

In Support of an Independent Kurdistan

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Abstract

Since the end of World War I, ethnic Kurds have been denied a sovereign, independent state despite repeated assistance provided to the West. Because of this, and features of their state such as promotion of democratic values, the United States should actively support an independent Kurdistan from a minimum of the territory held in Iraq to as large as the total territory which could have been gained under the referendum promised in the Treaty of Sevres. This paper examines first the historic background since 1921 which has led to how the situation currently stands. Next, it examines the aspects of an independent Kurdistan which would be beneficial to the United States and Western Society at large. These are shown through the political and economic work that has been undertaken in Kurdish territory in Northern Iraq. Finally, it is worth considering possible issues behind support of such a policy for the United States and thus the major issues are laid out for consideration. While no decision has been made, there is certainly room for movement, especially with the election of a new Biden administration. When discussing improving relations with United States allies, it bears considering a shift in view of the Middle East to bring the Kurds into the fold of close U.S. allies.

The area that would make up an independent state of Kurdistan lays across four countries: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Today, there are approximately 30 million Kurds throughout the world (The Kurdish Project) with many of them living outside of this area. Because of this, the Kurds are one of the largest, stateless, ethnic groups in the world. The United States should support an independent Kurdistan despite the opposition from other countries in the region due to the economic, security, and strategic benefits which could be gained subsequently. Kurdistan's benefit as an economic partner is primarily based in the energy sector with their large oil reserves. They are currently renovating their economy away from one that is oil-based to one that includes an emerging private sector and use of the vast quantities of arable land, which was overtaken by Saddam Hussein's urbanization project.

On the security front, the Kurds have fought alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and have been a vital ally in the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) because of the territory they have held and the support they have provided. They were the first ethnic group to react and fight against ISIL and were a necessary partner. Finally, the Kurds can help the United States reach its strategic goals of promoting democratic goals and norms throughout the region both by example and as a close ally of Israel. The Kurds have also shown their ability to do this through a history of following democratic norms and promoting diversity within their own territory.

History of Kurdistan from the end of WWI - Present

Following World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the Treaty of Sevres was negotiated to split up the Middle East (Sansal). In this Treaty, the Kurds were promised a referendum to determine whether or not to create an independent Kurdistan under the British sphere of influence. However, three years later nationalists overthrew the Sultan of Turkey. The new Turkish government did not recognize the Treaty of Sevres and renegotiated it to become the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 which denied a Kurdish homeland.

Despite the setback in efforts to create a Kurdish state, resistance groups attempted to make progress. General Mullah Mustafa Barzani led most of these revolutionary attempts until his death in 1979. His first attempt was in 1943 when he attempted to fight the Iraqi government with a small force. After this failed, in 1945 he fled to the Kurdish Mahabad Republic in Iran. In large part due to support from the USSR, the Kurds were able to successfully fight the Iraqi government. In the end, support was receded from the Kurds and the Iranian government attacked Barzani and his forces, ending this stage of resistance. Barzani returned to Iraq in 1958 when the Free Officers, an underground military organization, overthrew the monarchy and established a new government that recognized Kurdish national rights. Despite this, the KDP, or Kurdistan Democratic Party, now led by Barzani, staged a revolt against the new government in 1961 with the assistance of local tribal groups. The government eventually put down the revolt and dissolved the KDP, but offered an autonomy agreement in 1970. This agreement was not seen as providing enough authority to the KDP, and ultimately resulted in a final failed revolt by General Barzani. In this revolt, the United States provided weapons to the Kurds in hope that they would defeat Iraq, but would not take an official stance (Smith). In 1975, the US broke off all support for the Kurdish rebels after the Algiers Agreement between Iraq and Iran because they did not view Iraq to be as large of a threat. Thus, the Iraqi Army pushed the Kurds back and the United States allowed General Barzani to live out his final days in the U.S.

