

INDEPENDENT KURDISTAN: THE WRETCHED AND THE DAMNED

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On September 25, 2017, the semiautonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq held an independence referendum to determine the future of its quest for recognized statehood. As expected, an overwhelming majority (93% in the early returns) voted in favor of independence. Also, as expected, no one around the world, even within Kurdistan itself, thought this meant an independent Kurdistan would be recognized by all or that such a reality is anywhere close to being around the corner. That fact shows not only how wretchedly unlucky Kurdish history is, but also how unjustifiably damnable the international process is when it comes to the fight for independence.

First, to its credit, it seems the KRG understands the referendum is never going to be the final step in this arduous process. There is debate even over whether or not the referendum can be officially declared ‘binding’ or ‘non-binding.’ More to the point, the KRG says the positive result simply signals that it will begin the long process of state-building, whatever that actually means, and will engage in negotiations with the federal government of Iraq, rather than make an outright and immediate declaration of independence and secession. In all likelihood, the KRG would prefer being able to do the latter but acknowledges the world community just isn’t likely to support such a radical maneuver. Indeed, a quick country snapshot bears this out:

- Iraq: Basically, any decision about the future of Kurdistan has to involve ALL parts of Iraq. No independent initiatives can take place in a political vacuum.
- Iran: It believes in the territorial unity and sovereignty of Iraq and accuses members of the KRG of being, in essence, ‘middlemen for Zionists.’
- Israel: In a case of bad timing given the accusation above, Israel supports Kurdistan in its effort to be an independent state.

- Saudi Arabia: Non-committal but did declare the internal powers of Iraq in general would ‘show wisdom’ in not holding the referendum at all.
- Syria: Rejects any territorial division or splitting of Iraq (for obvious consequential reasons)
- Turkey: The decision to hold the referendum is a ‘grave mistake.’
- Armenia: Non-committal but reiterates the hope that all tension and potential conflict is resolved internally and peacefully.
- Australia: Holding the referendum only guarantees the further weakening of Iraq overall and contributes to its destabilization.
- Belgium: All states and peoples have a right to self-determination, but this is not the right time to be holding the referendum.
- China: Believes in Iraq’s territorial integrity.
- France: The referendum should lead to the proper representation of the Kurds in the Iraqi federal government (which is ostensibly a signal against Kurdish independence).
- Germany: Warned the KRG against making unilateral decisions and holding a ‘one-sided’ referendum.
- Netherlands: The referendum could be more acceptable if it was held in cooperation with the Iraqi federal government (which it wasn’t).
- Spain: The referendum is illegal according to the 2005 Iraqi constitution and, quite frankly, all of Iraq should stay united in order to fight a coordinated effort against ISIL.
- United Kingdom: While deeply supportive of the right of self-determination, like Belgium, the UK agrees now is not the time to be working on this referendum.
- United States: ‘We support a unified, stable, and a federal Iraq. We appreciate and understand the legitimate aspirations of the people of Iraqi Kurdistan.’”

Perhaps not so ironically, the US reaction is frustratingly familiar to anyone who supports the idea of a free and independent Kurdistan: what exactly does it mean to be for a unified Iraq but also ‘understand the legitimate aspirations’ of the Kurds? It sounds ridiculously like America is speaking out of both sides of its diplomatic mouth, which of course causes nothing but greater

confusion on the ground in Kurdistan. At least many of the Western countries above expressed sympathy with the KRG but did ultimately say now is not the time for the referendum. Not good news, certainly, for the KRG, but at least it is clear on where these nations stand. In fact, the strange having-it-both-ways American reaction is probably what accounts for the KRG's own duplicitous interpretation of the referendum results: how can the referendum be 'binding' but also 'not an outright declaration of independence', when the referendum directly asked voters to decide that very issue? It can be both when the only true global power capable of giving the referendum teeth (America) gives non-committal support, leaving the KRG uncertain as to how to proceed.

All of this signals that the continued wretched bad luck of Kurdistan is likely to continue. In a world that has seen history constantly alter and manipulate maps, split countries apart for the sake of Great Power games, and randomly assign new borders based on everything from the discovery of natural resources to diplomatic attempts to massage away ethnic tensions, Kurdistan has been unfortunate. One of the few peoples of the world that can legitimately (ie, archeologically document and historically affirm) lock its geographical location to its current position on the map, Kurdistan happens to also be split across at least FIVE internationally-recognized countries – Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, and Iran. Basically, the map makers of history have always chosen to disregard the legitimacy of the Kurdish people and its traditional homeland, *even though it has been remarkably stable and consistent for millennia*. There are in fact very few peoples across the globe able to make as strong a geographical, historical, and cultural claim on a very specific piece of territory.

It is this simple reality that has always damned Kurdish efforts for greater international recognition: even countries that may be sympathetic to the Kurdish cause realize any such move towards true independence would never be able to take place within a single region. The current referendum may officially be about only the Kurds in Northern Iraq, but try telling that to the governments of Iran, Armenia, Syria, and Turkey, all of whom have varying degrees of politically active Kurdish communities in their own border regions. Which means all of them will never accept a Kurdistan referendum in Northern Iraq because they will never accept it as a referendum *exclusive* to Northern Iraq. The fear of the cascade or ripple effect is palpable for all of these countries. And given the nature of the region and subsequent other instability and security factors, almost no country in the world today sees the Kurds in Northern Iraq as a singular question of justice, self-determination, and freedom, but a multi-layered question impacting several countries. Once more, alas, it seems the Kurds are uniquely positioned to be hurt by the grinder of politics, borders, and the cause of 'greater global security.' In a world on fire debating the security vs. freedom debate, the Kurds always seems to lose. It is doubtful that this referendum will reverse that trend. Rather, it will likely only affirm it.