum. In fact, Erdogan has already [accused](#) Israel of pushing the Kurds to seek independence—and of Erbil being “hand-in-hand together” with Mossad. None of the Middle East autocrats wishes to see Israel actively becoming involved in the Kurdish turmoil.

Russia, meantime, has emerged as Iraqi Kurdistan’s [major investor](#) having spent an estimated minimum of \$4 billion in oil and natural gas projects already—when American companies retreat out of an “abundance of caution.” Beyond oil, Moscow seeks to expand its political influence in the region by way of its commanding presence in Syria. Ever since the collapse of “socialism in one country,” the Russian government has moved away from the Soviet practice of sinking permanent roots in client states and assuming significant and fixed economic burdens. Vladimir Putin’s strategy, as demonstrated in Syria, is much more innovative and pivots on “targets of opportunity” whose control allows Russia to be flexible in its commitments and ready to exploit quickly any opening that might arise in a given situation.

Putin, for example, has moved boldly to exploit his “special relationship” with Erdogan to [reach an agreement](#) on a Syria “de-escalation zone” during a meeting with the Turkish strongman in Ankara. Such an apparently harmonious coexistence with the Turks (hardly historical friends of Russia) should be expected to influence Erdogan’s taste for open threats of war. The last thing Moscow desires in the devil’s triangle of Syria-Iraq-Iran is to see a Turkish cross-border invasion.

In similar fashion the Russian president pursues an elaborate diplomatic waltz with the Iranian mullahs, who also appear satisfied with Moscow’s involvement in Syria, so far. But Teheran, just to make sure, had the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah terror group [announce](#) that any Kurdish attempt at independence means “taking the region to internal wars whose end and time frame is known only to God.”

Predictably then, the Russian foreign ministry [announced](#) after the referendum that the Russian Federation maintains an “unwavering commitment to the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the friendly Iraq and other Middle Eastern states.”

On November 1st Iraqi Kurds will be going again to the ballot box, this time to elect a new government and president. Barzani won’t be running for re-election and there are already [21 political parties](#) registered to participate in the vote. The new administration will have its plate full: Kurdistan’s economy is in [shambles](#), political divisions are deep, and, in true Middle East fashion, each chieftain in the land has his own strong opinion on how to pursue the next step. Perhaps a good start for the Kurdish day after, therefore, would be to first seek a sturdy *common* approach to the ultimate goal and then take it from there.