

# KURDISTAN AND ITS REFERENDUM

Walter Posch  
National Defence Academy, Vienna

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On September 25, 2017, Kurdistan will hold a referendum on its independence, which most likely will result overwhelmingly in favour of an independent state of Kurdistan. This is not surprising. Kurdish aspirations have been around for a good century and a similar referendum was held as recently as 2005 with 98% of the eligible vote supporting the region's independence from Iraq. Thus the question arises, why nowadays is a second referendum needed?

The answer to this question raises a series of unresolved problems and potential troubles ahead, beginning immediately after the referendum, namely with inner-Kurdish rivalry and geostrategy. But it also relates to a series of intertwined events in the region where Kurdish organizations of different ideological backgrounds play an important role. After all, Kurds are less unified than is usually presented.

To begin with, the Kurds are neither a compact ethno-linguistic group nor religiously unified. This means that there are several cultures under a Kurdish roof stretching over the territories of several nation states.<sup>1</sup> All of these cultures affect political choices and perceptions. There exists, however, a Kurdish public sphere, which we understand as the political debate conducted in Kurdish media outlets—such as via the Internet or through TV stations—within the Kurdish communities residing both in the relevant nation states as well as in the diaspora.<sup>2</sup> This public sphere is important because it generates political input and has proven to be able to shape the discourse on Kurds and Kurdistan especially in Europe and increasingly also in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Yet the most important distinction is not among language groups, but among political ideologies.<sup>3</sup> There are three ideological trends to be distinguished: revolutionary communist, nationalist, and

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1. On Kurdish languages see Rüdiger Schmitt, *Die iranischen Sprachen in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Wiesbaden 2000, S. 76-79; Joyce Blau, "Le Kurde," in: *Compendium Linguarum Iranicarum (=CLI)*, edited by Rüdiger Schmitt, Wiesbaden 1989, S. 327-335; Jaffer Sheikholeslami, "The language varieties of the Kurds," in: Wolfgang Taucher, Mathias Vogl and Peter Webinger (eds): *The Kurds: History, Religion, Language, Politics*, Vienna 2015, pp. 29-50.

2. On the importance of the media and public space for identity formation see Cheko H. Gülsen, *The Kurds. An imaginary nation? Kirmanc identity and Medya-TV*, (Dersim Times) Utrecht 2006.

3. The best study on Kurdish national identity and the relationship between state power and the Kurdish minorities is still Hamit Bozarslan, *La question Kurde. États et minorités au Moyen-Orient*, Paris 1997; On *kurdayeti* see Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State. Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*, Syracuse 2005, on Kurdish unity in spite of diversity see Ofra Bengio, "Separated but Connected: The Synergic Effects in the Kurdish Sub-System," in: Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (eds.), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London, pp. 77-92.

Islamist.<sup>4</sup> Until now the Islamists have not generated their own vision of the future of Kurdistan, they are either integrated in the political process with other Kurds—as is the case in the Kurdistan Region—or cooperate with other Islamists against secular forces. In any case they bring their Islamist-Sunni identity to the forefront. Even so, the fusion of Kurdish identity with political Islam, often in a very radical form, is on the rise and may become more significant in the next generation.

Thus, for the time being, the nationalists and the revolutionaries remain the dominant drivers of the political process, both within the Kurdish public sphere and towards the international community. But contrary to the expectations of the Kurdish public sphere, both currents are at odds with one another (to put it mildly), and actually they are mutually exclusive.

At present, the revolutionary currents only remaining representative is the new PKK and its many civilian and military structures (KCK, HPG, PYD, YPG, PJAK, PCDK, HRK, KNK, CDK, etc.). Outwardly, the PKK looks like a framework organization covering many independent units, in reality the political centers in Qandil and Zab<sup>5</sup> know very well how to exert control whilst at the same time allowing a high degree of regionalized and localized autonomous decision making.<sup>6</sup> After having fought a bloody insurgency in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s, the organization had taken serious blows, both on the battlefield, and in losing Syrian support, which ended with the incarceration of party leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. Ever since, he has been confined to Imrali prison near Istanbul, a fact that did not impede him from ordering a total restructuring and expansion of the organization. According to Öcalan's own testimony, this became necessary as of 2003 when the US changed the balance of power in the Middle East by upending the powerful nation state of Iraq, opening up historic chances for the Kurds. As a consequence, PKK branches for Iran and Syria were established. The ultimate goal of the new PKK was—and still is—to create autonomous regions with local parliaments dominated GDR-style by the PKK and its associates in all parts of Kurdistan. Thus, there would be no need for a Kurdish nation state, as nation states are allegedly concepts of yesterday anyway. No separation from existing nation states is therefore needed, but rather their “democratization”—which in PKK slang translates into the establishment of a PKK dominated “democratic autonomy“ in the Kurdish areas.

