Beyond Referendum: How Should an Independent Kurdistan Be Different?

By Tyler Fisher - September 27, 2017

Kurdistan voted to become independent in last week's referendum.

The oft-repeated observation, that the Kurds are the world’s largest ethnic group without a nation-state of their own, might very soon be out of date. Following a referendum on Sept. 25, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has announced the results strongly in favor of secession from Iraq: 92% said ‘Yes’. Culturally and linguistically distinct, Kurdistan (literally, the land of the Kurds) already exercises a significant degree of autonomy. Kurdish ethnicity is driving this referendum. Ethnicity underlies its purpose and parameters, as well as the problems it may provoke.

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Increasingly functioning as a proto-state since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has, in fact, become virtually sovereign. It has nearly all the trappings of statehood: its own capital, its own president and parliament, flag, education system, official holidays, military and borders — though some borders remain in dispute with the Iraqi federal government in key areas. A separate currency and diplomatic recognition by the international community are conspicuously missing from this list.

Indeed, the international community has largely and vociferously opposed the referendum. In addition to threats of aggressive counter-measures by Iraq, Iran and Turkey, the United Nations, European Union and the United States have all questioned the timing of the referendum and have issued statements in support, instead, of Iraq’s territorial integrity and unity.

What little unity Iraq may possess is fundamentally artificial, of course, as factitious today as when the country’s borders were drawn up by the global powers a century ago, imposing artificial unity and artificial divisions. Within its borders, geographies of tribe and creed more often prevail. Kurdistan itself corresponds to these. Consult almost any map (in English) that predate the First World War, and Kurdistan appears, even where the name Iraq is absent as a political entity.

Thus, while the international community calls for maintaining the status quo, Kurdish voters are delivering a robust answer: the status quo, their vote declares, is historically and actually fractured, and the referendum is, in a sense, simply acknowledging the fault lines. Recognizing, politically, the disunity and irreconcilable differences with Baghdad need not provoke further unrest in the region. It is a step towards underscoring, de jure, a disintegration that has already taken place de facto.

An independent Kurdistan would do well, however, to remember its own tortured history, its struggle towards self-determination under the thumb of presumptions and impositions of national unity. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is home to a fragile mosaic of ethnic
minorities, including Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Turkmens, and Yezidis, and their presence is especially pronounced in disputed territories. Political disenfranchisement of these minorities, whether real or only perceived, must be carefully, conscientiously averted. The land of the Kurds must also be a land for these people groups who do not necessarily identify as Kurds, although their roots in the region also run deep. Strong reassurances to this end from the current leadership — and, more importantly, written into any foundational constitution — will be essential. In a seeming paradox, an independent Kurdistan will likely need to allow, even cultivate, a form of ethnic federalism in order to avoid balkanization.

The referendum is ultimately non-binding, and Kurdistan will not transform into a fully autonomous state overnight, but the referendum gives the KRG a robust, democratic mandate by which to negotiate territory and natural resources when crafting the terms of an inevitable independence.

It will be little short of a geopolitical miracle if that independence peacefully ushers in a truly pluralistic society and bastion of human rights. But the peoples of Kurdistan take pride in their difference. May they prove different in this as well.

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Tyler Fisher  
Member of Board of Advisors at the Soran University in Iraqi Kurdistan.