



# Iraqi Kurdistan: Post-Independence Referendum

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On September 25th, against the urging of the United States and other allies, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) held an independence referendum within the boundaries of its autonomous region and provocatively, without, in the city of Kirkuk. While the regional response was fast and furious, the United States did nothing, leaving the Iraqi Kurds at the mercy of a revengeful Baghdad: Erbil and Sulaimaniyah airports were closed to international commercial traffic. Turkey threatened to close borders and the Iranian and Iraqi militaries conducted joint exercises on the Iraqi Kurdish border. Baghdad sent the Iraqi army and Iranian-backed Shia Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) militias to retake the disputed territories back from the Kurdish peshmerga. Then, on October 29th, KRG president Masoud Barzani stepped down and suspended the post of presidency, distributing control of the KRG to other branches.

Recently, I spoke with four individuals about the ongoing and evolving crisis.

Barry R. McCaffrey is a retired four-star General who served in the United States Army for thirty-two years. During Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, General McCaffrey commanded the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized).

General McCaffrey prefaced our interview by saying, "I view the situation as a strong supporter of Kurdish independence – certainly in Iraq – and in the longer run, in Turkey, in Syria and Iran." He acknowledged the potential contentiousness of his opinion, especially vis a vis Kurdish aspirations in Turkey. But, in the shorter term, McCaffrey said that he thought that the Iraqi Kurds had had a reasonable chance for independence, especially given their potential for economic self-sufficiency. "Even though being a land locked state with hostile powers surrounding you is perilous, given the oil in the Kirkuk oil fields - which in my view might belong to the Kurds - I thought the Kurds could make it." But, he added, after the recent events, it is clear that "Iraq, Iran and Turkey have a coordinated strategy to snuff out the concept [of Iraqi Kurdish independence]."

McCaffrey appreciates the Iraqi Kurds' distrust of Baghdad and was "astonished that the Iraqi Kurds did not fight for Kirkuk." Further, he was surprised that the Iraqi Kurds "did not find a way around the Iraqi central government closing their airspace." He regrets that the Iraqi Kurdish political parties did not come together and "unite behind a single policy" prior to holding the referendum. For that "they are now paying the price." Lastly, McCaffrey remarked that while he "understands and has sympathy for the United States' government's dilemma dealing with this," he is "disappointed that [the U.S.] did not find a way to facilitate and support Kurdish independence."

Representative Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman is the senior representative of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the United States.

Representative Abdul Rahman spoke about the heavy hand Iran played in Baghdad's response to the independence referendum. At the time of our discussion, the KRG and the United States were publicly at odds with regards to Iran's direct involvement in the taking control of Kirkuk: Initially, U.S. spokespeople denied having evidence of direct Iranian involvement, while the KRG insisted that Major General Qasim Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force had flown to Kirkuk prior to Baghdad's sending troops and PMF militias to Kirkuk. (On October 18th at the FDD Summit in Washington, CIA Director Mike Pompeo said that the Agency had been aware of Soleimani's presence in Kirkuk.)

Ms. Abdul Rahman stated that the [KDP party controlled] KRG was "very clear in our position that Soleimani played a personal role in making a secret arrangement between some members of the PUK [opposition party]" so that the PUK peshmerga would leave Kirkuk. "Iran's motivation is to prevent the referendum from succeeding in any way – even in the distant future." She explained, "Soleimani travels in and out of Iraq and Kurdistan freely. But on this particular occasion we believe Soleimani wanted the local media to cover his visit so as to send a message to the United States."

When asked why Erbil held the referendum on September 25th despite U.S. objections, the Representative argued that the Kurds had made their desire to hold a referendum back in 2014, when they agreed to the Americans' request to fight alongside Iraqi forces against ISIS. However, during the fight against ISIS, the problems between the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds were not addressed and "continued to fester." Ms. Abdul Rahman emphasized that "the referendum gave the mandate to our leadership to negotiate with Baghdad; it was not...a unilateral declaration of independence."