In the 1980's, the KDP and another Kurdish rebel groups, called the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), came together with Iran to fight against Iraq and Saddam Hussein. As the war

with Iran came to a conclusion, Saddam sent his brother, along with the Iraqi military, to put down any semblance of resistance. His brother, Ali Hassan al-Majid, proceeded to use chemical weapons on both rebel targets and civilian towns. Between chemical weapon attacks and other humanitarian atrocities, it was believed that up to 90% of all Kurdish villages were destroyed (Johns, 2006) in the Anfal Campaign, or Anfal Genocide. In 1990, President George HW Bush called upon Iraqis to help throw Saddam out of power. After Operation Desert Storm and with Saddam still being in office, he began to take revenge on the Kurds who had helped the United States. In response to the defeat of Saddam Hussein by the United States and Allied forces, the Kurds began an insurgency attempt in 1991. Saddam Hussein proceeded to use chemical weapons (Air Force Historical Support Division, 2012) to suppress the insurgency. As a consequence of the burgeoning humanitarian crisis, the United States instituted a no-fly zone in Northern Iraq. This was led by the United States, United Kingdom, and France to prevent another genocide like the one that occurred in Anfal in 1988. This allowed the Kurds to take over large swaths of territory, establish an autonomous region, form the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG is a power sharing agreement between the PUK and KDP, but the peace did not last long and a civil war erupted from 1994-1998.

The U.S. invaded Iraq five years after the conclusion of the civil war in 2003 and the Kurds assisted in overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Following the overthrow, the Kurds continued to work towards achieving increased levels of independence. In 2009, the KRG attempted to begin oil exports but were blocked from doing so by the Iraqi government in Baghdad. The PKK also continued to use coercive measures against other states, such as Turkey and Iran, in attempts to gain independent territory from these states.

Soon after these attempts by the PKK to gain territory, the region was shaken by the invasion of Iraq by ISIL and the occupation of vast swaths of territory. While the Kurds were the first ethnic group to join the fight against ISIL, and were invaluable in counterinsurgency measures, they did not stop fighting for their independence at the same time. In 2015 a suicide bomber killed 33 people (Who are the Kurds?, 2017) in a Kurdish town near the border of ISIL territory. The PKK accused the Turkish government of “complicity” with the bomber and attacked Turkish soldiers and police. Consequently, Turkey launched a “synchronized war on terror” (Who are the Kurds?, 2017) against the PKK and ISIL. Turkey has also begun to more widely oppose Kurdish groups. Turkey now claims that the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) share the PKK’s goal of secession through armed struggle. Throughout the entirety of counterinsurgency efforts, Kurds were fighting ISIL and taking back land in Iraq for themselves, including the oil rich town of Kirkuk. This land was called the “disputed territory” until 2017 at which point Iraqi Kurds, under the KRG, held a secession referendum regarding both the agreed upon autonomous region and the disputed territory. Baghdad declared the referendum illegal (Iraq Supreme Court Rules Kurdish Referendum Unconstitutional) and moved in with its military to retake the disputed territories.

The referendum could have succeeded despite a lack of support from Baghdad except for a few key factors. There was, and is, no superpower who will be an advocate for Kurdish independence. Israel supports an independent Kurdistan, but 90% of Arabs surveyed in the 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index viewed Israel as a threat to the security of the region. Other powers will not support the Kurds because of reasons such as their view of regional instability in the wake of the Islamic State, and Iran’s attempts to move in as a regional hegemon. After the decade of the 2010s which revolved around regional instability, it appears as if the Middle East is finally returning to a state of calm. Uprisings from the Arab Spring have finally ended,

including the winding down of the Syrian Civil War. ISIL has been defeated and territory is being returned to the states who previously had sovereignty. The United States appears poised to remove troops from the Middle East. No major powers want to risk these factors being disrupted and causing a war over land disputes to give the Kurds their own country. These states also remember the civil war of 1994, which occurred very shortly after global powers helped the Kurds establish an autonomous region. They are hesitant in their support of a new or expanded state given how the independence process went the first time. Arable land is still being recovered from explosives used in this conflict to expand the agricultural economy (Ministry of Planning, 2013). Despite this conflict, there has been no Kurd-on-Kurd political violence since the civil war ended in 1998 and major progress has been shown when the KDP and PUK combined to create the majority party in the most recent KRG. Both of these are signs that there would be a functional government which could work across party and long-standing familial lines.