A cornerstone of this policy was established during the peace process in Turkey. This is not the place to go into the details of why the peace process failed, but one contributing factor was that in fact the PKK—meaning, Öcalan in Imrali prison and the Guerilla leadership in Qandil and Zab—never did allow the HDP, a left leaning democratic pro-Kurdish party with no organizational ties

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4. See Walter Posch, „Back to the Mountains? *Zenith*, special number 2015, pp. 128-133.

5. The political centre is located in some villages in Qandil mountains between Raniyah and the Iranian border, the military command is located in the Zab river valley just across Cukurca in Turkey.

6. On the PKK and its many civilian structures see my analysis here Walter Posch, “Die neue PKK: Zwischen Extremismus, politischer Gewalt und strategischen Herausforderungen,” (part 1) *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, 2/2016, pp. 139-155 and idem “Die neue PKK: Zwischen Extremismus, politischer Gewalt und strategischen Herausforderungen,” (part 2) *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift*, 3/2016, pp. 295-311 a shorter version of these two papers has been published at Walter Posch, “The changing faces of the PKK,” in Wolfgang Taucher, Mathias Vogl and Peter Webinger (eds): *The Kurds: History, Religion, Language, Politics*, Vienna 2015, pp. 87-110; for a different take on the PKK see Joost Jongerden, “The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK): Radical Democracy and the Right to Self-Determination beyond the Nation State,” Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (editors), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London, pp. 245-248.

to the PKK, to drive the political process.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the HDP and its charismatic leader Salahettin Demirtaş were literally squeezed between political hostility on the part of the Turks, and Öcalan's and Qandil's permanent tug of war on how to proceed. Öcalan had only one card to play in the peace negotiations, and that was to actually proclaim and order a ceasefire, whereas Qandil could only call for a continuation of military action, if they wanted to remain a force on their own. As a matter of fact, once the peace negotiations started to mature, and steps and conditions of its implementation were about to be debated, neither Öcalan nor Qandil were willing to allow the HDP to play the main role. By 2013, the breakdown was imminent. Then, a youth organization affiliated to the PKK started to erect barricades and build up new military units under the guidelines of experienced guerilla leaders in places like Diyarbakir and Cizre. Their actions were partially inspired from the situation in Syria where PKK-aligned forces started to control the Kurdish inhabited regions contradicting Turkey's political and military plans for Syria. Therefore, developments in Syria became more relevant to Turkey's domestic politics than it was the case before and affected the peace process negatively *as public support for it diminished*. As a result Erdogan allowed the process to collapse and allowed his far rightwing allies within the Turkish army and paramilitaries to actually bring down all resistance by military means. A timely coup d'état in 2016 gave him the pretext to close down political life, which included a crackdown on the HDP, although the party had nothing to do with the coup but tried its best to continue peace negotiations and clearly distanced itself from the disastrous policies of the PKK.

One reason why the PKK acted as it did was because the party saw its policies vindicated in Syria. Benefitting from a besieged government in Damascus, the Syrian branch—PYD—and the YPG military unit were able to reassert their grip on the Kurdish inhabited cantons, successfully sidelining the Baath party and actually neutralizing all other opposition parties, especially the Syrian branch of Barzani's KDP.<sup>8</sup> By 2014, the YPG was able to repel the onslaught of the Islamic State against their stronghold in Kobane, and a few months later it was Syrian YPG fighters and troops from the PKK's main military force, the HPG, that were able to cover the mass flight of the beleaguered Yazidis from the Sinjar mountains to safety.

Impressed by the PKK fighters' tenacity, and disappointed by its allies—namely the lack of Turkish cooperation against IS/DA'ESH and the unsatisfactory military performance of KDP-led forces in Iraq—the US military started to cooperate with YPG forces in Syria. This is, in itself, rather odd given the PKK's anti-imperialist ideology, coupled with the fact that US diplomacy spent decades of lobbying in European capitals to list all branches of the PKK as terrorists. This cooperation continues, and the YPG and its Arab partners (Syrian Democratic Forces) are a key component of the effort to reclaim the Euphrates valley back from IS. Naturally, Turkey was alarmed and intervened in northern Syria to prevent the Afrin canton from being connected to the rest of the Kurdish controlled region in northern Syria (Rojava). Ever since, a complicated mechanism between Russia, the United States, and Turkey has been put in place to keep the situation from spiraling out of control.

