

Iraqi Kurdistan – What Might Independence Mean?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On September 25, the Kurds in northern Iraq held what may be seen as the most welcome event in the Middle East since the Six-Day War: a referendum on independence, for which 93% of the voters (including non-Kurds living in Kurdish areas of Iraq) declared themselves in favor. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of their own, with between 35-40 million of them spread among four countries, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. The exact figures are not known, and for a reason: in none of those countries does the government compile, much less publish, accurate figures about the numbers of Kurds, because they all have a stake in minimizing the real numbers. So their “estimated” figures must always be assumed to be lower than the true ones.

But before getting into the disturbing details of what the Kurds have had to endure, let’s go back nearly a century, to see what the Kurds were originally promised by the Great

Powers, and how the betrayal of those promises has led to the present difficult condition of this stateless people.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, the Great Powers, honoring the Wilsonian principle of self-determination, recognized that the Kurds deserved a state of their own, and were prepared to give it to them. By the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the Kurds were originally promised local autonomy in Anatolia, with the possibility of establishing, within a year of the Treaty's signing, an independent Kurdish state. Section 3, Article 64 of the Sèvres treaty stated:

If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.

The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the Principal Allied Powers and Turkey.

If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary admission to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul vilayet.

That promise, of a Kurdish state established first in Anatolia, to which would then be joined the Kurdish lands in the Mosul vilayet (northern Iraq), was never fulfilled; the treaty was annulled because of Turkish opposition. After the

Turks under Ataturk had managed to expel the last foreign troops from Anatolia, the Turkish government refused to recognize the commitments it had made in the Sèvres Treaty, a refusal formalized in the Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923. The result was bitter: no autonomy for the Kurds anywhere, much less an independent Kurdish state. But the Kurds did not abandon their hopes for an independent Kurdistan. Though the Lausanne Treaty meant the postponement of the dream of Kurdish autonomy, and of a Kurdish state that might follow upon such autonomy, it did not destroy it. The Kurds are still stateless, but a concatenation of events today in the Middle East has brought their goal closer to being realized than at any time before.

The Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey have been mistreated, to varying degrees, in all of these countries. In Turkey, there are perhaps 18-20 million Kurds. The Turkish government has forbidden the use of distinctively Kurdish dress, the observance of Kurdish holidays, the transmittal of Turkish folklore. Even Kurdish names were banned in Kurdish-inhabited areas. The Turkish government for a time even tried to deny that the Kurds were a separate ethnic group, and until 1991 it categorized them as "Mountain Turks." The words "Kurds," "Kurdistan," and "Kurdish" were officially banned by the Turkish government. Following the military coup of 1980, the Kurdish language was officially prohibited in public and private life. Many who spoke, published, or sang in Kurdish were arrested and imprisoned. In 1974 the Kurdish Worker's Party, or PKK, was formed, and that year serious organizing for Kurdish rights began, not only by the guerrillas of the PKK but by other, strictly political Kurdish groups; an open insurgency started in 1984 against Turkish rule, and since then there have been varying levels of violence, intermittent ceasefires, suppression by the Turkish army.

After 40,000 dead, the aim of autonomy or, for a growing number of Kurds, the desire for outright independence, has not

been extinguished. That desire is no doubt heightened in the Turkish Kurds by their having to endure that Lord of Misrule, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while observing, and envying, the de facto autonomy that Kurds in Iraq and Syria have obtained. Further, the Kurds in both those countries have proven their military mettle against the Islamic State and, for the first time, the Kurdish militia, or Peshmerga, has large amounts of weaponry. That weaponry comes from several sources. Some is what was captured from the Iraqi army during the 1991 uprisings. More modern weaponry, left behind by the Iraqi army when tens of thousands of its soldiers fled ISIS fighters in Mosul in June 2014, was in turn seized from ISIS (or abandoned by ISIS fighters in retreat). Another main source has been the Americans, who have been directly supplying the Peshmerga with weapons with which to fight ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. Some of that weaponry could well find its way to Kurds in Turkey, as Erdogan, having furiously denounced such weapons deliveries by the Americans, is well aware.

In Syria, there are about two million Kurds, living in northern Syria, free from control by the central government. Before the civil war weakened the Assad regime, it could enforce its will, and there were mass arrests of rebellious Kurds, murders of Kurdish leaders, and official hostility to any Kurdish political or cultural expression. Now Assad has all he can do just to stay alive, and remain in control of part of the country, which does not include the territory where the Kurds live. The Kurds in Syria can do what they like, for the tottering regime in Damascus does not have the power now, nor will it in the future, to stop them.