Despite the crushing loss to the central government in Iraq, a positive light shined out of Syria for the Kurds. President Bashar al-Assad had been vehemently opposed to the Kurdish occupation of Syrian land and claimed that he would take back all of Syria. Nonetheless, the Syrian Foreign Ministry stated in September 2017 that they are open to negotiations with the Kurds. Additionally, in early 2019 the Turkish government stated that they were willing to create a 20 mile “safe zone” for the Kurds (Syria War: Turkey Ready to Create 'Safe Zone' for Kurds - Erdogan, 2019). This opened the possibility of negotiations between the Kurdish population in Northeastern Syria and the Syrian government. Despite hopes for improving relations, they quickly deteriorated during Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring during which time they invaded the Kurdish populated northeastern area of Syria. President Erdogan claimed this operation was undertaken to “neutralize terror threats against Turkey and lead to the establishment of a safe zone, facilitating the return of Syrian refugees to their homes” (Kirby). Turkey undertook this invasion of Kurdish-populated territory because they are afraid of the connection between the SDF and PKK and wished to establish a buffer by moving Syrian refugees back into the territory previously held by the Kurds. This was precipitated by the United States removing their troops from Syria and Iraq despite Turkish threats of invasion. The operation did establish a safe zone, but it has not been as successful as was hoped. President Trump has left the Kurds without any support from the United States and it is unknown if this status will change anytime soon.

Reasons to Support an Independent Kurdistan

The primary reason to support the Kurds is that they have a history of helping the United States promote their strategic goals in the Middle East. In 1991, they assisted the United States by rising up against Saddam Hussein when they did not need to and they were punished for doing so. The U.S. did not provide any support during this time and did not work to prevent the Anfal Genocide from occurring. Then, after having failed at gaining independence from Iraq once already, it decided to help the United States again in 2003 when they invaded Iraq. The Kurds proceeded to assist in the fight against ISIL throughout the entirety of counterinsurgency efforts. Kurdish forces were in fact the first to fight back, and held a 600-mile line for three years (Boteach). The United States continued to arm and support the Peshmerga, the military unit of the Kurdish region, to fight with the Syrian Democratic Forces during this period. This continued support bolstered the Kurds ability to defeat both remaining ISIL cells, and other security forces. From the invasion by the United States until they began fighting ISIL in Iraq and Syria, Kurdistan was the only sector of Iraq where no terrorist attacks by ISIL occurred (Frantzman). While no terror was undertaken by ISIL, the PKK, a group considered terrorists by Turkey and

the United States, and YPG, often conflated with the PKK by Turkey, continued to use coercive measures.

Another major goal for the United States is curbing Iran's influence in the region. While the Kurds have allied with Iran before, most of these alliances ended with Iran backing out, such as when Iran revoked their support for the KDP in the 1970's as a result of the 1975 Algiers Accord. This was called the most cruel betrayal in Kurdish history (Taleblu and Tahiroglu, 2017). Iran has also historically persecuted the Kurds and attacked groups such as the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, and the PKK. The leader of the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) also recently claimed that Iran is the Kurds and democracy's greatest enemy (Aziz, 2019).

Despite this all, Iran has been attempting to improve economic ties with the KRG. Improving the United States' relationship with the Kurds will help to prevent Iran from spreading its influence further through the region. Iran has the benefit of providing Kurdistan with a land border that they could permanently move goods across. However, tensions over territory have risen in recent times. In September 2020, Iran and Turkey signed an agreement to coordinate efforts against "armed Kurdish groups" (Menmy, 2020) in both Turkey and Iran. Iran has an incentive to work with the Kurds, especially if other Western powers are not. Iran and the United States have had major issues over the past several years. In January 2020, the United States assassinated General Soleimani and then in November 2020 Israel assassinated Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the head of Iran's nuclear program. This comes as the United States has withdrawn from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and is looking to rejoin the agreement early in 2021. Despite this attempt to revitalize relations between the two states, the United States is still looking to prevent Iran from becoming a regional hegemon. This is where the Kurds would become extremely useful. They would be able to work with Israel and other countries who have normalized relations with them in recent times to counter Iranian aggression and provide pressure to rejoin the JCPOA.

