

The Lasting Benefits of an Independent Kurdistan

by Hugh Fitzgerald



First of all, let's not forget that astonishing vote on September 25; 93% of the Kurds in Iraq went ahead and voted for independence. It was an opinion poll, not binding. But it meant a great deal. That figure cannot be ignored, not even by the U.N. The Kurds have a moral right to such a state. They are the most numerous people without a country of their own in the world today. They were betrayed once, by the Great Powers, who had promised them an independent Kurdistan in 1920, then cancelled that promise, at Turkey's behest, in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. In none of the states – Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey – where the Kurds live have they been treated decently. Their language, culture, even ethnic identity, are denied in Turkey, where they are "Mountain Turks" who have "forgotten their language." They have been subjected to Arab supremacism, savagely repressed in Syria, and even more savagely in Iraq, where they were most recently the victims of mass murder, 182,000 being killed by Saddam Hussein, without a

syllable of protest – as the writer Kanan Makiya has noted – from Arabs inside or outside Iraq. Saddam emptied Kurdish villages, and in his policy of forced “arabization,” he replaced the murdered Kurds with Arabs. That was fine by the Arabs, and the Kurds were helpless to resist. They have earned the moral right to their own state, on their own lands, the lands where Kurds were mass-murdered by Saddam’s Arab army, to the apparent indifference of both the Sunni and Shi’a Arab civilians.

Second, an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq would encourage nearly 20 million Kurds in Anatolia to renew and widen their fighting against the Turkish military. The Turks had hoped, over the last two decades, to wear the Kurds down, but the spectacle of an independent Kurdistan should revive Kurdish fervor, and unrest among the Anatolian Kurds can cause the Turkish government, that under Erdogan has become ever less secular, and more anti-Western, no end of trouble. At this point, with many of the Turkish secularists discharged from their jobs, or in jail, or in exile, and with Erdogan becoming ever more outrageous in his charges against America, Europe, Israel, as he flails about, warning darkly of a war between “the cross and the crescent” and accusing the Mossad of being behind – how, exactly? – the Kurdish referendum, he deserves to be permanently tied down in a conflict with the Kurds of Anatolia, who will gladly provide him with his very own Tar Baby. If they can’t win independence outright, they may at least be able to win greater autonomy at the local level, bringing about an end to their mistreatment, and finally, to exact recognition from the Turkish government of a separate Kurdish peoplehood, language, and culture. The Kurds in Turkey would be able to now acquire American arms unavailable before, supplied to them by the Peshmerga in Iraq and Syria, making them a much more potent fighting force than ever before. Erdogan, who clearly enjoys making trouble in and for the West, will instead find himself needing to apply his energies right at home, in the volatile Kurdish villages of

Anatolia.

Third, the Kurds in Iran, about eight million of them, are certain to take heart from an independent Kurdistan next door in what had been northern Iraq. In 1946, the Soviet Union set up an "independent" Kurdish state, the now-forgotten Republic of Mahabad, in northwestern Iran, bordering on Turkey to the west and Azerbaijan to the east. It lasted all of one year. Once the Soviets were out, the Iranian government crushed the "Republic," but its brief existence left a memory of what independence might be. And like Kurds elsewhere, those in Iran have not forgotten what was promised by the Great Powers in 1920. The Kurds in Iran have over many decades staged demonstrations and risen in revolt, their insurrections usually small-scale and easily suppressed, both by the Shah, and even more ruthlessly, by the mullahs of the Islamic Republic. The largest such revolt was in March 1979, but unfortunately the timing was a little late: the Iranians under the implacable Khomeini had just put down the Baluchi, Arab, and Turkmen revolts, and could now concentrate fully on the Kurds. Tens of thousands of Kurds were killed, and the revolt ended, with a flurry of executions. But now the circumstances are very different. Not only is the Iranian military overextended abroad, in four different countries, but if an independent Kurdistan does secede successfully from Iraq, the Kurds in Iran could receive military aid and even battle-hardened Peshmerga volunteers from an independent Kurdistan just across a porous border.

Fourth, the other ethnic minorities in Iran will also be heartened if the Kurds in Iran, inspired by the Kurdish state, begin to act up. Especially worrisome for the Iranian government are the Arabs of Khuzestan, the oil-producing southern province of Iran. The Arabs there last engaged in mass anti-government protests in April 2005, accusing the Iranian government of "anti-Arab racism." A sporadic insurgency has continued ever since, with shootings and

bombings by Sunni Arab terrorists. In 2015, so worried was Tehran about the Arabs of Khuzestan engaging in a tenth-anniversary uprising, that the government made sweeping arrests, of tens of thousands, to head off such a possibility. But the Arabs of Khuzestan in 2016 blew up an entire petrochemical complex and, in later attacks, destroyed a series of pipelines. The fear is palpable in Tehran that the Arabs will destroy oil-production facilities, and not just pipelines. The Iranian government claims there are 1.8 million Arabs in Khuzestan, while the Arabs claim there are five million. Whatever their number, they could now, if the Iranians were busy putting down the Kurds, the Azeris, and the Baluchis, attempt to rise in revolt again, in an area where the Iranians have to observe some restraint lest their weapons inadvertently damage the oil facilities. In a sense, the Arabs hold the oilfields hostage, preventing, for example, a massive air bombing campaign by the Iranian military. Furthermore, if the Saudis did decide to take their fight with the Persians right to Iran, they could do so most easily by giving military aid to fellow Arabs in Khuzestan. And far from worrying about damage to Iran's oil facilities, the Saudis would welcome such damage, for it would raise their own oil revenues.