Much the same savage treatment has been, and continues to be, meted out to the seven or eight million Kurds in Iran, where the Islamic Republic has rounded up and executed Kurdish leaders, suppressed mass protests, and also carried on a systematic campaign of assassinations abroad, as in the murder of four of the most important Kurdish dissidents in the

Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992. The largest uprising in Kurdish Iran was in 1979, when 30,000 Kurds were killed.

About six-seven million Kurds live in northern Iraq, the country where they have fared worst. The Arab army of Saddam Hussein killed 182,000 Kurds in Operation Anfal (a name taken from the eighth sura of the Qur'an, Surat al-Anfal, or "the Spoils of War"), between 1986 and 1988, and then moved Arabs into formerly Kurdish-populated villages, in a campaign of forced arabization. After the Gulf War, the American military provided air cover for the Iraqi Kurds, beginning in 1991, which meant that none of Saddam's planes dared enter the airspace over Iraqi Kurdistan. The Americans have also supplied the Peshmerga in Iraq with weapons to fight ISIS. The Kurds are keenly aware of how much the Americans have done for them. The Americans, in turn, have found that their Kurdish allies could be counted on not to turn on them, which has not been the case with our Arab or Afghan "allies." The Pentagon knows, too, that the Peshmerga have proven to be the most effective fighting force against ISIS, both in Iraq and Syria.

Since 2003, with Saddam's iron rule having collapsed, and while Shi'a and Sunni Arabs have been locked in a contest for power in Baghdad, Iraqi Kurds have continued to enjoy an autonomous existence in the north. This experience has whetted appetites for independence, and also turned the Kurds into the most pro-American ethnic group – save for Israeli Jews – in the Middle East. It is worth noting that since 2003, not a single American has been killed in Iraqi Kurdistan. That is why the American soldiers would take their R. and R. in the Kurdish territories.

When Masoud Barzani claimed that now is the time for Kurdish independence in northern Iraq, he mentioned that an independent Kurdistan could help bring "stability" to a region rocked by sectarian conflict. He's not exactly correct. An independent Kurdistan itself, once achieved, could be an island of stability, but all around it, there would be, as a

result of that independent Kurdistan, more instability. This would obviously be true in Iraq (where peaceful Arab acquiescence in the transformation of northern Iraq into Kurdistan is most unlikely), in Iran (where Kurds have already been eagerly celebrating the Kurdish referendum in Iraq, much to Tehran's chagrin), in Syria (where the Assad regime would have to begrudgingly accept the loss of the Syrian Kurdish region because Damascus lacks the military force to hold onto it), and in Turkey, where the decades-long simmering Kurdish insurrection can once again flare up, becoming a real threat in rural Anatolia, while the Turks, of course, have no intention of letting go of any part of their current territory, including areas overwhelmingly populated by Kurds.

Perhaps what Barzani meant is that the Kurds themselves will not "bring" stability to its neighbors but offer an example of such stability, a reliable, democratic, state, treating its ethnic minorities fairly (in Kirkuk, there are Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, Armenians, Yazidis) that would be a lone bastion in the Muslim Middle East of pro-Western sentiment. As for that lack of stability elsewhere in the neighborhood, isn't that what may make possible an independent Kurdish state in the first place?

The Americans have been supplying military aid to the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, and most recently, in May, did deliver mortars, anti-tank weapons, small arms, and vehicle. And then those deliveries ceased. Presumably this was the effect of pressure by Erdogan. But why should Washington at this point want to please Erdogan? So much of what the Americans do or don't do infuriates Erdogan as, for example, Washington's refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, while other Westerners – the Dutch, the Germans – are repeatedly called "Nazis" by Erdogan because they had the gall to keep Erdogan's men from campaigning among Turks in their countries. He has shown himself to be mercurial, ill-tempered, bullying, often hysterical, a false friend who in many ways has become an

enemy of the non-Muslim West. This March he called the EU ruling on head-coverings the beginning of a war “between Islam and Christianity.” In 2016, he seized all the churches, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox, in Diyarbakir and made them government property. In 2017, he seized many ancient Christian Syriac churches and monasteries, fifty of them this past June alone. His government continues to seize churches, without even the pretense of justification. All of these churches, monasteries, libraries, cemeteries are now the property of the Turkish state, never to be returned as long as Erdogan remains in power. Erdogan’s war on Christianity, and especially on the Syriac Christians who are indigenous to Turkey, has no end.