The Kurds have also shown a willingness to support Western values more than other states in the region. Despite the fact that they are not an independent state, Kurdistan has a well-functioning democratic system. The KRG has had peaceful transfers of power since the end of the civil war between the KDP and PUK in 1998. In the KRG, there are requirements for female and minority representatives (Jones). The government is also a champion of religious neutrality in schools (Mansfield) despite the territory being 94% Muslim. These freedoms are unseen in other states throughout the Middle East, even in our strategic allies. The KRG also supports a free press, which is a vital cornerstone of democracy that is oftentimes difficult to establish. The secession referendum, with results showing 93% of Kurds who voted supported secession from Iraq (McKernan, 2017), presented a devotion to democratic values as well.

Another reason for the United States to support Kurdistan is that they are viewed favorably by the state of Israel. In 2013, 96% of Egyptians (Beauchamp, 2014) who were polled viewed Israel's influence as mostly negative. This is not an uncommon view throughout the Middle East. Despite this, the Kurds and Israel have a good relationship. Prime Minister Netanyahu has called for international support of their independence (Sobelman). So far, Israel is the only state to explicitly state their support for an independent Kurdistan. Kurdistan may also provide a continuance of normalizing relations with Israel in the region. While President Trump did succeed in having normalization agreements be agreed upon between Israel and Sudan, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, Kurdistan would provide an effective state to continue these agreements in the beginning of a new Biden administration. Israel is the strongest supporter

of the United States in the Middle East. This could allow the Kurds to work bilaterally to improve relations between Israel and other Arab states. If successful, the United States would have two strong democratic allies in the region to work with while providing Israel with increasing numbers of normalized relationships in the region. This would be critical to regional stability.

An independent Kurdistan would finally provide the US an economic foothold in the region through both investment in the Kurdish government and the creation and improvement of a private sector in Kurdistan. This has already begun with initiatives like the United States – Kurdistan Business Council which “seeks to highlight the unique opportunities for companies to invest in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and to make it easier for companies to secure their investments and be successful” (United States-Kurdistan Business Council.). As of 2018, more than 20% of all Kurds ages 18-34 were unemployed (van Wilgenburg, 2018). While this is not promising for an independent state, it provides ample opportunity for American business to come in and have workers readily available. As of 2013, 50% of Kurdistan was 20 years old or younger, and it was projected that 1.1 million new jobs would need to be created by 2033 (Ministry of Planning, 2013). To do so, the private sector will have to step in to help provide between 43,000-54,000 jobs per year (Ministry of Planning, 2013). On top of this, Kurds are looking for work in the private sector. While there is high unemployment, more than 17% of those who have a job are underemployed (Ministry of Planning, 2013). Despite the high rate of youth unemployment, 93% of Kurds 18-24 years old can read and write (Benaim, 2018). The KRG, led by Masrour Barzani, has spoken about its desire to professionalize the KRG. These two factors are vital to the success of a strong, modern economy. Advances in the private sector funded by the United States will also open up availability for domestic private business to thrive. The KRG has also been making attempts to improve relations for foreign direct investment. This primarily has been undertaking major portions of the Kurdish economy. It is also important to acknowledge the abundant agricultural sector which is available to Kurdistan. Vast quantities of arable land were harmed by Saddam Hussein’s chemical weapon attacks and explosives used in subsequent conflicts. This land has not been available to Kurdish farmers since the attacks because of the expense in terms of both time and money to bring it back to functional levels. Once the recovery process is complete, 28 percent of the land controlled by the KRG will be arable (Kerr, 2012). This vast quantity of arable land, combined with a focus on improved agricultural production by the Kurdish government, will allow them to take advantage of this available resource.

Opposition to U.S. Support for an Independent Kurdistan

The primary reason to oppose supporting an independent Kurdistan is the negative relationship the landlocked state would have with its neighbors. Kurdistan imports an estimated 80-90% of all goods (Dziadosz, 2017) from their neighbors and other states in the region. It would be devastating to the Kurdish economy and its ability to move goods if any of those states decided to cut them off. The Kurds export many of their goods for their GDP. Luckily, oil can be moved by pipelines, but other sectors of the economy that they are trying to move into can not be moved so easily. Agricultural goods require a land or sea access location to move their goods out of what would be an independent nation. All of their neighbors have, at some point, threatened economic sanctions or to close their borders on Kurdistan if they attempt to become independent. Be that as it may, given the current situation in Syria, it is unlikely that they would be unable to move goods or services through their borders. Additionally, territory in Turkey that is largely

populated by ethnic Kurds, as well as historically possessed by the Kurds, has access to the Mediterranean Sea. These facts create doubt in the idea that their neighbors could block necessary goods from arriving, especially if Kurdistan had Western support.