The Representative bemoaned the fact that the United States came out "so strongly" against the referendum but had yet to come out so strongly against the recent Iraqi military aggression and the Iraqis' use of American weapons. Going forward, Ms. Abdul Rahman will continue to lobby in Washington, emphasizing three key points: First, the United States needs to understand the significance of Kirkuk and the extent of Iranian involvement. Second, the Iraqi Kurds need the military aggression against them to stop. And third, the Kurds will continue to look to the United States to help facilitate talks between Erbil and Baghdad. She says, "Let's sit down before there is any more bloodshed. Let's sit down before there is any more collective punishment of the people of Kurdistan."

Ameena Saeed is Yazidi activist and a former member of the Iraqi Parliament. The United States Department of State awarded her the 2015 Hero Acting to End Modern Slavery Award.

When asked about the Yazidi community's participation in the independence referendum, Ms. Saeed said she supposed that some Yazidis who live in Kurdistan, many probably voted for independence, those living in disputed territories – in the Shingal district for example – probably did not vote at all. She explained that many Yazidis still blame the peshmerga for allowing ISIS to overrun and commit genocide against her people. "If the referendum had been held before August 2014 [when ISIS the genocide occurred in Shingal], Saeed said, "all Yazidis would have voted 'yes' in the referendum."

While the community's distrust of the KRG lingers, Saeed made the point that "prior to 2003 when Saddam Hussein and Arabs controlled Iraq, there were no Yazidis in political positions. That changed when the KDP peshmerga took control of the region." She went on to say that "after 2003, a Yazidi became mayor of Sinjar."

But, now that the Iraqi army has entered Sinjar with the PMF, Saeed says many Yazidis are scared. Though Yazidis hope to one day establish a semi-autonomous region of their own, Ms. Saeed acknowledges that her community might have to take sides in the meantime. "If we belong to Kurdistan, even if it might not be the best option, is it better than living under the Iraqi government because we have had bad experiences with them."

A retired senior intelligence officer with decades of experience in Iraq and the region.

When I spoke with the retired officer who worked directly with the Iraqi Kurds for years, the former officer was frustrated and frank: "The situation is an embarrassment. The United States betrayed the Kurds and the Kurds betrayed themselves." Given the Trump Administration's new Iran policy, the retired officer saw the Kirkuk crisis as having been preventable. "It the perfect opportunity to act on the administration's policy. The United States could have pre-empted Bagdad's taking of Kirkuk by "weighing in heavily diplomatically, sending a delegation to Baghdad and telling the Iraqis that we won't tolerate a Shia militia presence in Kurdistan and we won't tolerate Baghdad's using American weapons to attack to the Kurds." Instead, the retired officer said, the United States stood by while Qasim Soleimani flew to Kirkuk and struck a deal with members of the Talabani family – founders of the PUK – who agreed to order the PUK peshmerga forces to retreat and allow the PMF to take Kirkuk.

Referring to President Trump's October 17th statement that "[the United States is] not taking sides, the retired officer said, "We don't have to take sides; we only have to engage."

As to why the United States did not engage, the retired officer said that the State Department's "outdated" position is to blame: "The State Department refuses to give up on the 'One Iraq Policy' pipe dream and accept the reality that they are never going to keep Iraq together." That said, the retired officer emphasized that the Iraqis and the Kurds must do their respective parts before the U.S. can meaningfully facilitate a deal between Erbil and Baghdad. Specifically, "Baghdad needs get away from the constant pressure from the Iranians and the Kurds need to get their political house in order and address the rampant corruption and lack of unity." Only then, could the idea of establishing a federated Iraq - a comprise upon which Baghdad and Erbil might eventually agree – could be seriously considered.

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As relations between the Iraqis and the Iraqi Kurds continue to deteriorate, Iran will continue to leverage the discord to its advantage. While Erbil's decision to proceed with the referendum was a political miscalculation, Washington's inaction verges on political treachery. The Kurds were a loyal and incredibly effective ally in the U.S. led coalition's fight against ISIS. For the moment, the matter seems settled against them. It must not be.