Erdogan is de-kemalizing, and re-islamizing, Turkey. He has arrested tens of thousands of secularist enemies, including members of the military (especially the officer corps), journalists, lawyers, judges, university professors. He has been a constant critic of Israel. He went into a towering rage against Israel because of the Mavi Marmara episode, in which Israeli soldiers dared to defend themselves against attack. He has fomented antisemitism at every level, accusing “the Jews” of harming the Turkish economy, causing a mine disaster in Turkey, spreading anti-Turkish stories through their supposed control of the world-wide-media, and even masterminding, through Mossad, the Kurdish referendum held on September 25 in Iraq. For Erdogan, it’s just one more Jewish plot.

Officially our military ally (and member of NATO), Turkey did not allow the Americans in 2003 to invade Iraq from the north, considerably complicating their military task. Erdogan is angry that the Americans are becoming too close to the Kurds, as they closely collaborate in fighting ISIS; the Kurdish successes against the Islamic State appear not to please but to alarm him. He has attacked ISIS, but at the same time he has also attacked the Peshmerga who are attacking ISIS. He has even told the Americans that his first priority is fighting

the Kurds; the Islamic State comes second. Finally, and most disturbing, Erdogan appears to take pleasure in his current prediction that a new “religious war” between Muslims and Christians – as he put it unambiguously, between “the cross and the crescent” – is brewing in Europe, leaving no doubt which side Turkey, as long as he is in power, will be on. All this makes it harder and harder to justify treating Turkey as an ally or allowing it to remain in NATO. And it should make the Western countries much more sympathetic to the Kurdish cause in Anatolia than they have so far demonstrated.

In Iran there are eight million Kurds, both Sunni and Shi'a, who since the First World War have demonstrated various levels of loyalty to the central government in Tehran. In 1946, Kurds in Iran established, with Soviet help, a “Republic of Mahabad” that only covered a minuscule sliver of territory along the northern border with Iraq and Turkey; it lasted less than a year. When the Islamic Republic was declared, many Kurds were at first enthusiastic, because the Shah had shown no patience with Kurdish nationalism, and they hoped for better treatment. They were soon disabused of that hope. As soon as Khomeini's Islamic program became clear, the Kurds, always more secular than the Arabs (because their ethnic identity worked against, rather than reinforced, the hold of Islam) started a series of demonstrations that were suppressed far more brutally than they had been under the Shah. The Ayatollah Khomeini called for a Jihad against Kurdish separatists in August, 1979; 30,000 Kurds were killed in battles. Mass executions of Kurdish civilians promptly followed.

All further attempts by Kurds to demonstrate against the Khomeini regime were crushed. The Iranian Kurds were on their own, for in Iraq the Kurds were held down by Saddam's men after the 1986 Al-Anfal campaign of mass murder against them. And in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), two despots, Saddam and Khomeini, forced “their” Kurds to fight against those on the

other side, instead of the Kurds in both countries being able to join forces to fight both the Arabs of Iraq and the Persians of Iran.

Now the future of the Kurds in Iran depends on what the Kurds in Iraq manage to accomplish. If they achieve independence, the route will be open for them to aid the Iranian Kurds militarily, for the weapons supplied to the Peshmerga by the Americans to fight ISIS are still there, ready to be re-purposed. Other arms might be supplied to the Kurds in Iraq to transfer to their fellows in Iran by either Israel, or Saudi Arabia, or both (geopolitics makes strange bedfellows). The Saudis have flip-flopped on Kurdistan: earlier this year they announced their support for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, knowing that it would cause trouble for Iranian interests in Iraq and, even more importantly, in Iran itself. But on September 19, a Saudi spokesman declared that holding the referendum as planned on September 25 could have "negative consequences on the political, security and humanitarian fronts." It could also "affect efforts to establish security and stability in the region, as well as efforts to fight against terrorist organizations and their activities," the official added. Perhaps they were trying to curry favor with Erdogan, or with fellow Arabs in Iraq. But the Saudis could flip again, if it looked like the Kurds in Iran could pose a real threat to Tehran, for Iran is Saudi Arabia's mortal enemy.

The one country in the Middle East that has steadfastly supported the Kurdish push for independence, and will neither flip nor flop, is Israel. For Israelis have never wavered in their sympathy for the Kurds, and there is a fascinating history of Kurdish-Jewish relations, going back many decades, when the Kurdish Barzani family head, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, was friendly with the Jewish Khawaja Khinno family, even seeking counsel from that family's patriarch on choosing of brides. And repeatedly Mustafa Barzani would publicly express