Should the United States choose to support an independent Kurdistan, it would also be choosing an expensive undertaking. The cost would not just be economic, but also require manpower and political capital. It would also be difficult to nation-build with the potentially violent opposition of the Kurds' neighbors. Given the defeat of ISIL and winddown of the Syrian Civil War, stability has been becoming more of a reality in the region, and some leaders believe that efforts to create a Kurdish state could upset chances at long lasting stability. However, there is rarely more political capital than at the beginning of a new administration. The political cost would not be so dire if they undertook a process of supporting this proposal early on in the administration. In terms of economic costs, while the COVID-19 pandemic will decrease the quantity of funds available for any projects outside of rebuilding the country, support for the Kurdish government could provide valuable economic stimulus. As previously mentioned, the developing Kurdish private sector would provide ample opportunity for American investment. This investment would provide ample opportunity for revitalizing the economy in the wake of the pandemic. In terms of manpower, the United States would need to work multilaterally with other major powers to determine and utilize best practices for nation-building because of their history of failure in this regard.

The United States would also have to find a way to handle the fears of Turkey, an important ally to both the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Turkey, and its leader President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have previously vowed to crush Kurdish rebels and groups they consider to be sympathetic to the Kurds. A central reason for this is that the Turkish government considers the Peshmerga to be a terrorist organization. This continues to be the case, despite the Peshmerga and PKK, or Kurdistan Workers' Party, fighting against ISIL. Turkish Kurds have attempted to secede in recent time, but Turkey believes that if Iraqi Kurds succeed then it is only a matter of time before their Kurdish minority attempts to secede as well. Even if the Kurds' state did not involve Turkey or Turkish land, Turkey has been clear that it will not support the state. President Erdogan stated that if American troops leave, "we will curse them as traitors" (Barkey, 2019). Turkey has also cracked down on Kurdish political leaders, even those without outspoken secessionist desires. An example of this was when the leader of the main Kurdish political party in Turkey was imprisoned. The United States would have to either convince Erdogan and his government that there is not a threat of their Kurdish minority seceding, or potentially lose a critical ally. Turkey also has enormous control over Kurdistan's economic stability. They recently allowed Kurdistan to build the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, a \$1 billion oil pipeline (Dziadosz, 2017) through their country which is critical to their economy. Turkey also threatened to stop buying oil (Dziadosz, 2017) from the Kurds. Iran has been more welcoming to the idea of an independent Kurdistan, especially in regards to economic coordination with the KRG. They do not want the Kurds in their own country to have autonomy or to rise up against them, but do not oppose the KRG.

Finally, despite the Kurds overwhelming support of independence for their own state, the United States has a history of opposing secessionist movements. The Kurdish representative in Washington expected opposition because, in a situation that was believed to be similar to their own, they claimed that if the US policies of the 1990's had its way then the "[Baltic States and Croatia] would still be part of the eastern bloc" (Calamur, 2017). Because of this, they believe that they had to move forward with the referendum in 2017 despite widespread opposition,

including harsh statements to not move forward with the vote from the United States. Even more recently than with the Baltic States, the United States did not support Catalonia in its recent attempt to break away from the rest of Spain. It would contradict the majority of post-Revolution American history to support the Kurds in their attempt to gain sovereignty.

Conclusions

Since the rise of ISIL in 2014, Kurds have shown why they could be a valuable ally in the region if given proper support. Their vast quantities of oil, as well as the infrastructure which is already in place, provides a stable economic base which many fledgling countries have not had. This would provide them time to reinvent their economy and make it more sustainable while supporting a currently almost nonexistent private sector. These changes would be mutually beneficial to the Kurds and the United States. The Kurds have also helped the United States promote their military goals since the mid-1970s. This would be critically important to have in an ally, especially with the defeat of ISIL approaching and the attempts by Iran to become a regional hegemon. Finally, the Kurds can help be a city on the hill in a region where the United States and its allies are traditionally not viewed well. The Kurds' promotion of democratic norms is critical as a potential launching ground for spreading democracy throughout the Middle East.

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