Fifth, there are Baluchis in Iran's far east, on the border with Pakistan. As non-Persians, and Sunnis to boot, they have been ill-treated by their Shi'a Persian masters. As noted previously, only 2,000 of the 3.3 million college students in Iran are Baluchis, while 55% of those executed by the Islamic Republic are Baluchis. The Baluchis have engaged in small-scale attacks in Iran. The latest example was this past April, when the Sunni, and mostly Baluchi, militant group Jaish al-Adl killed ten Iranian border guards in Iran's Baluchistan. The Baluchis in Iran number only 1.5 million, but there are 8.5 million Baluchis just across the border in Pakistan, who have repeatedly risen up to demand greater autonomy and who, with about 60,000 men under arms, could help the Baluchis

in Iran. If the Iranian government, already fighting outside the country in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, then finds itself also fighting the Kurds, and the Khuzestanian Arabs, and the Azeris (see below), the Baluchis in Iran might, with help from their well-armed cousins across the border in Pakistan, attempt a larger-scale revolt. Each new insurrection by non-Persians in Iran breathes life into the others; as more non-Persian ethnic groups rise in revolt, the more chance each has of success.

Sixth, the Azeris are the most numerous minority in Iran. There are 18 million of them, while there are only 9 million Azeris in Azerbaijan itself. The Azeris have always been more secular than the Iranians, and while under the Shah's regime they were generally well integrated, life has been more difficult for them under the Iranian mullahs. And they are quick to sense mistreatment. One incident, in 2006, was caused by a cartoon of a cockroach which was shown pronouncing "What?" with a distinctly Azeri accent. Tens of thousands of Azeris took to the streets, and were violently suppressed, in Tabriz, Urumieh, Ardebil, Maragheh, and Zenjan, in the northwest. These demonstrations took place in a context: that of the Azeri perception that the Persians regard them as dumb beasts of burden, referring to them as "Torki char" (Turkish donkey), meaning that the Azeris are the "brawn" while Persians are the "brains" of Iran. Ever since Khomeini took power, there has been growing Azeri nationalism. The resentment over economic conditions in the Azeri northwest, and Persian supremacism has fed this nationalism. It is worth noting that the Azeris in Iran claim to constitute 40% of the population – the real figure is likely between 25-30% – which suggests they think they are numerous enough to successfully revolt against the Persians.

While the Revolutionary Guards have come down hard on any signs of revolt, as they did in Tabriz in 1981, and followed up by executing hundreds, there are now important new

considerations. First, Azerbaijan is now an independent state, not a Soviet puppet. That means it could supply weaponry to fellow Azeris in Iran. Its territory could also serve both as a staging area, for attacks inside Iran by Iranian Azeris, and also as a place to which those Iranian Azeris could withdraw and regroup after such attacks.

The attraction of secession, and creating one country with fellow Azeris, has become stronger in recent decades, as the Iranian government has become ever more unbending and ruthless. But the most important factor in promoting an Azeri uprising would be that the other main non-Persian minorities in Iran, the Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs, would all have risen in revolt at the same time.

Should the Iranian Kurds, taking heart from an independent (formerly Iraqi) Kurdistan, manage to hold their own against Iran's military, this would be a signal to the other oppressed minorities in Iran – the Azeris to the northwest, the Baluchis to the east, and the Arabs to the south – to rise up, so as to force the Iranians to fight on four domestic fronts simultaneously, even as they would still be fighting abroad in four different countries, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. There is no better way to undo the Islamic Republic than to encourage its minorities, who make up nearly half the population, to renew and extend their local insurrections, keeping Iran's military constantly off guard and forcing it to fight on eight fronts – four domestic, and four abroad – simultaneously.

But it all begins with an independent Kurdistan carved out of northern Iraq. It should not be opposed by Washington, or London, or Paris. It should be encouraged. Those Kurds will need some Western military supplies, and unlike the Arabs in Baghdad, they have earned that support. If the Americans won't supply it directly, then at least they should let it be delivered through the Israelis, who have no such qualms or inhibitions. The Iraqi Kurds have been both pro-Western (and

pro-American) for many decades, an attitude that only deepened with the American air cover provided for Kurdistan against Saddam Hussein. The American military in Iraq soon learned that they could trust the Kurds. In Kurdistan, there has never been a single terrorist attack on American soldiers. Furthermore, the Kurds have reportedly been among the bravest and most effective fighters against ISIS, both in Iraq and in Syria. All that surely deserves political recompense, rather than abandonment.

The more one studies the pros and cons of an independent Kurdistan, the more attractive it appears. It's certainly the most promising way to disrupt a major part of the Camp of Islam, to keep Turkey permanently off-balance, to take a slice out of Syria, and another out of Iraq, and, especially, to encourage and set in motion in Iran, currently the most dangerous Muslim country, four separatist movements: the Kurds to the west, the Baluchis to the east, the Azeris to the northwest, the Arabs to the south. And these centripetal forces will be operating while the central government already has its hands full in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Finally, the Arab effort in Iraq to suppress the Kurds raises an issue that needs constantly to be stressed by the world's Infidels. 80% of the world's Muslims are non-Arabs. We need to point out to them how Islam is, and always has been, a vehicle for Arab supremacism. A Muslim is supposed to read the Qur'an in Arabic, to turn prostrate in prayer five times a day toward Mecca, in Arabia, to go on the hajj, again to Mecca, often to adopt an Arab name. Some non-Arab Muslims even create false Arab lineages for themselves, tellingly aware as they are of the superior position of Arabs within Islam. The treatment of the Kurds by the Arabs in Iraq can be held up as an example of that Arab supremacism. Understood in that damning light, Islam itself becomes less attractive to non-Arab Muslims.

Yes, those are the pros of an independent Kurdistan.

First published in