his closeness to this Jewish family. The many Kurdish Jews in Israel testify to the good treatment they received from the Kurds (far different from how the Arabs treated them). In the 1960s and the 1970s Israel had military advisers at the headquarters of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and trained and supplied the Kurdish units with firearms and field and anti-aircraft artillery. And when Saddam Hussein hung 14 "Zionist spies" – nine of them Jews – in Liberation Square in Baghdad in 1969, with a half-million Arab onlookers dancing and making merry, and other Jews were being hunted down and summarily executed, more than a thousand Jews were helped by the Kurds to escape Iraq. The Israelis did not forget this. 150,000 Kurdish Jews in Israel have long maintained unofficial cultural and business relations with Iraqi Kurds. In 2004 there was a report in *The New Yorker* that Israel had been helping Kurds militarily in Iraq, Syria, and Iran. There are reports of much more recent deliveries of aid of all kinds, including arms, from Israel to Iraqi Kurds. And were an independent Kurdistan declared in northern Iraq, that state could count on more such aid from Israel, which is not a bad military ally to have. A fuller description of the extensive Kurdish-Jewish connection can be found

Though the original basis for Israel's support of the Kurds was identification with another people being denied its right to statehood, the Israelis also grasp, apparently better than the Americans, the geopolitical benefits of an independent Kurdistan, a state that could inspire Iranian Kurds to open revolt. What better way to weaken Iran than to encourage an insurrection among its Kurds and, at the same time, to help them with arms, drones, intelligence? If Israel supplies them, what more can the Islamic Republic of Iran do to Israel than what it is already doing?

Why has the West been so hesitant to support an independent Kurdistan when there are so many reasons why it should be enthusiastic? Why did Rex Tillerson urge the Kurds to put off

their referendum? Why, after the referendum showed overwhelming support for Kurdish independence in northern Iraq, does the Trump administration continue to oppose such a state? Who was it who fled Mosul overnight,, when the Islamic State forces arrived? The Iraqi army. And what have been the most effective fighting force against ISIS? The Peshmerga.

The Americans seem to think we have a stake in keeping Iraq whole. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* on September 21, Michael Dempsey, “a national intelligence fellow” at the Council on Foreign Relations, maintains that “resolving” the Kurdish question “in a way that doesn’t undermine Baghdad’s legitimacy and threaten Iraq’s neighbors is critically important.” And many others have echoed this sentiment. After all that we have done for Iraq’s Arabs, receiving little in return, at this point why should we want to thwart a Kurdish attempt at independence? Whom do we owe more to – Iraq’s Arabs or its Kurds? There is nothing sacred about the post-World War I arrangement, which handed over a large swathe of Kurdistan to the Arab rulers in Baghdad. Neither the Sunni nor the Shi’a Arabs have treated the Kurds decently. Are we to allow the Kurds, who have been our loyal and effective allies, first against Saddam, and then against the Islamic State, to yet again have their dream of independence destroyed? Who decided, and why, that the Kurds should never have a state? Why should the Arab supremacists be allowed to permanently maintain their hold over Iraqi Kurdistan? Does that make either moral or geopolitical sense?

Another consideration that explains American uneagerness to support independence for the Iraqi Kurds is that we don’t want to alienate Turkey, which opposes a Kurdish state in Iraq for what that might mean for the Kurds in Anatolia. The American government treats that country as if it were still the Kemalist Turkey of 1980, or even of 1952, when Turkey was invited to join NATO as a payback in advance for sending its troops to fight in Korea. Turkey was once a stout ally, during

the Cold War, providing us with listening posts close to the Soviet Union and use of an airbase at Incirlik, but that was in the heyday of Kemalism, when the forces of secularism seemed unstoppable and Ataturk's reforms appeared to be permanent. Erdogan has been systematically undoing Kemalism, that is, reintroducing signs of Islam everywhere Ataturk had managed to banish them – especially in the army (where, in the past, soldiers who were seen reading the Qur'an too devotedly were not considered officer material), in the civil service, and in the universities. The hijab, once banned in the universities, the military, police, civil service, and Turkish government, is now permitted, and even promoted. Erdogan speaks the language of Islam, extolling the faith and denouncing secularism. Physical attacks by mobs on secularists, including those who only tried to distribute leaflets denouncing the Islamic State, have become more frequent and go unpunished.