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7. See this report of the Human Rights' Society Mazlum-Der, *Çözüm Süreçinden Çatışma Sürecine Mazlum-Der'in Şahitliği*, (From the negotiations to confrontation, the Mazlum-Der Testimony), Ankara March 2016; The protocols of the negotiations have been published in Germany see Abdullah Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşama İnşa, -İmralı Notları*, (Democratic liberation and the creation of a free life, the Imrali notes), Neuss am Rhein 2015.

8. On Syria see Harriet Allsopp, "Kurdish Political Parties and the Syrian Uprising," Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (editors), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London, pp. 289-306.

Yet another consequence of the dramatic events unfolding in 2014 is the ongoing establishment of a PKK stronghold in the Sinjar mountains, and the creation of a new military unit recruited exclusively from local Yazidis, bringing the PKK once again into direct competition with Barzani's KDP. Previously, the KDP had the border between the Syrian and the Iraqi Kurdish enclaves closed to put economic pressure on Rojava. This was in part a reaction to the limitations put on KDP supporters in Syria on behalf of the PYD, but it was also a means of strangling Rojava economically in order to prevent it from becoming a role model outshining the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. The open hatred between Öcalan and Barzani and the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan needs good relations with Turkey for economic reasons were factors contributing to this decision.

Sinjar is part of the so-called contested areas that are inhabited by Kurds, but not formally attached to Kurdistan, and therefore contested between Arbil and Baghdad. In itself this contest is nothing new, but goes back as early as the 1950s to the origins of the debate on Kurdish autonomy.<sup>9</sup> It was, however, overshadowed by the question of Kirkuk, and therefore treated as a secondary problem, if it was debated at all. Yet with the ascent of DA'ESH,<sup>10</sup> and the subsequent presence of PKK forces in Mount Sinjar, it became logical for Baghdad to revive a policy Saddam Hussein had tried before: namely, to play the PKK against the KDP. It is in this context that the offer of the newly established Peoples Mobilization Units (PMU or Hashd al-Shaabi) to pay for the PKKs Yazidi units makes perfectly sense. As seen from Arbil, the nightmare scenario is a military liaison between the PKK and PMU, which might in turn provide Turkey with an excuse to intervene. But more importantly, such a liaison weakens Arbil's claim over a strategically important part of the contested areas.

The decision to push forward with the referendum relates to an important part to the increased status and respect the PKK enjoys among the Kurds. Because after years of decline, recruitment numbers for the guerilla are high, its international status especially among the left has increased, and financial donations are up, thus strengthening all branches of the PKK. Another reason, however, is the political deadlock in Kurdistan itself. Relations between the dominant KDP and its competitors, PUK and Gorran, have tensed as the political process had stalled in the last years, and so has the nation-building project. For instance, there is still no unified Peshmerga army or common intelligence apparatus. Rather, the heritage of party militias is still the dominating feature, although admittedly progress has been made thanks to military training missions provided by the United States and some European nations.

This said, from an inner Kurdish perspective, the process towards the referendum has already shown positive results. At least political parties have started to talk to one another again, and the common goal of working for national independence has had a positive impact on the political atmosphere in the country. It has also energized some Turkish Kurds in the North, where the KDP Bakur was reestablished under the seasoned Kurdish politician Sertac Bucak, which one could read as an indication that Turkey might in fact not be that hostile to an independent Kurdi-

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9. For a historic overview of Iraqi-Kurdish autonomy see Walter Posch and Nathan Browne, *Kurdische Unabhängigkeitsbestrebungen und die Irakische Verfassung*, Vienna 2004 a more actual account is Francis Owtram, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Federal Constitution: A Perimeter Plinth of State Territorial Integrity or a Stepping Stone to Secession," Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (editors), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London 2017, pp. 521-531.

10. On the confrontation with ISIS/DA'ESH see Benjamin Isakhan, "The Iraqi Kurdish Response to the Islamic State: Political leverage in Time of Crisis," Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (editors), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London 2017, pp. 437-448.

stan given its strained relations to a Shiite-dominated Baghdad.

But the big question will arise the day after the referendum votes are counted: will the KRG indeed declare independence or not? If it does not, disappointment will be palpable and Barzani's reputation will suffer, even if he is able to use the referendum's outcome as a bargaining tool with Baghdad around the issue of contested regions like Kirkuk and Sinjar. If, on the other hand, Arbil does indeed declare independence, a series of strategic inconveniences will follow.

To begin with, Kurdistan's traditional friends most certainly will not support independence. Many European countries including great powers like the United Kingdom, but also Spain, will be against Kurdish independence to avoid lending credence to secessionist tendencies in their own countries. The position of the United States on Kurdish independence is far from clear. On the one hand, there is a vocal minority in Washington that could imagine an independent Kurdistan in order to put pressure on Iran, but on the other hand, until now the Trump administration has not taken any policy preparations to actually support Kurdish independence (such as diplomatic, political, economic, and military measures). This is not even broaching the notion of possible repercussions for the relationship between Washington and Baghdad. Also, the short remarks from Riyadh to support Kurdistan's independence should be taken with a grain of salt. After all, how could Saudi Arabia, until recently not a friend of the Kurds, actually support Kurdistan when push comes to shove? Other powers such as France, Russia, and Israel have apparently taken a "wait and see" approach, although they may not object to the outcome and even declare their sympathies with the Kurds but ultimately shy away from diplomatic recognition.

The one power that has clearly spoken against Kurdish independence is Iran, where the Ruhani government has undertaken a delicate balancing act towards the devolution of powers in favor of Iran's provinces, and where the question of Kurdish language instruction and the amelioration of the Sunni-Shii relationship play important roles.<sup>11</sup> An independent Kurdistan would potentially further energize Iran's ethnicities, and entice not only the Kurds to ratchet up their demands. The Iranians also feel betrayed by Barzani, whom they accuse of ingratitude, as according to their reading of events, it was their military support in 2014 and not the West's that actually saved Arbil from being conquered by the Islamic State. Let alone the fact that Kurdish leaders spent many years in Iranian exile. An economic blockade, strong support for Baghdad, and the increased activities of Iranian intelligence in Kurdistan are the least Arbil has to expect from Tehran, even if outright military intervention seems unlikely if we measure Tehran by its behavior towards crisis in the neighborhood.

A realistic post IS/DA'ESH scenario for Iraqi Kurdistan could therefore be that the Iraqi government would militarily intervene in all contested areas the KRG covets for Kurdistan, and to make securing national Iraqi unity a basis for Iraqi/Arab nationalism, the main narrative to legitimize itself in the eyes of the Iraqi Arab Sunnis. This all would happen with active Iranian support. As a consequence it also would put the United States in the delicate position of deciding whether to support the Kurds, or to let the Iraqis have their way—not that United States intelligence, diplomacy, or military in Iraq were unable to define the outcome of such a confrontation, as they certainly have intimate knowledge of the country and a supreme capability to shape events to their liking. Yet timing might be a key issue, and the Presidential tweets influencing the direction of

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11. See Walter Posch, "Fellow Aryans and Muslim Brothers: Iranian narratives on the Kurds," Gareth Stansfield and Mohammad Shareef (editors), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, London 2017, pp. 331-354, esp. p. 349ff.

US policy regarding Kurdistan independence and/or Iraqi unity may become untimely and be imprecise.

Regardless of whether Arbil will declare independence or not, the Kurdish issue will not go away—neither will the PKK. That organization has already spoken out against Kurdish independence using arguments Öcalan had already uttered in the early 2000s: a Kurdish nation state is too weak and would be on the prey of its neighbors anyway, its elites are corrupt and do not represent the will of the people.<sup>12</sup> Yet this goes against the great sympathies for Kurdish independence by its own people. Furthermore, the PKK also has to decide which direction to go. On the one hand, part of the guerilla are located in Iran and regularly strike against Iranian security forces, whilst at the same time, in Syria, it is a US ally that performs best on the battlefield. This helps endear the organization in US circles, which usually abhor third world revolutionary movements. On the other hand, the organization has a tacit understanding with Tehran's main ally in the region—the *Syrian regime*—which is natural, given the hostility of Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan towards Rojava. For similar reasons, PKK relations with Baghdad are not hostile at all.

In other words, almost all actors on the ground are keeping Humpty Dumpty on the wall and hedge their bets by not making final decisions on their strategic partners or future courses of action. We shall therefore expect further escalation after IS/DA'ESH has been defeated militarily and a new situation emerges. There is no guarantee that Kurds would not become victims of the shifting geopolitical sands yet again.

Partially, this however, is also the result of their own actions: In keeping up the PKK-KDP hostility they might strengthen their leadership cliques and individual roles, while continuing to weaken a common Kurdish position—a fact neither a referendum nor a declaration of independence will remedy. Most likely *kurdayeti* will remain a dream for the next generation of Kurds.

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12. Posch, "Changing Faces," p. 92f.