Erdogan has built 10,000 new mosques in Turkey since 2004. Ataturk, who closed mosques down, would be horrified. Erdogan's Deputy Prime Minister and others in his government have called for turning Hagia Sophia, currently a museum, into a mosque, which would further efface the history of Christian Constantinople, for half a millennium the largest and richest city in Christendom, from Western memory. He has seized nearly 100 Syriac churches, monasteries, libraries, and cemeteries, and made them the property of the Turkish state. He has seized, too, all the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches in Diyarbakir. He has waged war on his own officer corps, using the failed coup as his excuse for a massive purge of the secularists in the army, while at the same time accusing those officers of taking their orders from Fethullah Gulen, a mild-mannered Muslim cleric who, Erdogan claims, directed the coup from his Pennsylvania exile. That officer corps, which for nearly a century had been the ultimate guarantor of Kemalism, has now been weakened by Erdogan's removal of hundreds of officers, whom Erdogan accuses of

simultaneously being both secularists and of being the agents of a Muslim cleric. 114,000 people have been detained, while tens of thousands – more than 47,000 – of secularist teachers, journalists, media personalities, judges, lawyers, police and military, have been removed from their jobs and not just detained but arrested, deemed insufficiently loyal to Erdogan, and suspected, in Erdogan's crazed conspiracy-theorizing, of loyalty to Fethullah Gulen. Nearly 7,500 military, and 168 generals, have been among those arrested.

It took decades of American trust being repeatedly betrayed, but at long last Washington realized that Pakistan, the supporter of the Taliban and of Al-Qaeda, the builder – with American funds – of the “Islamic bomb,” the proliferator of nuclear secrets sold to North Korea and Iran, the persecutor of those who helped the Americans locate Osama bin Laden, is not an American ally. And the American government has finally cut military support to Pakistan, which used to run into billions, way down to \$255 million. And for the first time, even that sum is not to be given outright but will be put into an escrow account and released only if Pakistan demonstrates to American satisfaction it is not supporting but fighting terrorist networks. Pakistani prevarications and inveiglements will no longer be tolerated.

Perhaps the American government ought to take the same harder line toward Erdogan's Turkey. He's not our ally, and he doesn't want to be, so why do we keep trying to placate him? Would an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq cause trouble for the Turks, by making the Kurdish population in Anatolia more restless and more hopeful? Of course it would, and Erdogan would have his hands full attempting to suppress that unrest in Kurdish parts of Anatolia and, as a consequence, be less able to cause anti-Western mischief on the world stage or even domestically, against the secularist Turks still hoping to weaken his regime.

But don't we need Turkey to fight ISIS, and therefore,

shouldn't we refrain from doing anything that angers our Turkish ally? No. In the first place, that Turkish "ally" has been attacking not just ISIS in Syria, but the Kurdish forces that have been fighting ISIS, and with perhaps even more enthusiasm.

Furthermore, while ISIS in Syria and Iraq has now been effectively wiped out (fewer than 6,000 ISIS fighters remain in Syria-Iraq). it has changed tactics, with eight separate branches now established in eighteen countries, none of them places where Turkish power can be projected. The dream of a caliphate will continue to be held by hundreds of millions. But how can Turkey help in Western Europe, against the tens of thousands of Jihadist "carriers," members of, or collaborators with, ISIS, who have been admitted into European countries? Would Turkish troops show up in Germany, France, the U.K.? ISIS in Europe is not a problem the Turks can help with. In any case, in fighting ISIS the Kurdish Peshmerga showed itself to be the most effective fighting force on the ground against the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, more effective than the Turks. Do they not have a claim on our sympathies that we ought to honor? And even if we were to assume that the Turks can still be useful in opposing ISIS here and there (very much here and there) the Turks need not be bribed, at the expense of Kurdish self-determination in Iraq, to oppose ISIS: if the Turks do make war on whatever remnants of ISIS are still holding out, and they so far haven't always done what the Americans had expected of them (by attacking the Peshmerga as well as ISIS), they will do so for good and sufficient reasons of their own. What the Turks now worry about far more than ISIS are Kurdish secessionists in Iraq and Syria, and what their success could mean for Kurdish rebels in Anatolia, who would be spurred on by Kurdish success in establishing an independent state in what is now northern Iraq.

The Turks will be offended by a Kurdish state in northern

Iraq? Too bad. Why should they have a say in determining the destinies of the Kurds in Iraq? For that matter, why should they, given their record of mistreatment of non-Turkish minorities, be supported in their continued suppression of the Kurds in Anatolia? No one has convincingly explained why Turkey deserves to maintain its hold over nearly 20 million Kurds, people whom it calls "Mountain Turks" and denies them their language, their culture, their separate identity. By what moral right do they treat the Kurds thus? Wouldn't it be useful, at the very least, to have Erdogan tied down in Anatolia, given what an anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Israel trouble-maker he has proven to be abroad, and what an anti-secular despot at home? Perhaps the Anatolian Kurds will, at the very least, given the Iraqi Kurd example, win better treatment and greater autonomy for themselves. And there is the possibility, remote but no longer non-existent, that the overwhelmingly Kurdish parts of Anatolia might engage in a large-scale revolt in order to secede altogether and to join the existing state of Kurdistan. That prospect should give Erdogan the nightmares he so richly deserves.

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